

THINGS THOUGHT TOO LONG:
MODERNISM AND THE FUTURE OF THE SINGLE AUTHOR

Note: Warwick Gould was unable to travel to Austin because of his wife's illness: the paper was read for him while he waited on the phone in London to answer questions. The audience reaction—I think to the Roger Shattuck quotation on the meaningfulness of Modernism—caused the deliverer of the paper to comment at one point 'I'm only reading this for him, you know'. The comparative absence of questions indicated that the audience was not able to be content with the line proposed in the paper.

1. ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time (and a very good time it was) very few postgraduates working on the modernist period in the British university system wrote theory-driven, thematic theses. The best went from Honours degrees straight to theses on single authors, or on the influences on X of Y or Z. (The foolhardy edited texts: it was never easy to estimate how long it might take to complete such a project so as to display 'independent critical power' and the 'discovery of new fact' by which the PhD was solely judged.)

Colleagues joined the system as 'Lecturers in English Language and Literature'—Jamesians, Fordians, Conradians, Poundians, Lewisites, Joyceans—all were expected to teach the full post-mediaeval range. Hired in 1973 at Royal Holloway College in the University of London as a 'modernist', I had to devise an immediate course of lectures on Bentham, Mill, Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, Arnold, Pater and Morris while offering tutorials from Wyatt and Surrey to the present day, and lecturing on American fiction from Hawthorne to Sinclair Lewis. Post-mediaeval, not post-modern or even post-Renaissance was the limiting descriptor, and we all held introductory seminars for first years on the Prospect Poem: Jonson, Marvell, Denham, Pope and others—our sole 'theme'.

We were proud to be *amateurs*, and suspicious of 'professionalism'. Conducting our education in public, we learned to read in such a way

as to have some intuition for the ways in which our authors read (though we would not then have known why it would become important to put it in this way).

Structural change came from 1979 onwards. The Thatcher Government had scores to settle with the universities. The Humanities had no friends. It was an irony and a coincidence of truly *zeitgeistical* proportions that Big T theory, in the form of Deconstruction, distracted us when Big T government demanded our attention, preoccupying the readers it professed to empower, while university management collaborated with government to offer early retirements, drastic mergers, performance indicators, and the eventual installation of total quality management.

