

Literature in an age of endless work

Christina Jane Lupton

Accepted: 27 October 2023 / Published online: 5 December 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract This piece makes the case for the novel’s allegiance to a way of life that includes both work and contemplation. I point this out in response to some recent arguments that situate reading in one framework or another: a professional or a ›lay‹ context; a critical or a literary one. Bringing in the results of a recent ethnographic study that shows even literary academics wishing for some reading time away from work, and some novels that situate themselves at the end of the working day, I suggest that the best case for literature’s professional and practical continuation lies, ironically, in our political defence of a mode of non-work.

Literatur im Zeitalter der unendlichen Arbeit

Zusammenfassung Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Gattung Roman sowohl mit Erwerbsarbeit als auch Kontemplation in Zusammenhang steht. Damit reagiere ich auf gegenwärtige Positionen, die das Lesen ausschließlich entweder als Sache der Profis oder der ›Laien‹ auffassen bzw. in einem kritischen oder literarischen Kontext situieren. Ich stütze mich auf die Ergebnisse einer rezenten ethnographischen Studie, die das Interesse von Literaturwissenschaftlern an Romanlektüre jenseits der Arbeit zeigt. Insgesamt schlage ich vor, dass das Fortbestehen der Literatur, einschließlich ihrer akademischen Beobachtung, ironischerweise am besten dadurch gesichert wird, dass wir politisch für das Recht auf Freizeit eintreten.

✉ Christina Jane Lupton
Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen, Emil Holms
Kanal 6, 2300 København S, Denmark
E-Mail: tinalup@hum.ku.dk



George Eliot's 1860 *Mill on the Floss* begins, famously, in the mode of reflection: »I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill.« This opening scene maps for us the nineteenth-century world of commerce and production, at the heart of which sits the mill. The river, the Floss, carries the oil and grain of England out into the world. But the small girl who stands on the bridge and watches the water and the seemingly older narrator who relates the scene bracket this movement with their stillness. The novel revisits this setting from a distance, recalling a February evening when the waggoner is on his final trip of the day, the horses pulling the wagon one last time »up the slope towards the bridge, with all the more energy because they are so near home.«¹ *Mill on the Floss* opens here, at that hour where the activity binding the characters tips over into the time and space of contemplation afforded at either end of life to its players; it is a story of work processed and shared in the space of thought towards which the horses pull.

My argument in what follows is that Eliot's connecting of these two spheres – of commercial and physical exertion, on the one hand, and of contemplation, on the other – reflects more generally a pairing affiliated historically as well as practically with the form of the novel. My focus is on narratives that depict work in the past tense, thereby appealing to workers with second shifts to their day or season to their year in which they might become readers. I do not mean by this simply that the consumption of novels has been supported by the existence of free time. While this is true, there are many other forms of entertainment, from poetry to Netflix, radio to theatre, that are more compatible than the novel with the bare opposition of work and leisure. What interests me here is the more specific symbiosis of the novel form and the reader whose life, as it swings between salaried work and contemplation, involves a conscious split between what have been called different systems (Luhmann), spheres (Habermas), or stances (Amanda Anderson). Standing on the shoulders of suggest theorists, I want to suggest that the novel has historically relied, not just on the shoring up of childhood, retirement, and secular days of rest, but on the development and protection of institutional times and spaces – from libraries, places of adult education, summers, to the public sphere more broadly – in which reading and writing are to be done explicitly by the worker after work.

This alliance of the novel with a subject whose time is divided between paid employment and reading and writing undertaken in another mode has been eroded in dramatic ways by new forms of existence that have made both commerce and reading into round-the-clock activities. As many kinds of work have become more precarious, it's also become harder to know where they end. Sarah Brouillette makes the point that: »well-capitalized industries of production and consumption of literature exist where there has been significant absorption of people into waged labour over relatively long cycles of accumulation.«² When those cycles shrink, giving rise to new forms of precarious and flexible labour that determine the lives of more and

¹ George Eliot, *The Mill On the Floss* (1860), ed. Gordon Haight, New York 1980, 1.

