ESSAY

Critical Reading and the Fantasy of Method

BEN DAVIES

We as a profession lack detailed, accurate representations and descriptions of the reading work academics do. Addressing this deficiency is a challenge that academics, perhaps especially those involved in literary study, might take up—to give a clear account of what their reading work is, and what their practices are. This type of account is, however, largely absent—even from recent material written on all sides of the "method wars" and about the state of the profession over the last decade or so. In the introduction to his widely debated *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, for instance, John Guillory posits his book as a corrective to the fact that our work has "never . . . been systematically addressed in the context of a sociology of professions" (ix). Gesturing to such an undertaking, Guillory invokes Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "*Handwerk*" to draw attention to the fact that scholarly work and thinking are also bodily (7–8). Yet Guillory's detailed sociology of the profession stops short of offering an account of actual academics' reading habits, processes, or practices, and bodies themselves are fairly absent—despite his criticism that it is "the failure of the humanities to provide a generally accessible account of what it is that scholars do, an account that might be circulated beyond the humanities disciplines and that would mediate between scenes of immanent evaluative discourse and external scenes of reception or promotion" (296).[1] In a similar vein, Jonathan Kramnick states that his aim in "Criticism and Truth" is to rectify the fact that "what is missing from our talk about method is method, our actual on-the-ground procedures of reading and interpretation" (219). His solution is to meticulously describe "the ordinary science of the discipline" and the "hands-on immersion" of the critic (224, 223).

BEN DAVIES is professor of literature in the Department of Culture and Language and chair of humanities at the Danish Institute for Advanced Study, University of Southern Denmark. His most recent book is the coauthored *Reading Novels during the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Oxford UP, 2022).

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Yet the promise of detail at the level of practice remains unrealized here as well.

The very lack of clear and detailed knowledge regarding what academics do is the impetus behind Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase's call for a "praxeology" of literary academics in their recent work *Geistesarbeit* and the 2016 project Scholarly Primitives and Renewed Knowledge-Led Exchanges (SPARKLE), led by Jennifer Edmond:

> The literature defending the humanities is rich in evidence of impact and positive downstream effects, but there is very little evidence to show exactly how the humanities disciplines fulfill their epistemic mission, how they create knowledge alongside the other disciplines, using something that can be seen as an equivalent to better understood, more transparent forms of experimental scientific method.
>
> (Edmond et al.)

To address this lacuna, Edmond and her team interviewed three historians, two archaeologists, an art historian, and two literary historians to detail humanities "epistemic cultures" and be better placed to advocate for them. While this project comes closer to providing the type of detail about academic work so often missing from discussions about method in literary studies and defenses of the discipline, its remit understandably keeps it from directly weighing in on such issues.

Questions concerning the reading work that academics undertake and that published criticism relies on in particular are ones Christina Lupton and I have been investigating for the project Reading at University: How, exactly, do academics read? When, where, why do they read? How are academic lives shaped by and for reading, and to what end? What reading practices remain invisible in published academic work? With some external funding, throughout the autumn of 2022 we visited several universities in Denmark and the United Kingdom to interview academics and students about their reading. As of 2026, we have interviewed thirty-three humanists, talking to readers at different career stages and in different disciplines, but mainly in history, literary studies, and philosophy.[2] Ahead of the interviews, participants were asked to keep a journal of their daily reading habits during a given term week. At the end of this week, we undertook qualitative interviewing, carrying out hour-long semistructured interviews in person.[3] Building on previous studies of time use in the university, this project specifically investigates the interconnected issues of when and why reading happens in the humanities. While researchers in all disciplines read as part of their profession, it is in subjects such as English, history, and philosophy that reading is the absolute key to the successful production and transmission of knowledge. Reading is an essential activity for their research and teaching, and much of the humanities student's time is meant for reading.

Clearly, our dataset is relatively small and therefore limited. It is also interdisciplinary, and, as we have written about elsewhere, reading practices in different humanities disciplines vary.[4] In this essay, I incorporate the practices of these different disciplines to make broader points about reading, while focusing more specifically on the reading practices and the profession of literary criticism. Furthermore, our interviewees all work at universities in Denmark and the United Kingdom, whereas much of the work I cite on the "method wars" or the state of the profession comes from, and focuses on, the US academy. While this geographic divergence arose mainly from practical reasons and the recent publication of notable scholarship on the profession and the practice of criticism from the United States, such an approach allows for a broader, less US-centric perspective, opening up the potential for the exploration of both local and shared issues. I do not, then, claim representativeness in the following discussions. Yet our qualitative research has allowed us to examine in some detail the reading that academics undertake—the reading habits, practices, and processes that underpin their teaching and research, and their daily lives. In this sense, we have been investigating the "ordinary science" and everyday activities that underpin the work academics do, the time use and the labor behind their research, their teaching, and all the other work they must complete.