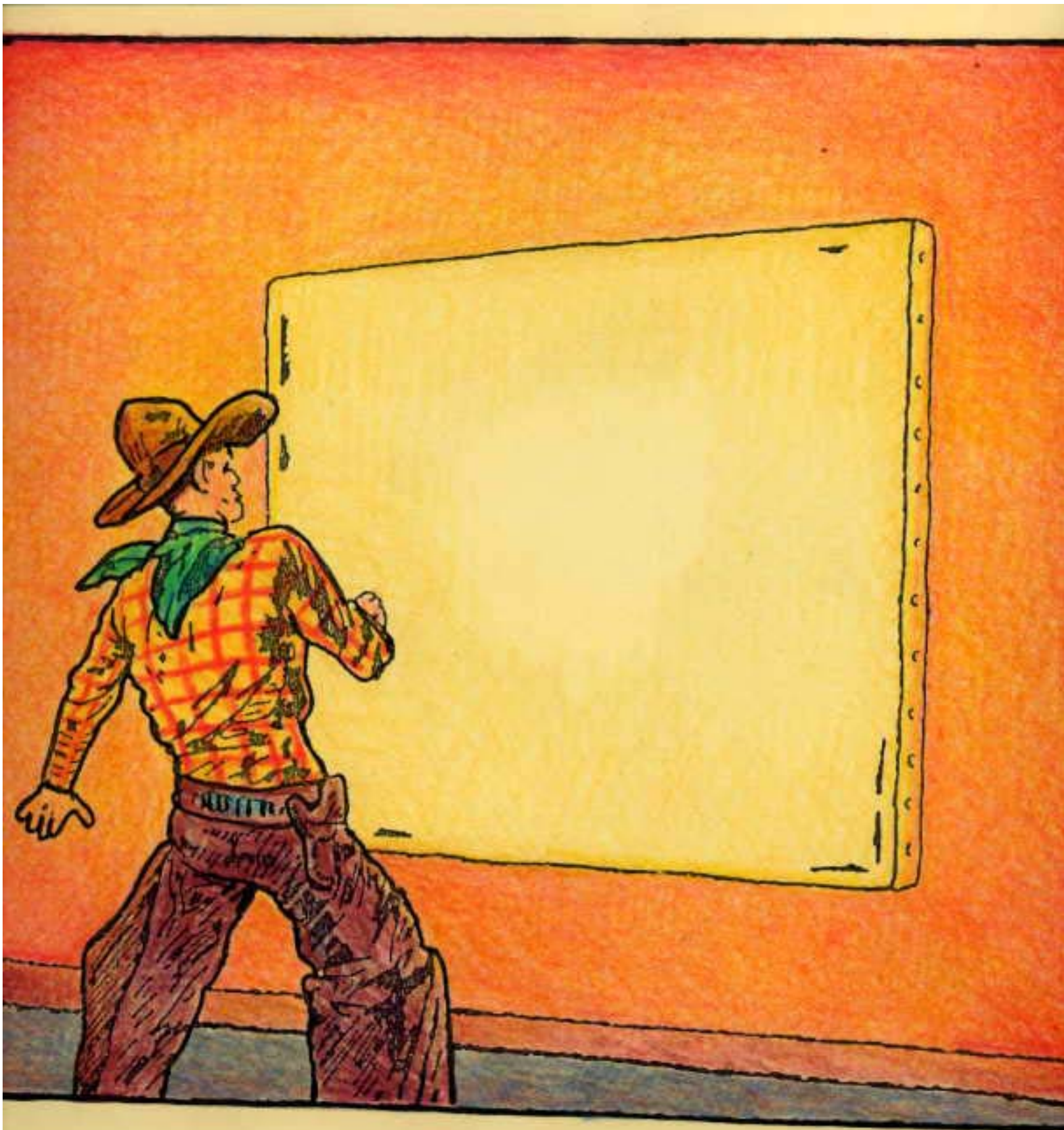
Pressure was mounted on PhD completion rates. Out went the PhD as research project to be submitted only when ripe for judgment. In came the PhD as job qualification, a *sine qua non* to be finished within three, and certainly within four years, unless the supervising department were not to be penalised—as some famous ones were—by the suspension of their accreditation to take PhD students funded from public money.

The nature of the PhD changed, as did its rules. Oxford led the way with a new criterion: the expectation of what a competent, diligent and well-supervised student could be expected to do in three years. Long-term study (e.g., of sources and analogues) was replaced by the more economical and less accountable application of theory (remember when Harold Bloom merely had an idea, before the idea had Bloom, as Christopher Ricks remarked in a *TLS* review? By then, the Bloom was gone.)

To be marketable, PhD students were encouraged to widen their range, to design their projects by such abstractions as the old term 'Modernism' which had begun to attract serious disputation only from 1967 onwards (when post-modernism began to be current). The move

was bewildering to the young author-centred graduate, as you can see courtesy of Glen Baxter (who also wishes he could be in Austin today)

(Here show Glen Baxter's 'It was Tom's first brush with Modernism'.
leave it on screen)



Tom quickly saw that a knowing familiarity with all the angles was what was the age demanded. His wary bemusement with concepts gave way to declensions of every abstract concept which could be applied to Modernism. Politics, gender, the body, textuality, sexuality were all quickly inscribed onto that blank canvas. Getting a job meant getting a PhD which, as Stanley Fish had demonstrated, meant simply disagreeing loudly with the latest thing published. 'Competitive reading', though denounced as a 'scandal' by Lawrence Lipking to the American Comparative Literature Association at Brandeis in 1988, was the order of the day.ⁱ