² Sarah Brouillette, »The Rise and Fall of the English-language literary novel since World War II,« in: Colleen Lye, Christopher Nealon (Ed.), *After Marx. Literature, Theory and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2022, 116–131, here: 117.

more workers, »the foundations,« she argues, »of much of what we recognize as literature are shaken.«³ While I agree, broadly speaking, with this analysis, I'd add here that both literature and those of us who study literature may have something to say, and even to do, when it comes to this destabilization. The extent to which the novel seems crowded out of the lives and societies that Brouillette describes, depends, it seems to me at this point in the history of human learning, not simply on some objective measure of how work is distributed and arranged, but also on the ability of critics to imagine and uphold the ideal of a world in which reading makes sense of the movement between work and its aftermath. In the paper that follows I look very briefly at some of the debates in and about literary criticism, report on the results of an ethnographic study I conducted with Ben Davies, and land with the suggestion that the best case for literature's professional and practical continuation might lie, ironically, in our political defence of a mode of non-work.

I.

One of the reasons that it is hard for literary professionals to situate literature within the framework of a life led in *and* away from work is that humanist academics are implicated historically in the running together of all the parts of our lives. Historically, Deidre Lynch argues, people who write about and teach literature have been amongst those most susceptible to having work define their free time. Unlike dentists or engineers, teachers of literature have always been expected to read the texts they teach at home, and to teach the reading they take most pleasure in at work: »The English professor's life,« observes Lynch »is supposed to slop over onto her job; it's all in a day's work when it does.«⁴ In these terms, Lynch suggests, literary professionals have worked in tension with the »conventional and gendered schema for segregating ›personal life‹ from the public sphere, feeling from knowing, and recreation from labor.« The reader who imports her childhood or summer reading into the classroom, like the critic who reads books to review in bed, does so in her account despite the distinction between these worlds and spaces being in clear sight.

In 2022, Ben Davies and I had Lynch in mind as we began a small, sociological study of academics and their reading habits.⁵ This study was focused on the real practices of reading and writing about literature in the context of the university career in Denmark and the UK. Our interviews with over 30 academics were motivated in part by the question of whether scholars today read as Lynch suggests, out of love for that practice. But what we discovered in doing those interviews with scholars of different ranks and at different institutions was that most felt that they had very little time to read at all – at least in the deep and sustained and curious way they most relished. Almost without fail, the literary scholars we met, whether in Cambridge or Odense, spoke of a life in which there was now no end to their professional

³ Brouillette (note 2).

⁴ Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*, Chicago 2015, 4.

⁵ Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, »When Your Job is to Read After Work,« *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audience, History* 15 (July 2023), 51–57.



duty. We heard consistently of people feeling overwhelmed by reading email, grant writing, peer reviewing, and preparing courses outside their fields of expertise. For some, this was life as they'd signed up for it, a life in which the distinction between work and reading was meant to fall away. But for most, this expansion of work into every space and time where a laptop might be opened felt counterproductive to that ideal. Scholars reported seasons of exhaustion, burnout, long evenings of Netflix and grading – anything but the novel reading that had led them to study literature in the first place.

The problem was not that literary professionals weren't reading. Indeed, most people felt that they now did little else but read: email, student papers, manuscripts, and applications for assessment. What they did *not* do, at least during term time, was open or return to a novel without an immediate sense of purpose. One PhD student at an elite university explained to us that writing on a long novel now required one to have read it first over summer, or as a younger reader without professional responsibilities; even in this most privileged position as a reader, getting through a long Victorian novel for the first time felt difficult.

I'm not going to report more on that study here. But I am importing for my purposes one of our central findings, which is that literary professionals, despite loving literature in all the ways Lynch identifies, now rely on time away from work as the pipeline along which their attachment to literature must travel. This argument may appear counterintuitive: precisely because of that blurring of work and love, it can seem that novels read for review or in preparation for teaching or because one is writing about them should do just as well as novels read off the clock. Yet what Davies and I found was something like the opposite: the desire amongst academics for a world with at least two shifts to the day, seasons to the year, or spheres in which to read was just as strong, if not stronger, than any version of that desire amongst lay readers.

This argument seems a bit alien to the current history of the discipline arguments that focus entirely on the work-life of professional readers. But there is a much older connection that has been made between the discipline of literature and the health of the public sphere. In *The Powers of Distance. Cosmopolitan and the Cultivation of Detachment*, Amanda Anderson turns, for instance, to a small cast of nineteenth-century authors, including George Eliot, who are invested in seeing the world from afar. Anderson defends and introduces her key term, ›detachment‹ as a ›stance,‹ a position to be taken up, but also relaxed, as ›one practice among others.‹⁶ Her introduction begins with Eliot's ›The Natural History of German Life,‹ an essay that suggests the ideal observer will see the world both at close range, as a pedestrian, and at a distance, as a critic or observer: ›A wise social policy,‹ as Eliot states in that essay, ›must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the Natural History of social bodies.‹⁷ In Anderson's opening chapter, she reads this point explicitly as an argument for the literary critics' needing a ›dual commitment to situated and detached knowledges.‹

⁶ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance. Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*, Princeton 2001, 32.