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Lupton and I have been exploring, as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar put it in *Laboratory Life*, "the intimacy of life among tribes which are much nearer at hand" (17), investigating the ways in which academics, as well as books read and written, are part of intricate networks in time and space, both in and outside the university. More specifically for the purposes of this essay, it has allowed for the examination of the reading that informs the production of literary criticism, the present-day processes and stages that make any method or approach possible.[5] While we have heard lots about academics' pleasure reading and their reading for teaching, I focus here on critical reading or instrumental reading with publication in mind, because the production of criticism—its value and use—is central to the many debates about, and defenses of, the profession. Questions concerning "method" and close reading likewise often take as their major object of focus literary criticism in its published form. Indeed, I argue in this essay that qualitative research into reading practices brings much needed detail and nuance to the so-called method wars. Such approaches offer a way to "look closely *at* current ways of reading rather than through them" (Felski, *Limits* 6), and thereby to explore the distinction between method and fantasies of method. If we are to look *at* reading, as Rita Felski urges us, we must detail and examine the processes and practices that are entangled with and influence forms of attunement and attachment and mood, as well as the production of close reading and criticism.

For many in the humanities and literary studies, this endeavor may seem too close, the potential findings too obvious. But it is the very reading that is required for work in the humanities and the production of criticism that is often vague or only spectrally present in fictional or real representations or the scholarly work produced, resonating with Latour and Woolgar's claim that "scientists' statements . . . systematically conceal the nature of the activity which typically gives rise to their research reports" (28). As Felski writes in *Uses of Literature*, "Published academic criticism . . . is not an especially reliable or comprehensive guide to the ways in which academics read" (14). Images of academics reading often fare no better. Take, for instance, the scene Stefan Collini wishes to create for a vice chancellor doing the departmental rounds in *What Are Universities For?*: "The emblematic figure of humane scholarship is not the professor at the lectern or the would-be author at the word processor, still less the white-coated member of a research team collecting 'data' and publishing 'results'. It is the person sitting alone reading a book" (147). The appeal here is strong—to focus on the humanist "reading a book"—but those three words and the image they offer hide more than they show.[6] An image of a reader can only be a cipher for the work, the reading humanists undertake. As Edmond writes, moreover, actual scholarly reading "does not adhere in the least to the image of immobile reader locked in to the limited space between her face and her book, but is instead a kinetic, embodied, multimodal series of interactions, engaging not only the centre of focus, but the peripheral vision as well" (par. 6).

Given the lack of detailed representations and accounts of the processes of reading, the work undertaken in the humanities is often seen as being obscure and opaque. Moreover, readers most often see only the end product of reading and writing—published criticism—neither the processes that go into it nor the discussions that take place in seminars or at conferences; they miss out on much of the "messiness" of reading that Elaine Auyoung for one has described (94). As one associate professor of literature we interviewed at Cambridge said of their colleagues in other disciplines, "they just think we read books. . . . [T]he humanities feel transparent and easy to understand and its complexity would surprise." Presumably, it is both the complexity of "reading books" itself as well as all the other things humanists do that would surprise outsiders. Similarly, a Danish postdoctoral researcher told us that people outside the humanities often do not know "how it is that we do the things that we do" and, crucially, "how unclear what we do is even to ourselves." This last point is particularly telling, and throughout our interviews many academics struggled, at least initially, to articulate what it is they do when they read. It seems then that the work

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of the literary academic is undervalued because it is at once transparent and mysterious, bafflingly simple and incomprehensibly difficult.

In undertaking this project, Lupton and I, like Latour and Woolgar in the lab, "try sociologically to understand what is all too frequently transformed into stories about minds having ideas" (171), building up a fine-grained account of the profession, of how texts are created and transformed in studies and classrooms, but also in living rooms and bathtubs and as audio files consumed on the commute to work.[7] It is in this sense that we are also responding to Christine Pawley's call to think about communities of actual readers as they exist in time and space. While we have not yet undertaken full embedded ethnographic observation, we did interview many academics in situ where they read at least some of the time—from the brand new but very small offices at one UK university, where some academics had to get rid of their book collections to fit into their new spaces, to the spacious rooms at some Cambridge colleges, complete with multiple desks, sofas, and armchairs.[8] Such insights may seem insignificant, but as the anthropologist Matthew Rosen argues, "the material conditions of reading are the very conditions of possibility that enable the abstract mental work that goes into it" (1075).[9] Indeed, seeing and understanding the conditions under which reading happens ultimately help provide real-life detail to ongoing debates about "method" and the differences between so-called lay and critical reading. It also helps rectify how, as Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan show in relation to teaching, large-scale debates, "wars," and "manifestos . . . tend—today and throughout the profession's history—to dominate our metadiscourse while misrepresenting our practice" (9).