Thus things stood by the end of the eighties. Theory, which had never quite gained the hold in Britain that it did here, receded in the nineties, though its backwash still swirls in the eddies of postcolonialism and cultural studies. Tom and his kind had been hired as 'new blood' in a culture dominated by the funding levers of the Research Assessment Exercise and Teaching Quality Assessment. Self-help came in the form of self-professionalisation, in some muddled imitation of academic life over here. Interdisciplinarity flourished at the expense of the discipline formerly known as English.ⁱⁱ As the new theme-trained generation joined the departments, a remarkable thing happened. Instead of a new breadth, many saw it as a point of principle to refuse to teach beyond the range of their theses. Had they been single-author types we might have had the most radical contraction of the syllabus since Leavis handed us the Great Tradition. With some compensatory widening of the canon came a worrying shortening of it, and a narrowing of the reading range and expectation of students—a more direct challenge to

ⁱ Even as he did so, he endorsed it with faux-ruefulness as at least demonstrating that one was free to read. I was there to hear him.

ⁱⁱ I leave that line of thought to Andrew Delbanco and John Ellis: see Andrew Delbanco's phillipic, 'The Decline and Fall of Literature', *NYRB*, 46: 17 (4 November 1999), www.nybooks.com/article/318, and John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale, 1999).

the practice of reading than that posed by any radical scepticism about dead white males. Theme-based, 'boutique' courses began to flourish. On most of these, students no longer read authors, just texts. Some called it professionalism, others shopping.

2. TEXT-BOOK PUBLISHING

The head of W. W. Norton told me here in Austin at 'The State and Fate of Publishing' in **check** that the British Higher Education sector was Norton's fastest-growing market. He had a Zeal-of-the-Land Busyness about him, and a conscious aim to 'nortonise' British courses. It was something of a pushover, with the advance of course-units, and Departments capitulated to anthology-based teaching, particularly at the lower levels of undergraduate courses.

In the UK student participation in Higher Education has been engineered to increase dramatically. Student poverty provided an additional moral lever against the setting of editions of complete works (e.g., of *The Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*) for all courses other than Chaucer and Shakespeare (not that the anthology publishers were philanthropists). As the whole world of undergraduate expectation changed, students could no longer be asked to read all the year round. One could no longer expect one's tutorial students should read (say) Spenser, Byron or Yeats in the vacation. They would protest that they were working part-time in term time and full-time in the vacation.

At undergraduate level, preparation for the eight finals papers had hitherto meant (to the realistic) concentrating in depth on at least three authors per period paper, plus Shakespeare and Chaucer: twenty major authors in three years. The structural changes in the system worked in synergy with the new theory-driven interdisciplinarity. The drop in the expectation of what students could read in single-semester courses grew by what it fed on: a true cycle of deprivation. The death of the single author was an assisted death.

3. 'A GENERATION OF STILL-BREEDING THOUGHTS'

Lurching between two poles of anxiety, the alternate assessments of Research output and teaching quality, Tom and his kind found that 'publish or perish' had been replaced by 'publish, publish and publish again'. The difficulty was not insuperable for those willing to invest their reader-empowerment in recognisable kinds of output. The website of *Modernism/Modernity* gives the flavour of what I have in mind

Concentrating on the period extending roughly from 1860 to the present, *Modernism/Modernity* focuses on the methodological, archival, and theoretical exigencies particular to modernist studies. It encourages an interdisciplinary approach linking music, architecture, the visual arts, literature, and social and intellectual history. The journal's broad scope fosters dialogue between social scientists and humanists about the history of modernism and its relations to modernization. Each issue features a section of thematic essays . . . ⁱⁱⁱ

'The official journal of the Modernist Studies Association', *Modernism/Modernity* lays breathtaking claim to the territory 'roughly from 1860 to the present' (I greatly admire that 'roughly'), the claim of a *Journal of Things in General*. I sometimes have to remind myself that the editor of this meta-journal of modernist thematics is the very likeable Lawrence Rainey and not Diogenes von Teufelsdröckh.