⁷ George Eliot, ›The Natural History of German Life,‹ *Westminster Review* 66 (July, 1856), 51–79.



It's a stretch of course, to see either Eliot or Anderson campaigning too concretely for the ideal reader being someone who works, but also has time to read novels, away from her email, over the weekend, during the summer. But it's not that much of a stretch. This, I've already suggested, is the very kind of life that underpins *Mill on the Floss* as a novel narrated at a distance from the world of commerce with which its narrator seems once to have been involved. Almost all the critics Anderson showcases in *Powers of Distance*, including Eliot herself, can be described in more material and historical terms as part-time employees; essayists and novelists whose detachment is premised practically on their days having two parts to them. Matthew Arnold, for instance, worked as a school inspector in the mornings before reading and writing all afternoon in the Atheneum club: »during one week in November 1862,« observes Stefan Collini, »he could be seen every afternoon from 2 to 6 seated in the library writing the article that was to become one of his celebrated Essays in Criticism.«⁸

This ability to move, as Arnold did, between working for the education system in the morning, and doing on his own unwaged reading and writing in the afternoon, has become hard to imagine against the background of what Jonathan Crary describes as 24/7 existence. Crary may overstate the case when he writes of a world that »renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits.«⁹ But his vision has been given more credit by the pandemic, which encouraged more workers than ever to turn bedrooms into round-the-clock offices. So many kinds of reading for work now happen while a colleague is speaking, while we are driving or exercising, or in a five-minute break between other tasks. We know that these are not the kinds of reading we want our students to do. We feel that people should still immerse themselves in longer texts. We have not given up entirely on that idea of the solitary reader who reads off the clock, outside the framework of work.

Yet the debates within the discipline, about the kinds of reading we should be doing ourselves, or studying in others, have not really engaged with the fact that even those of us who read for work desire another mode, of after work reading. Instead, with the discipline there's between a split: on the one hand, there's been a burgeoning of criticism devoted to the study of novels as things read after work, for pleasure. Rita Felski's recent studies *Uses of Literature* and *Hooked* have helped convert academics to thinking professionally about this kind of reading. The approach of digital humanists including James English, Ted Underwood, and Gerhard Lauer to reading has also helped to bring into focus at a larger scale the behavior of general novel readers.¹⁰ And the recent work of scholars including Beth Blum, David James, Sarah Dillon, and Jürgen Pieters has promoted at a smaller scale the ways in which novels remain popular as sources of solace, advice, and public reasoning in the

⁸ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists. Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain*, Oxford 1991, 17–18.

⁹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London 2013, 10.

¹⁰ See, for instance, James English and Ted Underwood, »Shifting Scales. Between Literature and Social Science,« *MLQ Special Issue 77/3* (2016), *Scale and Value. New and Digital Approaches to Literary History*, 277–295; Simone Rebora et al., »Digital Humanities and Digital Social Reading,« *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 36, Supplement 2 (2021), 230–250.



world beyond the university.¹¹ These studies all focus, almost by definition, on the ways readers pick up books, enjoy them, use them, or write about them on social media platforms, once their paid work is done.

On the other hand, there's been a lot of discussion of literary reading as its own domain of professional work: Bruce Robbins's *Criticism and Politics. A Polemic* (2022), Steffen Martus' and Carlos Spoerhase's *Geistesarbeit. Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften* (2022), Jonathan Kramnick's *Criticism and Truth* (2023), and John Guillory's *Professing Criticism. Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (2023) all offer competing accounts of what professional readers of literature actually do. These studies differ in the emphasis they place on literary study as a way of working with language, for instance, or as a platform for critical engagement with society. But they each target reading in the very specific space of the university Literature Department as a workplace. To be sure, John Guillory concedes, it can be hard to distinguish between general and professional readers of literature when novels, unlike most technical, scientific, and bureaucratic texts circulating in the world, double as objects of employment and pleasure.¹² Yet, he asserts in the end that there are certain skills and characteristics that make professional readers easy enough to train and to recognize: and first and foremost in his account is the fact that literary professionals are paid to read.¹³