So, what have Lupton and I found, and how do our findings add to the overall picture of reading in the humanities and of the reading that leads to the production of criticism, among other forms of scholarly work? First, it is worth acknowledging the obvious: academics read a lot, but not always what or in the manner they want to. Second, and more significantly, we have been able to see lives shaped by and for reading, and many interviewees emphasized in particular the importance of extracurricular reading to the core values of their profession. Indeed, almost all the students and faculty members in the humanities whom we interviewed felt that they came closest to reading as they wanted to in summer, or after their work for classes was done. Being away from home, especially in holiday settings, often seemed to provide the ideal time and space to undertake more exploratory reading. The fact that the most ideal reading for the humanist scholar happens during time for which they are not paid creates a complex situation in which the professional survival of humanists begins to depend on there being some limits to their paid work. Of the many layers of attention that "working" on a text requires of the humanist scholar, that initial one of reading for curiosity or pleasure turns out to be the hardest to make room for as university employees exercise the other kinds of literacy called for in writing emails, judging funding applications, peer reviewing, and supervision. This all leads to a rather complicated conclusion that it is the people who read most professionally who may need their instrumental reading to be limited. Without this balance, between time spent with and away from their email, teaching preparation, grant writing, grading, and assessment of one another's texts, humanists are left to read as everyone does: for work, and without ever ranging freely between new texts or returning repeatedly to the same passage, scene, sentence, or word. Humanities academics and students will survive only if "up against it reading" (as one interviewee described it) does not eliminate the other forms of nonwork reading that have always and ironically been vital and distinctive to their professions.

In general, Lupton and I have heard a lot about the time-consuming work of reading, including just how much reading academics do in fields distant from their primary one, the way they learn foreign languages on their own time, and how they spend time learning new technologies and reading colleagues' and students' work. More specifically, we have gained greater insight into the complex processes that scholarly and critical reading entails.

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To give a flavor of some of the work that goes into academic reading in keeping with the spirit of Latour and Woolgar's opening account of the morning activities of the lab members, here I provide three fairly long transcript moments, the first from an intellectual history postdoctoral fellow in the United Kingdom, the second from a professor of comparative literature at the University of Southern Denmark, and the third from a Danish historian:

> I really do trawl everything and kind of get huge, you know, the tabs for days, of things and create lists . . . then I go through and I download or I skim and go through things, and then inevitably come back and reread the same thing for a thousand times . . . I like to have this huge corpus of information overload. That's my starting point. . . . I think I'm very eighteenth century, I'm kind of the product of what I study in the sense that it is just sheer overload, there's a huge amount, but I am quite rigorous and I do go through and I look at every single thing, and I will double-check. If there's a footnote, I'll go through every single footnote, if there is something, I will dig for a day to try and find it. So, I'm quite ruthless and quite rigorous in that. But it's clearly not a very efficient process. . . . I highlight, I write notes, I am a huge fan of Post-it notes. My life has just been stacks of Post-it notes. I think I can condense all of my research into Post-it notes. And then other lists, again. It is completely chaotic, and disordered, but clearly that is my mind and how it works, and everything has to be filtered through into some subsidiary level of notes, subsidiary level of Post-its, down to the final sentence that it becomes.
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> So, there's a huge process of distillation, of reading time, marking up, going back, then transferring it to a *Word* document that may then become a kind of template just for that particular novel or text. And then I have another *Word* document that may be an article or a book chapter, and then I go back and forth between those. And then occasionally, of course, I have to go back to the text itself. But there is this kind of slimming down of the text.
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> The people who have helped us with the Russian archives, they have a system whereby you give them a general idea of what you're interested in, sort of keywords and so on and roughly where you think this material might be held. They go and do the catalog search, and then they come back to you with an *Excel* sheet saying here's the hit. And then you highlight what you think you might be interested in. And then they actually scan that document quickly and give you a brief summary of what's in it. . . . Then I would have my little lecture notes in shorthand, written down, sketched out ideas. And then looking at those type up the actual draft documents . . . by dictating them.

Such accounts—just a snapshot of those we have collected—give a glimpse of the stages, materials, and time that academic reading requires. They also show how some scholars can be just as attached to their practices as they are to their methods.[10] These processes may seem obvious, banal, unimportant, but it is worth considering here how such practices and processes are those that help create, among other things, forms of criticism. For Kramnick, "[k]nowledge resides in the fingers doing the writing as much as the eyes doing the reading" (230). The attention Kramnick gives to the formulation of in-sentence quotation is admirable and welcome, since it returns us to one particular aspect of what literary critics actually do. However, his description, and the examples he provides, remain at the level of method; he emphasizes the skill and dexterity of critics in combining their words with the words of others, but he does not reveal the more everyday practices involved in this work—the annotating, typing, copying and pasting, and the revising and deleting of words that create the finished piece of criticism. These, too, involve complex forms of "confrontation and comingling" (222). What is missing from his talk about method is close attention to practice—despite his accurate diagnosis that "[m]ethod talk should, but hasn't really, included reflections on everyday practice" (219). By asking us to "[c]onsider the intuitive virtuosity shaping this moment from the everyday life of the discipline" (223), as he does when discussing how Mary Favret quotes William Cowper's *The Task*, for instance, Kramnick also elides the roles of chance and the more accidental moments

