Towards an Experimental Education Criticism: eleven notes in place of a manifesto

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the resistance of education to criticism. Its resistance derives from the inability of criticism (as an educated medium) to consider education from the outside, and the inevitable reassertion of educational values in the work of criticism. An experimental approach to education criticism is proposed, a proposition which must itself be made somewhat obliquely and indirectly, and which should ensure in its articulation that it does not 'amount to much'. The characteristics of experimental work will be worked out in practice and can only be gestured at here. They may involve ambivalence to art, a failure to address 'the human condition', and the pursuit of estrangement.

Keywords: criticism, experimental writing, creative-critical writing, critifiction.

1. Crisis

Education is resistant to criticism. It will always exceed the grasp of criticism so long as critique remains a function of an educated outlook. A critic will immediately ask what is meant here by 'education'. But to enquire after what this concept 'education' encompasses is already to prevaricate, endlessly, and remain within the domain of the educated.

If criticism cannot consider education from its outside, outside education, criticism has nothing to say. This effective silence (of words, of sense-making) may be taken to constitute a limit point. The outer extremity of education criticism (in all its forms) might be defined as the point at which educational values no longer condition its outlook and criticism is finally stilled. Before that point, criticism in pursuit of its limit might attempt its own unavailability to educated culture, which is to say, it may attempt a manner of expression that is not immediately recuperable, or legible. This is how it approximates and approaches silence by encouraging some degree of consternation, with the sound of educated consternation having the quality of the last utterance before nothing more is said. Before education criticism falls silent, then, it exudes discourse and defies sense (at least to a degree) whilst remaining riveted on the precision of its analysis.

The term 'education critique' is adopted rather than the more typical 'education*al* critique'. To use the adjectival form already demonstrates submission to the presumed attributes and assumed goods of the noun.

Education criticism is the perception of crisis, the symptom of crisis, and the bringer of crisis. It brings education to a realisation of its crisis – the crisis of its evaluative order. In doing so it will confront problematic accretions around the term (that is to say, further educated prevarications around the idea of crisis), where the association between criticism and crisis is longstanding, and, of late, suspicious. Crises have become ordinary, they are incorporated within the functioning of the system (with 'the system' here understood in its broadest sense as 'the prevailing order'). A point has been reached in the co-option of crisis where 'the stuff of crisis itself consists in that which can be leveraged under the sign of crisis' (Boggs and Mitchell 2018: 434). An institution is said to be in a state of crisis in order to effectuate change where different actors then take differential points of view concerning the nature of the crisis, what it signifies, and what needs to be done. Criticism and crisis are cooperatively embroiled with one another in this way. Criticism identifies and anatomises so as to help reduce crisis, and crisis, or what Abigail Boggs and Nick

Mitchell call the 'crisis consensus', imposes a basic restraint upon criticism insofar as 'the consensus itself is normed, often silently, by an analytical predisposition toward rescue and restoration' (436).

Or to put this differently: criticism is circumscribed by the problem of identifying and ameliorating crisis, whilst crisis is made answerable in its existence to the identificatory work of criticism. Crisis is operationalised and betrayed against reaching its fulfilment by that same (ameliorative) criticism.

This is the crisis consensus that education criticism breaks with. Education criticism has no truck with this reduction, this institutionalisation of criticism, and is closer to abolitionist outlooks which 'do not require a stable imagination of institution or discipline in the way that critique does' (Singh and Vora 2023: 49).

2. Educated people

Educational studies – there it is, the adjectival form – typically concerns itself with the study of pedagogy (the teaching of dependent personalities) and related matters. Education studies might well shift this focus to include the study and critique of andragogy (the self-cultivation of adults in educated society), or else it will continue to give up the work of education critique to other fields, like literary criticism.

Education criticism takes the formation and plight of educated adults, the very existence of educated people, the culture of the educated, as its object of interest. It assesses what that culture has become (moribund, but how?), including how it carries the influence of the humanism(s) of the Enlightenment and the humanisms which preceded it. As Jean-François Lyotard wrote, in its Enlightenment form, humanism 'gave itself the ideal aim of a community of equal and enlightened citizens deliberating with utter freedom about decisions to be taken concerning common affairs' (2003: 202), whereas today's humanism is more systemic, and pragmatic. It is true that the 'system' (by which Lyotard means, the global capitalist order) 'must show regard for the human beings of which it is made' – and here is its residual humanism – but it will do so 'without neglecting … that the system requires the said human beings to bend to the needs of its development' (202).

