**The Forms of Academic Work**

**Center for Advanced Studies, LMU, October 10-11th 2024.**

**Patricia McManus**

**‘The Forms of Literary Criticism: Classrooms, Publics, Context Collapse.’**

Section A) Context Collapse

The phrase ‘context collapse’ is used most frequently – or most self-consciously – in the vocabularies of scholars of what were once called ‘new media,’ the platforms of the web 2.0 age when user-generated content, user-generated modes of organising online and user-generated distribution networks all conspired to profoundly alter how humans communicated with one another. The key movement I want to take from the phrase ‘context collapse,’ is the porousness it named in the borders between private and public spheres. It is not that people shared private experiences and thoughts online – in public spaces – but more that these spaces knew of no such border. The multiple modes of identity possible online – anonymous, pseudonymous, alter, serial, ‘true’ or ‘real,’ frequently coexisting simultaneously in one user’s work or in the space where that work of communication took place – tears context, dissolves its currency as an interpretive nexus.

The context it tears is the older form of the imagined community theorised as the orientation of print media, an orientation not so much to the nation as to ‘nationness,’ by Benedict Anderson. This is not necessarily a nationalistic context though it can be but it is one very much governed by the capacity of print styles to address a market of unknown, anonymous strangers (the potential buyers, borrowers or stealers of the print text) as if they were known, and in the case of the novel, as if they were familiars, known intimately.

What remains in our time of ‘context collapse’ is a flattened context, the interpretive mode organised or governed by the technology and the software of the online platform itself, of Twitter or X, for example, or of YouTube; and the agents or instruments of that mode, moving in that context, our ‘user,’ more or less at home, more or less a ‘digital native.’

I will not go into more detail here except to say that the phrase, ‘context collapse,’ came to seem more and more suggestive to me as I worked with students who did not share each other’s cultural reference points. With the exception of music and video-games (big exceptions I know), these students were not reading the same books or watching the same screen fictions. They had Instagram, Tik-Tok and Snapchat accounts in common (and the whole cultural life summoned up by the competencies assumed by those platforms) but there was no fiction there.

The novelist and literary critic, Ryan Ruby is useful here. Over the past few years, Ruby has shared details and excerpts of a long poem he has been writing for several years, *Context Collapse: a Poem Containing the History of Poetry*. This work was published in November of 2024 by Seven Stories Press. For Ruby, ‘context’ as a term summons up the conditions of production, storage and transmission of poetry: he argues that these features “comprise what I am calling *context* because they establish the parameters of the relationship between the poet and the audience.”

In an interview he gave about the work to Andrea Scrima of the online magazine, *3 Quarks Daily* in 2020, Ryan glossed what he meant by ‘context collapse’ in a way which traces something of the trajectory I wish to posit here as the situation of our undergraduate students as readers when we are engaged in teaching fiction to them.

Ruby’s point in the quotation I am about to give you involves poetry: the hermetically sealed world of readers he refers to is the relatively tiny world of the poet’s own community, those known to the poet and to whom she will send her poetry book or a copy of a poem. The entirely porous world, on the other hand, is that of the internet where poems go to have their contexts shattered, remade, reshattered and remade across multiple, incommensurable contexts. Ruby’s purpose is to track the meaning of this for poetry or for the history of poetry but buried in his work is a history of reading and of readers. It is this history – and what it tells us about where we are now (us and our students) which I suggest might be helpful here:

So what we have here is linguistic transmission that is at once hermetically sealed off from the vast majority of its potential recipients and entirely porous to any and all possible recipients, which, I might add, is a recipe for all the kinds of disasters and controversies and scandals we see, not just in contemporary American poetry, but in contemporary American life more generally. This situation is what social media theorists call (spoiler alert) context collapse. And in the penultimate section of the poem, I use the term not only to mean the ways in which, at present, thanks to the current state of media, contexts collapse on one another, but also to the ways in which, due to these same phenomena, context, considered as a mechanism for understanding the meaning and valence of simple statements, like tweets, and complex linguistic forms, like poems, has itself collapsed.[[1]](#endnote-1)

When challenged by the interviewer on the seeming success of some online poetry, for example, ‘Instapoetry’ (and Rumi Kaur is the example here), Ruby notes that “[f]or what it’s worth, Kaur’s poems sort of die on the slow silence of the printed page, which is not their intended context.”

It is that ‘slow silence of the printed page’ I wish to use as the pivot to the next phase of this exploration. In a seminar room, or in a reading context organised by the function of the seminar room, students experience that silence of the page as other than, maybe even alien to, the experiences of reading they are most fluent or most at home with.