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that ultimately inform many close readings, presenting something of an idealized version of critical method. While his argument that close reading is a form of writing is compelling and reinstates the body of the reader-writer, other forms of reading of course occur before, during, and after writing.[11] Indeed, qualitative research—along with certain types of historical and archival scholarship—can show that much close reading often ends up not making it into the final version of an article or book, either being present only in discarded notes and scribbles or simply staying in the mind of the reader. Whether close reading stays on the floor as discarded notes or in the mind, it would be strange, though, would it not, to say that it has not occurred at all? Moreover, by detailing the reading processes that academics undertake, we can see how critics are doing things and not simply ruminating while they read and before they write—and that reading involves all sorts of activity before it might become part of a finished article. Critics are situated in time and space; they must navigate between different words, materials, and technologies, scribbling, copying, pasting, listing, rereading, and so on. All of this involves both complex thinking and doing, skilled and somewhat mundane practices—practices that underpin and are part of the very methods that Kramnick details.

By showing the various processes and practices involved in critical reading, qualitative research also helps reveal the temporal complexity of critical reading. It helps disclose the multiple stages, the recursions and returns involved in reading, and, by giving an indication of what critics do, it shows how critics spend their time during and between readings. Such accounts thereby enrich critical discussions of "rereading" by providing glimpses into what happens with and between so-called first and second readings. Indeed, many of our interviewees describe their reading as being less demarcated or stable than Michaela Bronstein, for instance, makes it out to be in "How Not to Re-read Novels":

> And the course of reading, especially first reading, is an adjustment of our mental rhythms to those the book demands. Reading—even, indeed *especially*, reading James at his most challenging—is a matter not merely of critical thinkers wresting understanding from recalcitrant text, but of readers letting their thoughts be absorbed, affected, and controlled by a novel. (79–80)

Bronstein's focus on the temporality and rhythm of reading and rereading is insightful—and the wish for that first type of reading is one that many of our interviewees longed for but did not get to, especially during term time. As Felski elucidates in *Hooked*, however, any encounter with an aesthetic object can involve different forms of temporal experience, from moments of surprise or epiphany to delayed response or a certain lag effect (54–61). Critics' interactions with texts are, likewise, temporally complex and varied. A French literature specialist at Cambridge insisted, for instance, "I'm not linear" and "I don't do linear encounters with text." Connecting her reading to her period of specialization—the eighteenth century—the prevalence of the fragment, and the morphology of the book, this academic describes a reading practice characterized by scanning and closely analyzing one passage before turning to analyze another. Her reading practice, even for a first reading, thereby rubs up against the idea of being controlled wholly by a text's rhythms; rather, her nonlinear approach, which she passes on to her students by having them first analyze randomly selected passages when confronted by long works, discloses how readers can assert agency over a text and can bend its rhythms to their own, or at least move between their desires and needs and those of the text.

An English literature PhD student in Cambridge explained how he organizes his reading by time slots, whereby he reads in scheduled twenty-five- or fifty-minute sessions and then takes notes for five minutes, followed by a five-minute break, on repeat. In this way, even his first readings are controlled not so much by the rhythm of the text but by what he labels his "quite rigid structures" of scholarly time management. More generally, he claimed never to be absorbed by literature:

> I don't tend to get lost in novels, which is perhaps a slight thing I feel a little bit self-conscious about

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> because I feel like maybe I should. But I think . . . the enjoyment I take is from a kind of sense of study of letters, I suppose. I take pleasure from the idea of becoming encultured or something like that, or knowledgeable. Where I would go for entertainment is probably not books. I take a great amount of joy from this focused research study process, so that is enjoyable for me, but these aren't leisure activities.

This reader is too critically positioned and engaged with the idea of reading as a form of study to experience what Bronstein describes as "the absorbing thrill of first reading," or the "reader's naive, durational experience of the text" (90). The pleasure he finds in reading is bound up more with thinking, ideas, and scholarly engagement than with naively giving himself over to a text. It is also the case that academics' reading is often driven and informed by the demands of research, publication, and teaching, rather than idealized free enquiry—as expressed by a comparative literature professor at the University of Southern Denmark who reflected on the pipeline that can accompany the award of external grants: "I think the three- or four-year projects where you've already promised that you will publish this and that are less conducive to sitting down and thinking about something and reading about it. Because you have to deliver within three or four years." Given such pressures, many interviewees told us how they are always reading critically, with pencil at the ready, underlining and taking notes. Even with that first reading, they often move back and forth, stopping and starting, rather than reading sequentially. As the associate professor of literature at Cambridge put it with reference to their own reading of Henry James, forms of reading can also overtake a set agenda or even a reader's desires: "I had a phase . . . of taking Henry James novels on holiday—such a bad idea because you can't not instrumentalize it. I mean, it's fantastically pleasurable to read but you can't help . . . you can't do it without a pencil in your hand, because you think, oh I really must keep that." Pleasurable absorption and critical or instrumental reading here combine in ways that are at odds with accounts of rereading that parcel them out neatly.