Older humanist ideals survive but within a culture that is, in Roland Barthes' analysis, 'no longer sustained by a humanist ideology' – in the older sense – 'or is increasingly reluctant to sustain it' (Barthes 1986: 341). Within this context writing itself must be reconfigured. It cannot hope to appeal to a community of enlightened citizens before which it would stand for itself, for its meaning, and persuade this enlightened group because of that meaning and its shared assumptions. Rather, as Lyotard writes elsewhere, 'What is important in a text is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do' (Lyotard 1984: 9).

3. Experimentation

> Personally I do not believe that a fiction writer with the least amount of self-respect and integrity … ever says to himself: "I am now going to write an experimental novel." … Fiction is called experimental out of incomprehension and despair. (Federman 1993: 37)

So wrote Raymond Federman, author of a number of celebrated experimental works and coiner of the term 'critifiction'. The term 'experimental' is to be treated with suspicion. It is often used dismissively to label works that are deemed 'unusual, difficult, innovative, provocative, intellectually challenging, and even original' (Federman 1993: 37). The word marks off and separates out, it boxes up and so makes safe critical work that does not assimilate easily. But this is not the only reason, or even a good reason, why no self-respecting writer should use the term to describe what they are about to do. Rather, the term demonstrates incomprehension because all writing should take the form of an experiment, or at least, all writing that shies away from

conventional forms (such as the commercially successful novel), will be experimental in the sense that each author will have found their form out of necessity and not for the express purpose of doing something wild or quirky, or innovative – to take a word that has been thoroughly co-opted by the academy in particular.

Note, Federman writes that no *fiction writer* with the least amount of self-respect will declare they are about to write an experimental novel. Critics are in a different category. Criticism might need reminding it too can take the form of an experiment. Even experimental critics might benefit from disrespecting themselves a little.

4. Staid forms

In literary and cultural studies there is a longstanding critique of the limitations of criticism (for instance: Felksi 2015; Bewes 2010; Latour 2004; Ulmer 1987), of the enduring figure of the critic who cultivates taste or judgement (the conservative variant harking back to Matthew Arnold), and of the critic who 'unmasks' or explains what is really going on, ideologically or otherwise, and situates their educational and intellectual work in the van (see Dawson 2005: 185–92). These versions of criticism are considered to be its exhausted forms, their exhaustion deriving from the decline of the legitimating structures (those assuring rectitude, grounding taste, guaranteeing distance) that now invite incredulity. Steven Connor observed more than three decades ago (his book was first published in 1989) what the effect was and would be: namely, 'the apparent collapse of criticism into its object, the much-discussed blurring of the 'critical' and 'creative' functions' (Connor 1997: 227). And so, efforts have and continue to be made to reconstitute (and re-actualise) the work of the literary critic in particular as a creature embroiled with its material (Schad and Tearle 2011). These include more playful or creative variants of criticism, and versions of criticism with a broader expressive repertoire and outlook. This direction of enquiry has generated a considerable body of work in literary theory and related fields, and yet educational studies has remained largely untouched by it. This might be a mixed blessing. The collapse of criticism into its object might still be welcomed in literary studies, but in educational studies, the collapse of criticism into its object, into education (as the field typically understands this term), would be cramping.

More serious and staid forms of writing and analysis – those which still typify large sectors of educational studies – undoubtedly have their merits. They permit, indeed sanction, forms of thought that have an admirably impersonal, or at least systematic, quality. The reader who spends time among the works of academics seeking to exceed this form (under its many names: fictocriticism, critifiction, post-criticism, paracriticism, the creative-critical) might return to these staid literatures with some relief. Arguably, academic experimentation carries with it the assumption that the academic in question deserves to experiment, or should experiment, each assumption another effect of the unflinching belief in the social, cultural necessity of university life. Academic form-busting work is not necessarily radical even if it declares itself so and its accomplishments might be considered slight, at least in light of their repercussions. The academy itself seems fairly immune to them.