This is not an argument about contemporary reading practices of young people *per se*. Young people read, they read online and they read offline. Phenomena like BookTok or Wattpad indicate perhaps even a flourishing of both reading and writing. Arguably, the mode of mediation in these online spaces is lyrical self-expression: both as writers and, more importantly to me right now, as readers, the dominant interpretive mode reached for in the time of context collapse is that which is least in need of context, the mode of the self, the self’s identity, experiences and desires. In her work on Wattpad, Sarah Brouillette has written of this mode as present in what she calls a ‘bibliotherapeutic culture.’ Brouillette treats Wattpadd as a particularly innovative instance of bibliotherapeutic culture. Within the purview of Wattpad,

as within the industry at large, feminization of work has been accompanied by the rise of bibliotherapeutic conceptions of writing as a form of care and inclusion. These conceptions extend beyond the Wattpad platform into the fiction that is hosted there and optioned for remediation.[[2]](#endnote-2)

I want to suggest in what follows that if the phenomenon of context collapse is at least provisionally accepted, in this conjuncture for reading, that our job (less as scholars than as teachers thought the two are necessarily entwined) has to now involve some attempt at recreating and institutionalising context for our students. Before I move to the question of literary criticism, however, the question of its possible future forms, I want to create a brief excursus into the relationship between novels themselves and their readers, their publics. My wager here is that we cannot treat novels (any literary phenomena) as inert material we bring history or interpretive skills to. Novels do not generate their own public autochthonously or out of their own entrails but they do participate in the clarification of the temporality of that public, its historicity. The public is temporally bound, so is the novel.

Section B) Publics

To illustrate what I mean here, let me call on an old classic, Jean-Paul Sartre’s long essay from 1948, *What is Literature?* In the chapter he titled, ‘For whom does one write,’ the second chapter of *What is Literature*?, Sartre dwells on the co-dependence of writer and reader: they share something which enables them both to be transformed by the book written. He gives the example of *The Silence of the Sea* by Vercors, a pseudonym for Jean Brullor. This novella was published in occupied France in 1941; it was published by Les Editions de Minuit, then an underground press set up to find ways to circumvent Nazi censorship. Sartre notes how critical reception of this story of passive resistance was polarised. The novella was “received with hostility in the émigré circles of New York, London, and sometimes even Algiers, and they even went so far as to tax its author with collaboration.” Though its author had been a member of the resistance from the very beginning and his “aim [was] perfectly evident,” the émigrés did not get this as Vercors “did not aim at *that* public.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

In France, however, an occupied zone, “nobody doubted the author’s intentions or the efficacy of his writing; he was writing for us.” This is not a matter of ‘truth’ but of ‘effectiveness’: not being confronted with the enemy up close, the exiles imagine him in terms of a whole, “as the incarnation of evil.” Conversely, however,

the conquered and occupied populations, who mingled with their conquerors, re-learned by familiarization and the effects of clever propaganda to consider them as men. Good men and bad men; good and bad at the same time. A work which in ’41 would have presented the German soldiers to them as ogres would have made them laugh and would have failed in its purpose.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Given the conditions in France in 1941, “the only form of opposition that could be required of the population was silence, scorn and an obedience which was forced and which showed it.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Vercors’ story had been designed to “combat within the mind of the French bourgeoisie of 1941 the effects of Petain’s interview with Hitler at Montoire.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Sartre’s explanation of the divided reception of *Silence of the Sea* is in itself interesting. But it becomes more so as he argues that the effectiveness of Vercors’ story was short-lived. By the end of 1942, the story had “lost its effectiveness,” it had “lost its public”:

Its public was the man of ’41 humiliated by defeat but astonished by the studied courtesy of the occupiers, desiring peace, terrified by the spectre of Bolshevism and misled by the speeches of Petain.[[7]](#endnote-7)

By the end of 1942, the war had surged up again in France: on “one side, underground propaganda, sabotage, derailment of trains, and acts of violence; and on the other, curfew, deportations, imprisonment, torture, and execution of hostages. An invisible barrier of fire once again separated Germans and Frenchmen.”[[8]](#endnote-8) It is Sartre’s phrasing I want here, and the relation between novel and public it rests on: thus, “Vercors’ story defined its public; by defining it, it defined itself … after the defeat it was alive, virulent, and effective. In a half-century it will no longer excite anyone.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

I ask for your forgiveness here for what might seem a digression into a question about readers and novels but I needed to find a way to stress to you that novels are not the raw materials for the literary criticism which practices itself on them. Novels demand or desire certain types of reading so any discussion of literary criticism must hold itself beholden to its object. Any one novel may not get the public it deserves but that it asks for a particular public, that it addresses a particular reader has to be a phenomena we consider.