In his discussion of rereading, Stephen Best problematizes any easy distinction between first and second reading. Instead of arguing for the value of one over the other, he emphasizes how "there is a temporality to reading and it is deliciously involuted" (338). But while they might differ in their accounts of rereading at the level of sequence, Bronstein and Best both treat reading in a somewhat abstract way, however temporally complex it may be. In both accounts, reading—and writing—are left underdescribed, treated as somewhat all too familiar. Reading and rereading happen in the mind alone with little consideration of the situatedness of the critic or the text, or, indeed, the coordinates of time and space in and through which reading occurs. Such formulations therefore elide what scholars and critics know—that with first and subsequent readings, or readings that "roll into or upon" and "wrap up, envelop, surround, entangle" one another (Best 341), they interact with texts, not just cognitively but also physically and materially. For many academics we spoke to, the storage and retrieval of notes on their own reading was complex and challenging—often to the point that these notes themselves become overwhelming as reading matter. A literature professor at the University of Southern Denmark described his notes storage system in the following terms: "in my computer there is a number of files within the big file." "I mean, it's a mess." And an associate professor of literature at the same institution spoke with more unease, explaining, "I have a very, very long document, many hundred pages long where I take notes from both primary sources and secondary sources." "I'm kind of frightened because really I ought to read it from one end to the other, because I've been working with this for what, five years, and there's tons of stuff that I've forgotten and that I did not use back then." Self-flagellation (pious or otherwise) aside, it is clear that critics do things with texts; there is not simply a moment—however long or short—of one reading followed by another reading at some later stage, or folded in with the first. If, then, we are to better capture and account for the temporal experiences of reading or rereading and of writing criticism, we must take into consideration the actions

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that make up critical reading—from the simplest underlining and annotating to more complex textual interactions—as they occur in time and space and are constitutive of the "deliciously involuted" time of reading. Whereas Best argues that "postcritique offers few tools to capture the temporal recursions and involutions" (341), I would make the case that qualitative research into critical reading can at least capture and disclose some of these recursions and involutions by focusing on the processes and habits of critics—often the very aspects of reading more abstract theory or critique elides.

Just as our interviewees' descriptions of the processes, moves, and practices of reading show the time-consuming, painstaking nature of academic work, they also reveal the role of chance and randomness, the importance of having access to research materials and variance in working conditions. Such accounts show, for example, the role luck and late discoveries can have in the formation of scholarly work, as well as the possibility of dead ends that occur in reading but are often missing from published criticism, from careful discussions about practice such as Kramnick's that emphasize critical skill and "virtuosity," and from the more polemical debates about method. A comparative literature professor in Denmark, for instance, discusses the late and somewhat fortunate discovery of a novel as they were close to wrapping up a monograph:

> I was finishing a book last April, and I think it was in February I came upon a novel that would sort of fit that argument I was making quite well. So I first, through various searches, came across a novel and thought, that might be interesting. I bought the novel, started reading it, thought, this is actually relevant for what I'm doing and I should spend time on it. I read the book. And then I ended up just writing a few pages about it in the conclusion of this book.

No account of the lateness or fortuitousness of this discovery is made in the monograph itself, and yet its inclusion forms an important part of the book's epilogue; indeed, the novel is used in support of the concluding argument, which concerns both the real-world importance of literature and the rise of a new type of genre. To the unknowing reader, the novel's place in this argument seems entirely designed, as if it were always part of the overarching thesis—rather than an important but somewhat late addition. Yet, this novel could easily not have made it into the published work of criticism, leading either to the book's providing slightly less evidence for its concluding argument, evidence of a different kind, or to a slightly different argument in that part of the epilogue. A professor of English at Cambridge was even more forthcoming about the role of luck when discussing their research methods:

> I think in recent years, and I suppose for quite a lot of my recent career, I've had what I've thought of as an unwise or sometimes a kamikaze approach to scholarship, which is that I'll just go out there and randomly find things that will be interesting in libraries. . . . And going where they take me rather than having a very clear sense of, this is my research agenda, or this is exactly what I want to know about.