5. The human condition

> Edgar Allan Poe was so right in his time when he called nineteenth century realism that pitiable stuff invented by merchants for the depiction of decayed cheeses. (Federman 1993: 74)

The problem with realism is that it is an enduring conviction – it continues to govern the educated outlook. Realism is the principle of subordination by which the existence of an established meaning is asserted even if it is not described. Realism is the idea that an underlying sanction, a greater truth,

is discoverable, and that it is necessary to be educated to find it. Realism is the notion that it is the role of fiction (and of criticism), to point in its direction, even if fiction still carries the burden of Romanticism alongside, the idea that there is an inner life, a subtle interiority, that must be given expression (or given respect). Fiction and criticism are applauded when they 'ring true', as if so-called reality, and so-called interiority, could be brought to some kind of state of enhanced reverberation, as if their natural frequency had been touched.

The education critic may also and somewhat belatedly give up on 'realism' – the idea that criticism should cast light on reality and bring it into starker relief. Indeed, an experimental criticism may welcome failure in this respect. Its predicament would be similar to that facing fiction, where, as Federman wrote, 'As soon as a work of fiction refuses deliberately TO REPRESENT the world (*to mirror reality*), or refuses TO EXPRESS the inner self of man (*to mirror the soul*), it is immediately considered a failure' (Federman 1993: 2; emphasis in the original). Education criticism, like fiction, might wish to be consigned in this way to (near) irrelevance, and be impugned for its lack of psychological depth, for not speaking of or addressing itself to 'the human condition'.

6. Ambivalence before art

Theodor Adorno once wrote in an essay titled 'Cultural Criticism and Society' that the cultural critic colludes with ('high') culture 'as its salaried and honoured nuisance' (Adorno 1988: 20). The cultural critic does this, and 'preserves the notion of culture', even when, or precisely 'while demolishing its present manifestations as mere commodities and means of brutalization' (28).

The extent of this collusion can be easily overlooked – the critic is, by constitution, blind to it. The problem with the critic in this arrangement, as Esther Leslie interprets, is that the critic 'believes in culture too much, in the sense of severing it off from the rest of life, making culture a specialism, a Very Good Thing' (Leslie 2011: 152). The critic objectifies culture by appearing not to, by declaring that culture cannot be reduced to its objectification, that it is no mere object, or at least that it must not be reduced to a consumer object with a fluctuating value. This is how cultural criticism 'sides with conservativism', aiming its support 'at a form of property which is stable and independent of stock market fluctuations' (Adorno 1988: 22). Culture becomes a fetish object as the separation of culture (its reification) from its social conditions is affirmed.

This elevation, sequestering off, and reification, is not the 'sin' of culture (or the straight achievement of the critic). It is the product of a longstanding bourgeois defence mechanism, a 'withdrawal into itself' (23) before the unliveable, inhuman social conditions, that characterise bourgeois society. This isolation of culture, its removal into a protected and idealised realm, is also, at the same time, an 'emasculation of culture', it constitutes an impoverishment (24). Culture can have no vital function in bourgeois society.

The special uniqueness of culture in bourgeois society is this: it must exist in a state of imagined contrast or conflict with 'the open-air prison that the world is becoming' (33) and which it has no power to confront. Culture is the focus of a lamentation, an utterly unproductive complaint made by the critic in its name, a complaint that is simultaneously offered in the name of 'humanity'. This is how the position of critic and defender of culture (and so too humanity) is itself trapped by its 'enthrallment in the cultural object' (32). In its operation, cultural criticism is constrained to serve the culture fetish, or the fetishisation of culture, positioning it as 'a luxury good, which can be bought' (Leslie 2011: 152). As a luxury good, culture is always a safe investment, and it is the role of the critic to assert that fact. The culture critic is 'the broker of this speciality good' (152) and serves, one assumes, to promote the idea that the best of art should be bought but then made free – it is a public good, its value is beyond valuation – and should be raised above mere commerce.

Adorno's critique of the critic might prompt reflection on how the predicament he describes could be exceeded. He seems to suggest a formula for a different criticism, where to escape this bind where culture is idealised even as it is critiqued would presumably necessitate a critic who can

'both participate in culture and not participate' (Adorno 1998: 32). This perhaps means a critic who remains decidedly ambivalent about the worth of culture in its present and potential forms.

Education criticism would presumably need to cultivate such ambivalence. If it draws its critical arsenal from the arts and humanities, it must remain cautious before the lure, the implicit belief, in the necessity of the arts and the deep association that is assumed by educated people to tether the health of culture with the health of society. It needs to be aware, too, of how academic criticism also participates in 'hyping culture's value' (Leslie 2011: 156). Here academia trades on the accompanying idea that by studying the arts and literature, the arts and humanities must themselves be Very Good Things.