Section C) Literary Criticism and Classrooms

You may have already noted that we do reconstruct publics, as literary scholars it is how we teach all the fiction which came into the world before us. The further away the work is from us, the harder it gets to create the public for that work, the public the novel addressed or desired. Literary scholarship is our bridge to developing hermeneutic practices sensitive to that public. The work of reading gets harder the older the novel is but both contemporary novels and past novels are supported by the apparatus of courses, modules, the use of overarching concepts, periodisations, stylistic clustering, the apparatus which governs our classrooms, assignments and grading schemes. That apparatus is built out of literary scholarship, the discipline’s scholarship as it overlaps with the regulations of the university more widely. Literary scholarship I define here as that amalgam of literary history and literary theory brought to the point of practice in the methods of close reading. Such scholarship has been neglected or even maligned in recent years as the site of nefarious practices, displaced attentions, projected wants, distractions. Such slights come in the name of a renewed attention to literary criticism.

In his well-reviewed book, *A Defense of Judgment* (2021), Michael Clune argues that literary scholars have “for several decades now” not justified their choice of literary texts as “they have felt unable to defend” those choices. Even though professors of literature make judgements about what is “more worth your time and attention,” and make such judgements all the time, articulating to students that these texts are worth that time because they are more “powerful, beautiful, surprising, strange, insightful ‘than others,’ they yet cannot defend these choices. Instead

we pretend we’re not making them. We bend over backward to disguise our syllabi, articles, and books as value neutral, as simply means for students to gain cultural or political or historical knowledge.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Clune carries on,

this stance is incoherent. It’s impossible to cordon off judgements about literary value from the practices of interpretation and analysis that constitute any viable model of literary expertise. If I judge that a certain poem contains a historical insight that can’t be captured by a history textbook, or that a particular novel knows something about political dynamics that a student can’t get from a work of political theory, then I’m making a literary judgement. I’m saying that it has value, not just for me but for everyone.[[11]](#endnote-11)

There is something wrong here, however. Literary studies exists as a discipline because there is a consensus that literature is not history and is not politics. The problem is not that we cannot say that literary texts contain insights that history texts do not, or political insights that political texts do not. Our whole discipline is one long articulation of precisely that distinction: that is why we exist – at least in part. Literary texts – written fictions, dramas or poems – do things other non-literary texts do not do. The problem is of a second order. Given the primary distinction, how then do we choose which literary texts to read, to garner insights from. Literary criticism uses scholarship, uses history and theory, but should have this as its own peculiar job, its own supplement to scholarship: why *this* literary text and not the other, why *this* novel and not any one of the 1000s or 10s of 1000s existing in the same historical moment or the same geopolitical spacetime?

“Countless are the novels of the world,” Franco Moretti wrote in his preface to *The Novel Volumes 1* and *2,* “[s]o, how do we speak of them.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The direction some scholars took at that point was towards the digital humanities. But for those of us who stayed with close reading, with the treatment of certain texts as willy-nilly exemplary, the problem still remains. The novels we study are but an ever shrinking portion of the novels which were written, were published and were read. So, the question is, how do we articulate a justification for this novel and not that. And in doing so, help our students gain a sense of the significance of their own reading practices as students, or their own belonging to a public of readers which stretches before them and which might stretch after them.

Can literary criticism do this: can literary criticism include precisely aesthetic judgements. If it can, that seems to me to be a catastrophe, if it cannot, that too is a catastrophe. Are the practices Clune terms ‘judgments of literary value’ distinct from questions of exemplarity? John Guillory may be right in that there is something odd, something anomalous, about this discipline of literary criticism. Professing criticism is in some ways a contradiction. When literary evaluation is not a matter of historical or political interpretation but of aesthetics – not a separate category of knowledge of course but a matter of what a novel does with the history and politics embedded in its language – how do we proceed? This novel is good as a novel because … ? What is our vocabulary? There has to be something other than ‘I like this’ (our students’ typical response) or ‘this is interesting’ (our own typical response).

1. Andrea Scrima, ‘Context Collapse: a Conversation with Ryan Ruby,’ (02. 17. 2020)*3Quarks Daily* <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2020/02/context-collapse-a-conversation-with-ryan-ruby.html>

   Accessed 10th November, 2024. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Brouillette, ‘Wattpad’s Fiction of Care,’ (07. 13. 2022), *Post45*. <https://post45.org/2022/07/wattpads-fictions-of-care/>

   Accessed 10th November, 2024. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? And Other Essays* (1948/1949) (Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 75/76. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Michael Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago University Press, 2021), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Franco Moretti, ‘On the Novel,’ in Moretti (ed), *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, Culture; The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)