Discussing their highly praised university press monograph in particular, they explain: "It was very much driven by a few quite chance archival survivals." Here we see a reflection on the process and method of research, which entail both careful planning and chance, or at least a form of planned chance. As Edmond and her coauthors write of their interviewees, humanists have an ability for the "harnessing of serendipity," as well as a tendency to underestimate their approach: "Herein lies the problem with many discussions of the humanistic method: the inability to see the power of the method for the perception of it being haphazard, not meticulous, curious, outdated" (Edmond et al.). Regardless of the exact status of randomness in the Cambridge English professor's approach, the important point here is that such reflection is not often seen in criticism itself, even where a writer details their trips to the archives or a library—or, in this case, in a monograph specifically about somebody's personal library, their encounters with books, and their reading of literature. Moreover, this

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academic's material-led approach acknowledges their own encounter with books in time and space, instead of framing it as involving some sort of abstract critic on one side and aesthetic object on the other, as is so often the case in literary theory and implied by much criticism. As should be obvious, possible encounters (or lack thereof) with materials in time and space are part of any method, however theoretically framed it may be—all methods are, of course, part of complex networks. For this scholar, "it feels a bit high risk because you don't know if you're going to find anything. . . . It could lead you nowhere or it can sometimes lead you in very difficult directions where you can't push forward with something. You find you're drawing a blank."[12] As we know (but all too often criticism does not reflect), behind any form of writing lies a whole series of moves involving human beings, spending time not only thinking but also doing things —borrowing from "lay" conversations, chancing it, reversing and unpicking the very argument one started writing, for instance. As this professor discusses, such moves are part of the realities of research:

> I always feel there's something problematic about academic life that you have to start writing before you've done all the reading . . . actually getting a rhythm of reading and writing is really hard. . . . And I'm aware that there are these other things I should have read. And it's almost OK, there's some of this I'm going to have to read after I've started writing, and in a way I'm going to have to reverse.

As with the earlier account of the late inclusion of a novel in an academic monograph, this description of the reading and writing process shows that what is often presented and read in published criticism as a necessary or determined argument or interpretation is much less stable. It shows that critical pronouncements are in fact more provisional and contingent, possibly even the inverse of what the writer was originally arguing—and not simply because of a change in judgment or interpretation, but in part because of the realities of reading and writing as practices that take place in time and space.

Reading also involves not only the act of sitting with a text but finding, sourcing, touching, moving, traveling to libraries and archives—in short, various forms of bodily work. A philosophy PhD student at the University of Copenhagen captured this reality when he described his work in the Derrida archive at L'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine in France:

> In this particular archive, at least, you're not allowed to photocopy anything, so you can read it there, and then you can transcribe it. . . . So, you have to read it there or get it through your eyes, maybe on paper. . . . I feel like I'm a reading machine. Not so much in order to understand the text. . . . It's about gathering material, so it's a very quantitative thing that I do to get as much back home with me.

This scholar emphasizes the manual nature of archival research by interpreting his body in machinic terms, as a collecting, scanning, and quantifying technology. Moreover, the scholar is not simply a lone actor or mind, but part of multiple networks—some formalized and remunerated (as with hired Russian translators digging in archives or as members of a funded project team who read together as, in the words of one interviewee, "a three-or-four-headed reader") and others less acknowledged, less tangible (as Felski writes of Antoine Hennion's ghosts): "there is never a naked face-to-face of subject and object; even if we brood over a page of prose in monastic solitude, the air is thick with the ghosts of the many coactors who made the encounter possible" (*Hooked* 7).[13] There is then, as Felski describes, often a discrepancy between the stated modes of much criticism and their real-world foundations: "Literary scholars may extol the merits of unbinding and unraveling, negativity and non-identity, but our practices—of reading, writing, teaching, talking—tell a different story, relying on myriad ties to persons, texts, things, and institutions" ("Postcritical" 138).

As the Cambridge English professor acknowledges, their approach is ultimately underwritten by their secure position. They have the professional stability of a well-resourced academic post to spend time on reading that might lead "nowhere" (nowhere of course truly being nowhere only if we subscribe to the idea that reading must lead to outputs, reading to

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writing). There is, then, a parallel here with Latour and Woolgar's claim that "the daily activities of working scientists lead to the construction of facts" (40). This academic's reading habits and practices shape their methods and the forms of scholarship they produce—the types of claims and statements they ultimately make—just as their practices are shaped by their daily activities and sustained by their working conditions, which are different from those of other scholars and unavailable to many; as they admit, the specific type of research they undertake and produce comes about "partly because I'm very near to some research libraries, so I've got the potential materials close to hand." Indeed, their working conditions cannot help influencing and informing their critical capabilities or their "critical mood," which, Felski emphasizes, "accompanies and modulates thought; it affects how we find ourselves in relation to a particular object" (*Limits* 20, 21). Bound up with any approach, method, or mood, then, are the material realities and conditions of scholars, who exist in time and space, not as minds alone. It is, for example, entirely possible that this academic's research would be more speculative and theoretically driven were they not so close to a host of research libraries, or if they had less time and less security for their riskier approach; in other words, any supposed method one may find in the published monograph does not derive purely from the scholar's critical commitment or their desire to stake a claim that can be easily assigned to one side or another in ongoing disciplinary debates about reading. Acknowledging such labor conditions is at the heart of Sophie Corser's challenge to Guillory at the end of her essay "Reading Work with Claire-Louise Bennett and Doireann Ní Ghríofa." Noting that so many who undertake research and produce criticism simply are not paid for their labor nowadays, Corser calls on scholars to be more self-reflexive on this matter, urging, "We should refer more often to the conditions of our reading work in our articles, conference papers, monographs" (135). As well as problematizing the lay/professional distinction in relation to paid labor, such transparency and acknowledgment would, I contend, show how reading happens and how different conditions can lead to different forms of reading and outputs. It would provide greater insight into the "methods" of literary criticism.