By participating in, or engaging with the artistic forms it finds productive, education criticism places the estimation of their value on pause, or at least measures their value (the value of engaging with the arts), by their capacity to diversify (or indeed stir up) critique. As Leslie appears to argue, scholarly attention to the meaning, or the critique, of art, will be supplanted by an attempt to respond to the urgency of the original artwork within the 'contingent urgency of the [present] moment' (2011: 161). The challenge posed is not what can this or that literary text, poem, or piece of art be made to signify or stand for, but what can it be made to do within the work of criticism. One answer to that challenge has been this growing usage of the term 'creative criticism' (e.g. Benson and Connors 2024) to describe critical encounters that respond linguistically to the text under study. Reading Adorno in the context of such work sounds a note of caution, however. It suggests that (creative, or indeed experimental) criticism would be wise not to consider itself an art form. This is what Oliver Tearle (2011) seems to have in view when he describes creative criticism that attempts to occupy the form and style of its object (the work of Shakespeare, Joyce, or Bernhard, for instance), as always inevitably 'doing a number on it' (11).

7. Critical bestiaries

> Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? (Hejinian 2000: 47).

Criticism is typically restrained by its materials. It is produced in some kind of relationship with what is already out there, the archive it addresses, an archive it approaches with undue seriousness, perhaps, and certainly with excess restraint. This 'archive' may be understood, in Foucault's sense, as not merely the collected materials of a culture, but the frameworks determining how those materials can be deployed and understood. An experimental criticism might be figured as an attempt to expand what can be said of those materials, and push against the edges of 'the discursive formation' (Foucault 2006: 130) currently framing their reception.

In an essay titled 'Fantasia of the Library', Foucault engages in a discussion of two nineteenth-century novels by Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet,* published posthumously in 1881, and *The Temptation of Saint Anthony,* which Flaubert reworked several times before its publication in 1874. The first presents a satire of two court clerks who retire to the country and fail at every endeavour they attempt (as farmers, etc.), not able to apply the knowledge they have gleaned from books. Theirs is a slavish, productively inert model of how an educated person might read, and eventually they return to the work of the copyist who takes satisfaction from arranging all materials on the same plane, not adjudicating between them. By contrast, Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* – a novel recounting the saint's torment in the desert, blurring the distinction between reality and illusion – serves to dramatise an extraordinarily productive engagement with the archive. Its rich imaginary is not the effect of some opium dream or delirium; rather, it is the result of extended scholarship, a creative gathering and redeployment of cultural inheritance. *The Temptation* is,

Foucault writes, 'a monument to meticulous erudition' (Foucault 1977: 89). It is also 'set back from his [Flaubert's] other books', for which it forms 'a prodigious reserve'. The book is distinct 'by virtue of its prolixity, its wasted abundance, and its overcrowded bestiary' (88). With it, Foucault suggests, a new imaginative space takes form:

> The domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs … fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. The imaginary now resides between the book and lamp. The fantastic is no longer the property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge … (90)

These printed signs are necessarily distorted, fragmented in their passing, and perhaps it is here that the work of creation draws its potential. This is a space of prolific intertextual possibility, or as Anna-Sophie Springer writes, Flaubert's novel (and the creative scholarly potential it models) demonstrates the richness of its site of 'creation, un-creation, and recreation' (Springer 2015: 35). The scholar's work will involve 'the amassing of minute facts', and if this sounds pedantic, or uninspired, it is important to see how these facts are productively distorted just as they are gathered. For these facts are 'monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions' (Foucault 1977: 91). This is where the imaginary grows, 'in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library'. This is an activity in reading and writing that works to 'extend the space that existing books can occupy' (91). It offers a fecund model for a more creative, experimental criticism.

Foucault sees a similar process occurring in painting with the development of a 'new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums' (92). For Foucault, 'Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings and texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open. They erect their art within the archive' (92). The potential for creation is prodigious, and it is one that criticism might emulate.

The modern museum is not necessarily a productive site, indeed the museum might be viewed as a place where a part of the intellect goes to die. As Adorno wrote, 'Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association' (1988: 173): the museum contains objects 'to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying' (173). Museums 'testify to the neutralization of culture' in their reification of art (173). But Foucault hints in his 'Fantasia of the Library' at another set of possibilities that extend from the library to the museum, and so also to the direction an education criticism might take.