And despite the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' that surrounds the academic monograph, rumours of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. Various American doomsters passing through London (Elaine Showalter, Robert Darnton), warn us of the entropic disasters in American academic publishing and of the desperate remedies proposed to the MLA by Stephen Greenblatt, my colleague John Sutherland

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modernism-modernity>. Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, E-ISSN: 1080-6601 Print ISSN: 1071-6068.

responds in the *London Review of Books* that resourceful academics ‘write books as beavers build dams’^{iv}. Though there is no sign as yet in the UK that universities (which of course subsidize monograph production by employing the authors and buy the product themselves) would further legitimate vanity publishing, publishers remain keen to convince us that things could not be worse. They urge young academics to diversify, to produce coursebooks, textbooks, anthologies, casebooks, anything in a series, and anything but the single-author study. Various crude theories are advanced to explain the monograph dilemma—over-production, lack of time or money to read or buy, the move within academic libraries (especially here in North America) from holdings to access policies. It is clear that the British system is too small for its own Research Assessment Exercise-driven over-production and is commercially reliant on the export market, making publishing decisions on the basis of up-front sales to North-American distributors for the academic library market.

Modernist studies are, however, a large (perhaps swollen) subset of academic monographs,^v and very few publishers have been game to face the truth on this matter. According to Lindsey Waters of Harvard University Press, much that is produced by young scholars following the advice of their dissertation directors for the monograph market is ‘uninteresting’

I am getting depressed dealing with the young scholars in shock because they ‘did everything’ their dissertation directors instructed to craft a product that would sell, only to be told by me it’s uninteresting. The situation of young scholars in literature is a bit like

^{iv} ‘Diary’, *The London Review of Books*, 22 January 2004, 31.

^v The British Library’s holdings of foreign-produced monographs are notoriously uncertain, but even the BL’s *Public Catalogue* lists 1802 monographs since 1975 with ‘Modernism’ or ‘Modernist’ in the titles. An Amazon keyword search gives 12497 hits on ‘Modernism’, and 12301 hits for ‘modernist’.

the one of sonnetteers in the Renaissance, when everybody had figured out how to write 14-liners, but too few of them had any lift..^{vi}

The stale self-regard of contemporary monograph titles shows that he is right. Ringing familiar changes on Modernism with sexuality, textuality, gender, theory, politics, the body, representation, enablement, they awaken the suspicions that Bertrand Russell's fabled team of word-processing monkeys is still hard at work. Troping on previous titles and reshuffled lists of abstract nouns can presumably fool computer-generated keyword ordering until the shelves are full, and before anyone is aware that nobody is reading these books any more. This is academic over-production, a large-scale bankruptcy concealed only by its obviousness. Puns, lunettes, bracketed syllables and clumsy slashes simply ape the worst in the conference presentations from which many such titles are made up. Publishers in search of the quick-fix have been foolishly led, and the younger authors are less to blame than a generation of dissertation supervisors who seem to want their students to act out middle-aged enthusiasms by producing unread books.

4. THE FATE OF READING

In the paradigm shift from single author to theme-based teaching and learning the fate of reading steadily and whole, reading to find out what kind of reading leads to writing, is increasingly at stake. Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' was no more than a charming piece of sixties antinomianism, designed to shake up a pedagogical system stifled by Lansonism. When Readers say 'A Professor is a Reader who has ceased to read' you sense an awful warning ('Reader' is a research title in the UK system). More than fifteen years ago Frank Kermode insisted that it is essential to

^{vi} *LRB*, 22 Jan 2004, 31

‘ keep the road open’, to maintain, somehow, a style of talking about literature . . . which will preserve the reading public, and—quite simply—literature (which we must presume to recognise) from destruction. I regard this as by far the most important single element in the task of university teachers of literature; it is nothing less than the preservation of what we give that name. In their own time they can read what they like and deconstruct or neo-historicise what they like, but in the classroom they should be on their honour to make people know books well enough to understand what it is to love them. If they fail in that, either because they despise the humbleness of the task or because they don’t themselves love literature, they are failures and frauds. I hope I make myself clear.^{vii}

Last summer a conference in Belfast celebrated the seventy-fifth birthday of Denis Donoghue, and Wolfgang Iser, Frank Kermode, Edna Longley, Marjorie Perloff and others lined up to pay their tributes. Colm Toibin told us very simply about his experience of Donoghue’s teaching in Dublin. Toibin had arrived at UCD in the very early 1970s, a provincial, a Catholic, a Fenian, a man who had not faced his own sexuality. Donoghue’s teaching of how to read brought him to the point of saying to these variously unsatisfactory selves: ‘*Non serviam*’. It was a story which, *mutatis mutandis*, we could all tell; the story of how our formation has been wrought by teachers. Wallace Stevens supplied Toibin’s title: ‘How to Live. What to Do’.