The Cambridge English professor concludes the discussion of their reading processes with a willingness to discuss their work at a meta level of reflection, positioning their approach as being somewhere between method and fantasy:

> I suppose you could say that maybe it's, whether we're bordering on some scientific method or fantasy, in a way, empiricist. It's saying let's see what's out there. Let's go and dig around . . . and if you've got a book list, say, what are we going to do with that? How are the humanities going to process this thing, which is a fairly shapeless life-form?

There is here a tension and an overlap between method and fantasy of method. There is an apparent honesty concerning an element of luck, randomness, and formlessness, and at least some doubt about the status of this approach: Is it method? Or fantasy? Or fantasy of method? Criticism and critical method do not entail only forms of attachment or theoretical commitments but material realities as well, and "method" has as much to do with position, time, and working conditions as it does with mood, allegiance, choice, or attunement. In some ways, this moment of self-reflection is a fantasy of a fantasy, because behind this particular scene there is a highly skilled humanist able to navigate all this, combining and oscillating between (enjoying as well as potentially alienating, to invoke Guillory [*Professing Criticism* 334–35]) so-called lay and professional, academic and nonacademic, modes of reading. The fantasy of method can work both ways of course, and scholars can present their approach as being either more systematic or more random than is actually the case. Even so, this reflection shows how by talking with academics and detailing their reading processes, we are better able to see the temporal complexities and recursions of reading, or at least how they are recalled and conceptualized—the twists and turns, the role of the body and the role of thought, the merging of skill and chance, activity and contemplation, expert craft and everyday practices.

To better understand the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular—especially the

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reading that goes on under their banner—we need to draw on certain postcritical approaches and, importantly, qualitative research methods to think through the work and practices of critics and criticism as they occur in time and space. Even if one wishes to undertake or focus on criticism or critique, at the very least some qualitative work with actual readers can help give a sense of the formation, role, purpose, and dissemination of those very forms of criticism—the reading that goes into them and reading the criticism itself. Offering some account of the conditions and practices of scholarly work would provide a more nuanced sense of what critical reading entails and would introduce a further layer of reflexivity to debates about "method." Through forms of qualitative research, we can see that many of the practices that lie behind the differing "methods" of reading are shared by those on all sides of the debate; that others, conversely, are idiosyncratic rather than part of a supposed uniform approach; and that yet others involve elements of luck and randomness. Where Felski reminds us that "[w]e are less theoretically pure than we think ourselves to be" (*Uses* 14), then, the same can be said of our reading practices.

In the postscript to the second edition of *Laboratory Life*, Latour and Woolgar articulate the need for reflexivity, writing:

> Reflexivity is thus a way of reminding the reader that *all* texts are stories. This applies as much to the facts of our scientists as to the fictions "through which" we display their work. The story like quality of texts denotes that essential uncertainty of their interpretation: the reader can never "know for sure." We mentioned already the value of ethnography in stressing this uncertainty. Here we see that reflexivity is the ethnographer of the text. (284)

As Latour and Woolgar contend, scientific facts—and, I would argue, literary criticism—are, at least in part, texts and thereby stories; the same is true, of course, of the descriptions readers give of their practices, as well as any ethnographic accounts of reading undertaken in the field. Detailing the stories of the texts of published criticism, through both interviews and more immersive ethnographic studies of reading, however, would allow for a better understanding of the work that goes into literary-critical reading and writing. It would also provide much needed detail concerning "method" in literary studies, as well as offer a good dose of humility to these debates, by moving us away from notions or illusions of methodological purity and of "minds having ideas." Indeed, an account of the reading work critics undertake ultimately centers the reader as a human being, the very opposite of what seems to be happening in academia today, as Matt Seybold for one identifies as the "unbundling" of professional activities and "EdTech":

> But what this unbundling also implies for most academic workers is a complete eradication of the expectation for professional development in the form of research, publication, conferencing, even reading. Those instructors who remain will not have the time, nor potentially the training, to create new knowledge in their field, or any incentive, beyond self-actualization, to develop their own personal knowledge base. This EdTech griftopia is in fact designed to impoverish humanities research, which remains . . . the backbone to all criticism, whether academic, para-academic or popular. (01:00:10–53)