'[E]very painting,' writes Foucault, 'now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the infinite murmur of writing' (Foucault 1977: 92–3). By extension, all artefacts also now belong within the climatically controlled display and store-rooms of the trans-national museum complex. As a vast impersonal storage system containing a huge assemblage of collected artefacts, the museum, like the library, may also hold fantastical critical possibility if only it could be jumbled up a bit further. The museum assembles all manner of things, tearing them from their contexts, and thereby makes possible new associations, new readings of objects, within its confines. It is here that critical practice can be re-imagined as, in part, an act of curation, whereupon 'the work of writing, editing, and [somewhat errant] curating become difficult to distinguish' (Springer 2015: 37). The critic's work might be as much visually and spatially concerned as it is textually enframed, insofar as 'a curatorial engagement with the library [and other artefacts] has the capacity to elicit additional physical modes of assembly' (39). This may be done

physically, but also by the curation of images. A curatorial criticism might develop critical associations, and discursive possibilities, not available to written work on its own. Educational values and assumptions would be as much spatially upset as they would be conceptually challenged. The objective might be likened to the rearrangement of educated persons in a room, so that each person is positioned in a manner that is awkward in relation to every other inhabitant of that space.

8. Form

> [T]he writer is faced with the necessity of making formal decisions—devising an appropriate structure for the work, anticipating the constraints it will put into play, etc.—in the context of the ever-regenerating plenitude of language's resources, in their infinite combinations. Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics (Hejinian 2000: 42).

Alongside its adoption and creative redeployment of a vast cultural resource, education criticism would experiment with form. Education criticism might indeed be configured as a practical investigation into the affordances of form: different forms make different modes of thinking possible; once a form is produced and populated, it tends to necessitate what is written. Raymond Federman goes so far as to claim that 'the essence of a literary discourse … (a discourse that delights in its own form like fire, as Blake put it) is to find its own point of reference, its own rules of organization in itself, and not in the real or imaginary experience on which it rests' (Federman 2004: 157). Different forms express different realities – and here the operation of switching form itself may itself be considered a type of critique. But Federman also argued that the New Fiction of 1950s and 60s America sought to show 'the form rather than the content of American reality. It tried to render concrete and even visual in its language, in its typography and topology, the disorder, the chaos, the violence, the incongruity, but also the energy and vitality' (1993: 22) of its time and surroundings. An experimental criticism might broaden the activity of thinking in a similar way. As criticism switches between and experiences different types of writing, it is able to test and perturb the limits imposed by each adoptive framework, limits which might be taken as symptoms of different kinds of cultural and intellectual restraint. This criticism does not just re-present what it finds problematic, even as it no longer claims to rise above and outside its point of interest, preferring instead to inhabit its concern.

Repeated claims that the end of criticism has arrived (Latour 2004; Felski 2015), or at least that the time of the expert critic who pronounces judgement, who is licenced to speak, and deserves to be heard, is over, may well be overblown, but they do open up thought to new possibilities, the chance to imagine a new set of relationships between the writer critic (who can no longer advise, no longer judge) and the educated individual. These new relationships may be to the detriment of the latter, since the writer no longer seeks to improve the educated person (or their context) by developing their taste or improving (correcting) their perception of reality. This writer can still be imagined as 'a social thinker with the right – even the duty – to address all educated individuals in society, not only those involved in literary pursuits' (Samuels 2001: xiv–xv). And yet, this writer is now released from the idea of making advanced or higher learning digestible to a broader audience for its betterment. Rather counter-intuitively, the decline of the expert critic (or at least their growing humility) might lead to even more inaccessible and less apparently 'useful' forms of writing, or at least to forms of writing that do not answer the call of accessibility, to instrumental use, to making themselves legible (even just to fellow experts) as their basic condition. Such writings might also be considered not a little 'toxic', or at least unhelpful to the project of education (such as it is understood). These written outputs would nonetheless need to deflate or undermine that 'professional fiction' which Connor associated with 'postmodern stylistics' (1997: 247), which treats sublimely difficult works as if they were necessarily subversive. Such works may simply be further signs of (educated) decadence.

9. Critifiction

Federman dates the emergence of critifiction to the 1970s: 'Many novels written in the 1970s read more like essays than pure fiction, or what I call *critifiction*: a kind of narrative that contains its own theory and even its own criticism' (Federman 1993: 31). These experimental texts foreground how they are made, they make a point of their constructedness, and they front their own deficiencies too in order to show that discourses are open formations and a writer never masters the 'meaning' of their work (50). This results in the production of open texts that do not attempt (however futile it may be) to fix their meaning but promote the opposite. The techniques employed can be very simple. As Lyn Hejinian writes, simple repetition may achieve this effect: although repetition is 'conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts', it can be used to disrupt 'the initial apparent meaning scheme' (2000: 44), repeatedly displacing the context that gives a line its import.