5. THINGS THOUGHT TOO LONG

Ernest Renan reminded us 150 years ago that ‘No historical questions are more difficult to solve than those which aim at discovering in the past qualities created by the spirit of the present.’ (p 248) It will be apparent that I share a scepticism voiced by Roger Shattuck twenty years ago:

^{vii} ‘The Men on the Dump: A Response’, p. 103.

Modernism is not a meaningful category of literary history or art history. It's a feather bed for critics and professors . . .^{viii}

Almost a decade ago, John Harwood's *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation* took up this argument brilliantly, in a book which bore Glen Baxter's young cowboy on its dustjacket. Harwood did not explicitly foresee the present crisis in academic publishing, but he readily foresaw the kind of writing that would bring it to its knees, warning that the 'oil' . . . will run out, so far as academic criticism is concerned, when the taxpayer is no longer prepared to pay for it' (p. 19).

[C]ritics who will dispute the smallest detail of an interpretation, and who regard reading itself as problematic, if not impossible, deal confidently in personified abstractions such as 'modernism' and 'postmodernism', apparently secure in the belief that these are precise terms with meaningful referents. In advanced theoretical discourse, every pivotal term—literature, language, text, theory, discourse, culture, capitalism, imperialism, ideology—is reified into a ghostly dance of abstractions.^{ix}

'Things thought too long can be no longer thought' says Yeats, and perhaps it is the requirement to embody research training in Masters and PhD courses which offers us all some hope. (There are too many

^{viii} ' . . . an endlessly renewable pretext for scholars to hold conferences, devise special numbers, and gloss one another's works into powder. . . the 'category "modernism" tries to make a category of items that will not fit into a category . . . [Whether betokening a period, school, style, it is] all make-work, an exercise in nomenclature with no grounding in compelling events or works'. See Roger Shattuck, 'The Poverty of Modernism', in *The Innocent Eye* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984), check p. 338-340. Quoted in John Harwood's *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation*.

^{ix} Harwood, p. 28. Others, such as Frank Kermode, have readily seen how the claim to professional status has somehow removed the 'specialists' from any 'obligation to common readers' (quoted in Harwood, p. 19).

'designer' Masters courses, in many cases extrapolated from the undergraduate boutique courses. In just one year, they can offer little but procrastination for serious holistic attention to the single author.)

The 'research training' requirement offers a bridgehead for the return of historical bibliography, the new disciplines associated with the History of the Book, including the histories of reading and writing (even 'modern' palaeography). Here, students are discovering, it is possible to begin to get real again.

7. ALL KNOWLEDGE IS BIOGRAPHY

Let me try to draw all of this together by illustrating with respect to W.B. Yeats, a single author and research field I do know something about. Ever since the seventies, major bibliographical, textual, and editorial research has proceeded on the letters, the manuscripts the works, and the lives of Yeats and his associates. Criticism has had to abide the emergence of a new generation of essential tools. With the completion of the new authorized *Life* by Roy Foster, the electronic publication in beta form of the *Letters* and the near-completion of the Cornell Manuscripts Series, it is possible to envisage all sorts of new, essential studies, and we are desperate for young trained scholars suitably attentive to the enhanced editorial standards demanded by the best of this work.

What should logically follow is a period of great single author criticism, taking account of WBY's strategies of self-allusion, the plenum of his work. Moreover, there is much more editorial work to be done and specialist studies to be written. Where are such scholars to emerge from?