Showing how academics use their time and what they actually do when they say "I read" is something that those caught up in the "method wars" and those in the humanities more generally should, then, be interested in now more than ever. At this historical moment, when artificial intelligence and other forms of technology are being promoted and pushed as possible replacements for human labor within the profession, it is vital that we account for and articulate the human aspect of what it is we do and why this is important—whether to be able to advocate better for our practice or, failing that, to understand it more fully so that we can at some future moment recollect its complexity before it is forgotten. Accounting for the human practices that make up reading may also help us think about how we wish to read—and even write criticism—in a postwork world that could be close at hand, where

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the work of reading for teaching and criticism has been outsourced and, yet, we still have some, possibly more, time for critical pursuits.

Notes

I am especially grateful to Christina Lupton for her feedback on this essay, and to Rita Felski for inviting me to present an early draft at a work-in-progress workshop.

1. In his essay "How Scholars Read," Guillory provides an interesting account of scholarly reading, focusing not on processes but on speed, the volume of scholarly reading required, and forms of attention. The way scholars have to read, Guillory contends, is in part determined by the professional "imperative to publish" (14), and "the success with which we confront the challenge of accumulation depends," he writes, "on our ability to manage the clock time of scholarly reading" (16).

2. The makeup of our interviewees is as follows: 6 from the University of Cambridge, 10 from the University of Copenhagen, 8 from the University of Portsmouth, 5 from the University of Southern Denmark, 1 from the University of Sussex (retired), and 3 from the University of Warwick. There were 16 women and 17 men, 9 professors, 6 associate professors, 1 reader, 1 postdoctoral lecturer, 1 postdoctoral researcher, 1 research assistant, 1 visiting researcher, 3 PhD students, 1 PhD graduand, 1 emeritus professor, 3 MA students, and 5 BA students. Out of the 20 interviewees who provided their ages, 4 were 18–24 years old, 4 were 25–34, 3 were 35–44, 5 were 45–54, and 4 were 55–64. Out of the 21 interviewees who provided information about whether they had children, 9 of them did.

3. For a discussion of this type of interviewing, see Mason 62–68. We recorded the interviews and then had them professionally transcribed.

4. For some preliminary thoughts on this and related issues, see Davies and Lupton.

5. For historical accounts of reading practices see, among others, Grafton; Blair; Eddy.

6. Collini, of course, has done more than most to explain the work of critics and academics, both in and outside the university.

7. Whereas Guillory invokes Nietzsche to point to the manual dimension of scholarly work, Latour and Woolgar cite Martin Heidegger at this moment in *Laboratory Life* to underline their approach: "A useful maxim is Heidegger's observation that 'Gedanke ist Handwerk': thinking is craftwork" (171).

8. Edmond and her coauthors discuss the differences between the space of the lab and the working environments of humanists in terms of the difference between closed "farmed agriculture" and the nomadic "hunter gatherer" (Edmond et al.)

9. Brim offers an illuminating account of how institutional resources and prestige shape queer studies in the American academy.

10. In *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Felski writes, "As becomes vividly clear to anyone who glances at the history of criticism, scholars feel strongly, even passionately, about their methods. Interpretation is not just a mechanism of attachment; it is an *object* of attachment" (132).

11. With a slightly different focus in mind, Edmond and her coauthors argue more generally: "At the most basic level, however, unless you consider writing to be an all-encompassing activity, it simply cannot be said of the SPARKLE sample that the process of writing incorporated the moment of knowledge creation, as the practices of writing are far too variant." In their words, "[t]he writing process, like the notetaking process, is one modality for working one's way across the layers of the humanistic scholarly apparatus" (Edmond et al.).

12. A historian at Portsmouth describes his archival research experiences in somewhat similar terms: "sometimes you'd come away with absolutely nothing, sometimes there were nuggets of stuff in there."

13. SPARKLE identifies the following types of networks: conferences, peers, teaching, cowriting, consulting (Edmond et al.).

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Abstract: This article emerges from the project Reading at University, undertaken in collaboration with Christina Lupton, which has collected material from academics and students in Denmark and the United Kingdom about their reading habits, practices, and time use. Building on previous studies of time use in the university, this project specifically investigates the interconnected issues of when and why reading happens in the humanities today. While researchers in all disciplines read as part of their professions, it is in subjects such as English, history, and philosophy that it is the absolute key to the successful production and transmission of knowledge. The project's qualitative approach has allowed for an examination of the reading that underpins the production of literary criticism, the present-day processes and stages that make any method or approach possible. Such a qualitative study of reading brings much needed detail and nuance to the so-called method wars and to discussions of the profession of literary criticism.

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