For Federman, toying with language in this way is underpinned by a seriousness of intent that derives from a bleak assessment of his present:

> [S]ince civilization has become fraudulent, since it has turned into an enormous lie, it is important to examine its deceptions, its ruins, its clichés … But above all it is important to examine and denounce the language that continues to perpetuate lies and illusions … to empty language of its symbolic power. (Federman 1993: 32–3)

Underpinning Federman's critical stance, as Eric Dean Rasmussen interprets, is the conviction that 'writers must affirm, brazenly, the ontological status of language as a material force acting in the world that contains and generates a reality of its own' (Rasmussen 2011: 177). This conviction is not separable from the commitment that, as a material force, the imperium of existing language forms might be selectively broken or messed with to offer glimpses of other possible worlds or arrangements of human life and outlook.

The critifiction that Federman dates to the 1970s was more than a mere experiment in form, then. As a critique of prior literatures, and as an attempt to exceed them, it set out to challenge its surrounding reality, the America it found intolerable. This was 'a question of denouncing the vehicle that expressed and represented that reality: discursive language and the traditional form of the novel' (Federman 1993: 32). It led to textual experiments,

> rendering language seemingly incoherent, irrational, illogical, and even meaningless, these works of fiction negate the symbolic power of language while proposing at the same time a purification of that language so that it can no longer structure or even enslave the individual into a sociohistorical scenario prepared in advance and replayed by the official discourse on television, in the mass media, in the political arena, and in literature. (33)

This leads Federman to the extraordinary claim that 'the New Fiction writers … neutralized the fiasco of reality and the imposture of history' (34). It is not clear how far this neutralisation-effect is supposed to have extended.

Incorporated into this critique is the idea that the writer does not originate their work either. And so, although Federman considers imagination to be 'essential in the formation of a discourse' (49), he redefines imagination in terms of plagiarism: 'it merely imitates, copies, repeats, echoes, proliferates—plagiarises in other words' (52). Hence the creative process is better thought about as a process involving montage/collage (51) – and this should be foregrounded. Demonstrating the constructedness of a creative work in this sense cannot be done by citing where the component parts originated. A writer is not in command here either ('I do not know any more where my own thoughts originated'; 52). Plagiarism might be better demonstrated by a fragmentary and eclectic style, or as Rasmussen puts it, by 'the endearingly monstrous clumsiness of the pieced-together text' (2011: 170). This text is not organised around a unitary and originary 'voice'.

The act of writing is also reconfigured, where each attempt '[t]o write becomes a surplus, an excess of what has already been written' (Federman 1993: 57). Language (or perhaps, it would be better to write, 'discourse') provides a prodigious resource, a set of statements that may be endlessly displaced into new arrangements. This, presumably, is its potential for 'excess'. But Federman proposes a reduction too (within the orbit of that excess), and here takes Beckett (in particular, *The Unnamable*) as his prime example. This reduction of literature is

> working its way toward non-representation and non-expression in an effort to rid itself of the authority [and myth] of its creator and the burden of originality. It does so by rendering language seemingly meaningless, expressionless, blank as it were … (64)

Rendering language blank helps show just how little 'intention' it can tolerate.

Arguably, by taking one of the linguistic and subjective domiciles of the educated, that of Literature, and showing how little it can be made to amount to, or how absurd, 'fragmented, discontinuous, and ironic' it can be (25), experimental literatures already perform an immanent critique of the educated person. Effectively: look, how little this thing you revere and take succour from can be reduced to … or look how parodic and delirious the book has become, and look, it is still called literature. The failure of experimental literatures to produce something utterly unrecognisable as 'a book', or 'a poem', and so on, becomes a telling indictment against the conceits usually attached to these objects. If they can be messed with so completely, if they can be wrapped in so many layers of irony, and yet *still be recognised*, what exactly does the book, or the idea of the book, amount to as a support for educated subjectivity?