I have the impression that research universities in the US are much better than we are in the UK in the business of training postgraduates

by offering them work on larger projects.^x But much of what has to be done is not comprehensible within the funding horizons of graduate study. I had the of co-editing one of the volumes of the Oxford *Collected Letters* of W. B. Yeats. Frank Kermode remarked that ‘the Oxford edition of the Yeats correspondence . . . is quite another world’,^{xi} and it is acknowledged by OUP itself to have inherited the mantle of the Dickens *Letters* and to set new international standards for annotation.

As I write this paper I am reading proof of the fourth volume edited by John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (an Austin alumnus). There is no doubt that this edition is, quite simply, rewriting early twentieth-century literary history, and the rules for its construction. Here in the US there is a good deal of criticism, not all of it malicious, of the time such annotation takes. It is natural to wonder whether and if so, how, to involve graduate students in such work. Both its General Editor, John Kelly (Oxford), and Ronald Schuchard (Emory) feel that graduate students can be of little help. If a graduate student were to return from the British Library’s newspaper collection at Colindale saying ‘I could find no trace of it’ we would simply stay there ourselves until we had got it right. Long-term researchers develop instincts few will get in the three years of graduate study.

Yet, by leaving them out of account we risk creating a future generation who will not know what it is to go and find out.. The only way in which serious annotatory projects such as the Yeats *Letters* can be undertaken at an appropriate level is protracted and must needs be focused on unpredictable and frequently frustrating outcomes. One can only say to the participants, as they immerse themselves in the Yeats papers at the

^x Yet, even as the Arts and Humanities Research Board in the UK (soon to be a fully-fledged Research Council) has poured much more research money into the Humanities, most of it goes on large-scale post-doctoral research projects. There is as yet (to me) little sign of conspicuous success in incorporating book-historically inclined doctoral theses into such projects.

^{xi} Reviewing the letters of Marianne Moore, in *Pleasing Myself*, p. 37)

National Library of Ireland, the Macmillan Archive at the British Library, the Yeats manuscripts and association copies here Ransom Center, or hardest graft of all, the sea of print in Colindale, 'to the destructive element submit yourself'. If the happy few cannot be graduate students who will not learn to swim in time, a way must be found to bring them along for the ride.

Without such scholarship, single author study will not crack the greatest remaining mysteries which hover around the question: 'What, for the great authors of this period, for Yeats, for Joyce, for Eliot, for Woolf, is the relation between reading and writing? That dotted line back from reading to writing in Robert Darnton's communications circuit is the great unanswered question of early twentieth century creativity. Addressing it in all humility but armed with the best scholarship of the 80s and 90s would lead to the rethinking of some of the great studies of the last era of Yeats criticism, the era of Jeffares, Ellmann, Henn, Wilson, Ure, Torchiana, Melchiori, Grossman.

It is in some such mood of qualified confidence that Palgrave Macmillan have asked me to edit a new Yeats Studies Monograph Series. That firm has always wanted more *Yeats Annuals* than I have had time to edit, though it does now prefer these volumes to sport thematic sub-titles for the American library market. As Yeats's publisher, Palgrave Macmillan wish their Yeats Studies Series to recoup what has been lost in their unsuccessful *Collected Edition of the Works*, in the firm belief that there is a readership for sound and clearly-written scholarship on 'whole' authors. Whatever form it takes, such scholarship will be, at root, biographical, because it will acknowledge that the author is not dead. 'All knowledge is biography', as Yeats himself insisted.

The history of the International Yeats Summer School for forty-five years is an enduring testimony to the common reader and to the idea of the single author. Every time that I teach there I ask myself whether universities can continue to turn out readers to match those one finds in Sligo. The answer surely is this: teach the graduate students in the

libraries, in the presence of manuscripts, association copies, rare books. Show them what it is to know books in order to love literature. That is what our best students will remember of us. If for Shelley 'poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the gigantic mirror that futurity casts upon the present', then the condition of English in our Universities offers a gigantic mirror for the future of reading and so of writing. After a generation of still-breeding thoughts, it is as well to remember that.

WG, 14 Mar 2004