This immanent critique is furthered by the more obvious and challenging element of experimental literatures that attack the conceit of deep interiority conjured by Romanticism and do so either explicitly or by refusing to play along with conventional notions of characterisation, commentary, or insight. In this respect they challenge the humanistic presuppositions, the ingrained ideals, of educated subjecthood. In his 2004 essay 'Critifictional Reflections on the Pathetic Condition of the Novel in our Time', Federman suggests how in his view this educated subjecthood is maintained:

> The belief that psychology reveals our essence necessarily endears our actions to us. We imagine they possess an intrinsic or symbolic value. Then comes the snobbery of complexes that teaches us to exaggerate our wits, to be dazzled by them, to gratify our ego with faculties and depths it is obviously un-endowed with. (Federman 2004: 159)

But as Federman adds, '[t]he ultimate perception of our nothingness, however, is only partially veiled by this process' (159) – and by nothingness perhaps Federman might be taken to mean, our inessential makeup, our constructedness, our accidental appearance, yet within it, nonetheless, our facility still to make something of the artifices we are surrounded by. In Federman's analysis, the ailing novel, the novel in its more conventional form, certainly no longer veils this growing sense of a void, a cosmic indifference. What makes the novel look so pathetic, Federman appears to suggest, is how its characters so obviously belong 'to a second-rate humanity' (159), reflecting as they do, the situation of 'a humanity that has deteriorated still further' (160). Federman suggests that today's humanity is worse off than the one Balzac dealt with, or Shakespeare before him. At last, in fiction, and as a belated effect of a decaying humanity, the character is dying out and with it the plot too. A sensitised reader who still opens such books, who takes up these novels which trade in these exhausted forms, will find themselves immediately beset by boredom: the first attempt at characterisation, at realism, the first segment of reported speech, all bore this reader (or at least should, Federman suggests). And yet, having not yet given up writing, there is nothing left to do for a reader like him but continue to write novels 'in which, once the universe is disbanded, nothing happens' (160). A few pages later Federman suggests a less reducing approach:

> What is the antidote to this un-reflexive and lazy precipitation of what still pretends to be literature? Is it the kind of writing that resists the recuperation of itself into distorted or false figures and images. The kind of literature we need now is the kind that will systematically erode and dissipate the setting of the Spectacle… This kind of writing will be at the same time frugal and denuded, but rhetorically complex, so that it can seize the world in a new way. This kind of writing must create a space of resistance to the alienated devotion to images—to the refining and undermining of the world by images. (169)

These (counter)texts are the 'deliciously unreadable [and of course, unmarketable]' novels that 'could just as well stop with the first sentence as continue for a thousand pages' (160). The novelist is freer to write (or not) because of the extraordinary indifference they are faced with, because there is no point left in soothing the conscience of an exhausted humanity with false representations and ideological cover-ups. But, as Federman asks, 'are there still people out there willing to turn their backs on the spectacle and find time to write and read works of fiction?' (2004: 170). And here the basic issue with the demand of this kind of (critical) fiction appears – it depends on considerable intellectual input (and that input must be trained, acculturated, educated).

When these things reach a broader audience, and the vast majority don't, it is unsurprising that they are declared to be almost or completely *unreadable*. This is a subjective response for sure, but for Federman unreadability is a quality of the text itself. As Rasmussen interprets: 'Unreadability … refers not to readers' subjective, affective responses but to objective, observable, resistant qualities inherent to the text's material composition' (2011: 179–80). Federman defines unreadability as 'what disorients us in a text … what prevents us from recognizing that something is happening, but also prevents us from looking up and away from the text to relocate ourselves in the world' (Federman 1993: 70–1). To disorient but still attract a reader is clearly not an easy effect to pull off. Such disorienting-yet-alluring experiences do not preclude engagement with the world, however:

> On the contrary, the extreme attentiveness demanded by the experimental text—with its gaps, aporias, and multiple conceptual levels—brings readers closer to the Real, that which resists absolutely being recoded into symbolic formations, and "undermines culture". (Rasmussen 2011: 180)

… where, in this quotation, Rasmussen takes 'culture' to mean, 'the normative beliefs and the fantasies that organize our individual desires and coordinate a people's collective sense of reality' (187).

All this by contrast to the readable text which offers the pleasure, the comfort, 'of recognizing our own knowledge in it, our own culture – of recognizing (*righteously*) how cultivated we are, and consequently how coherent, continuous, whole, rational, logical, how secure we are in our culture. The readable novel reassures us of that' (Federman 1993: 71). Here, comfortable reading preserves and guards culture, unreadable (or experimental) novels undermine and bring it into crisis. Readability allows the reader to identify their 'reality' in the text, which means 'readability is equated with [the pretence of] *reality* … even with *morality*' (72); the unreadable, does not, and stands guilty of being declared immoral, or at least a waste of time.

It is possible that a similar approach might be taken with criticism, reducing criticism down, showing how little it can amount to, how little it can resemble criticism whilst still retaining the label. Effectively, look how denuded, how reduced this criticism is, look how (apparently) disorganised and confused it has become, look how unrespectable it is, see how it fails, and still it is recognised as such, as criticism (as commentary, as analysis, as anatomisation, and so on). An experimental education criticism might be declared unreadable too, and this would be a consequence not of its baroque structures, its over-complications, its self-indulgent intellectual excesses (all the typical marks of academic writing as perceived by the uninitiated which gradually become tiresome commonplaces to those who are adept). An experimental education criticism

would be rendered unreadable from its determination to evade the fraudulence of an unquestioned, self-evident reality, a reality in which the educated are still at home and pre-eminent, a home from which the educated have not yet been sufficiently shaken.

10. Estrangement

In *The Language of Inquiry*, the language poet Lyn Hejinian calls for barbarian interventions, and makes plain that she is not the first: 'The time of sweetness and dilettantism is over. What we need now, are barbarians,', wrote André Gide in 1911 (cited in Hejinian 2000: 334).

Unlike Gide, Hejinian writes after Auschwitz and Adorno's apparent dismissal of poetry (who could write poetry after Auschwitz, surely it has become unthinkable?). But for Hejinian, this event gives the argument for a barbarian or estranged writing greater force. There are two readings of Adorno's remark that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism'. The first reading is that what happened at Auschwitz and numerous other atrocity sites throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first century is, 'in the most vicious way, "meaningless"' – it cannot be described (325). If poetry cannot reckon with, cannot address, what humanity is capable of, anything it does subsequent to Auschwitz is an indulgence and a diversion. The second reading, Hejinian suggests, is to take Adorno's statement not as a condemnation of poetry, but as a challenge to write poetry differently: 'Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic, and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied by) foreignness—by the barbarism of strangeness' (326). This is another way of configuring the demand that experimental work (and so too experimental critical work), should try to ensure that it does not 'amount to much' from the perspective of the social order that its author(s) were born and/or socialised into.

There are two possibilities, then, and they are not mutually exclusive. There is a criticism of (self) reduction that would attempt to show how little it can amount to and still be called 'criticism' (just as literature has shown how little it can amount to and still be called 'literature'), and so would exhibit just how far educated culture will extend itself (in its drive to assimilate all things or bring them within the domain of its reckoning). The challenge, here, is to encourage educated culture to over-reach itself, and demonstrate its assimilative greed, its thinness, its lack of substance, its wish to chase down and co-opt the critic however far they stray. And then there is a criticism of strangeness, driven by a desire not to amount to anything (from the perspective of dominant culture), not to culminate in a final assessment, not to submit to the kind of strapline, or summary statement that radio presenters and book publishers like to begin (and end) with. This criticism is wily, evasive, and inscrutable.

11. Losing one's head

Hélène Cixous retells a story concerning Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, in which the King of Wu instructs the general to take his wives (180 in total) and turn them into an army. This the general attempts, heading up two columns with two of the women. They all fall about laughing when given their drill and so the general has the two leading women decapitated. Now the rest march perfectly, 'two beats—right, three beats—left' and so on (Cixous 1981: 42). 'It's hard to imagine a more perfect example of a particular relationship between two economies', Cixous writes, 'a masculine economy and a feminine economy, in which the masculine is governed by a rule that keeps time with two beats, three beats, four beats, with pipe and drum, exactly as it should be'. This masculine economy is an order that

> works by inculcation, by education: it's always a question of education. An education that
> consists of trying to make a soldier of the feminine by force, the force history keeps reserved
> for woman, the "capital" force that is effectively decapitation. Women have no choice other

than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them*—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons. (42–3)

Education is here associated with submission to order, the adoption of repeatable gestures, and the observance of Law, where the teacher and the general (and the statesperson, the doctor, the lawyer, and so on) share a preference for the formation of legible columns. Reading against the moral of the story, it appears that having a head (worth having) in such a context is about having the capacity to remain offset before all pointed restrictions, or at least walk from them with a derisive smile. This, perhaps, is what education criticism reduces serious criticism to, the plenitude, the magnificence, of that grin.

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