Wherever one stands in these debates, it's hard to ignore the schism that they have opened up between those interested sociologically in the ›lay‹ reading that happens in the margins of professional life and those focused more narrowly on describing and defending the literary scholar at work. In this context, the very terms of the question, of whether we are interested in critical or post-critical, lay reading or disciplinary practice, obscures the possibility that the novel has historically addressed a worker who *can* stop work. This possibility is not entirely lost on Guillory, who notes that, while literary scholars should not be confused with critics, »the criticism of society can and should be practiced by anyone so moved, in whatever venue possible.«¹⁴ He nods here with some caution to the ideal of a public sphere, a place of after work reading and writing to which all workers would ideally have access. But as a caveat to his description of the kinds of reading for which literary scholars should get trained and paid, this gesture does not begin to address the paradoxical situation in which most literary academics now feel caught up, whereby the sheer volume of reading and writing that their teaching, institutional work, and research output requires of them excludes them from participating in any private capacity in the public sphere – or even from reading the texts they really want to.

These debates over reading leave little space for the ideal of a life where literature bridges and yet does not collapse the worlds of work and leisure and lifelong learn-

¹¹ See, for examples, Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion. Searching for Advice in Modern Literature*, New York 2020; David James, »Literature of Uplift,« in: James English, Heather Love (Ed.), *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*, New York 2023; Sarah Dillon, Claire Craig, *Storylistening. Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning*, London 2021.

¹² John Guillory, *Professing Criticism. Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, Chicago 2022, 322.

¹³ Guillory (note 12), 331.

¹⁴ John Guillory, »We Cannot All be Edward Said,« *Chronicle for Higher Education* 13 (February 2023).

ing. Yet many contemporary novels, I'd argue, continue to be written precisely at that juncture where professional activity gives way, as *Mill and the Floss* imagines, to the possibilities of a literary community that forms after work. The premise of many recent novels can be described in these terms as making the interruption of office life or manual labor the grounds for imagining a future compatible with literature. This is played out in novels like Ottessa Mosfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Greg Baxter's *Munich Airport* (2014), where the disenchanting worker within the culture or tech industry becomes the narrator whose personal break with work produces writing. And the end-of-work fantasy takes an even more robust shape in speculative fiction that imagines the end of life as we know it, staging the future as a scene of reading and writing and criticism to which the novel is performatively indebted.

Take, for instance, Ling Ma's *Severance* (2019), a plague fiction where a devoted worker in the publishing industry, Candance, survives to tell the tale. At one point in the novel, before the deadly pandemic hits, a band of young Brooklyn professionals confront a day of bad weather that makes it impossible to go to work. Their mood is jubilant: »A day off meant we could do things we'd always meant to do. Like go to the Botanical Garden, the Frick Collection, or something. Read some fiction.«¹⁵ This storm becomes an important occasion for taking stock of these workers' reasonable longing for a break, a sign that such a release would be of direct value in reanimating possibilities of art and literature: »We just wanted to feel flush with time to do things of no quantifiable value, our hopeful side pursuits like writing or drawing or something, something other than what we did for money.«¹⁶ It's from this break that *Severance* emerges, a book written and read by someone who knows the publishing industry, but only begins to really read and write literature once it has come to a stop.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx famously attributed to communism the promise of it being possible to live in such a way that one might »hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.«¹⁷ We seem largely to have given up on this as an ideal that would be advanced, as he believed, if production were state-owned and managed, and workers could distribute their labour rationally, rather than according to the strictures of professional occupations. But twenty-first century workers have not given up on the idea of curtailing working hours: the prospects for Amazon and Starbucks employees working less, organizing labour differently, of French workers wanting to keep an early retirement age, and of all workers having more time to commit to the public sphere, have grown stronger since the Covid-19 pandemic. Experiments with the four-day work week, arguments for universal basic income, and trade union negotiations have reached levels of popularity unheard of since the 1970s. It would be hubris to see novels or humanities degrees as directly motivating or even serving these movements. In this sense, Guillory is reasonable enough in suggesting that we must modify our claims

¹⁵ Ling Ma, *Severance*, New York 2018, 199.

¹⁶ Ling (note 15).

¹⁷ Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, New York 1976, 47.



for literary scholarship and what it can do. We know on an intimate level that the reading and writing, even of literature, is not a bulwark against the pervasive quality of meaningless labour, nor a guarantee that leisure will be well spent. We know that academics are at best awkward advocates of the well-tempered life. But novels, which have arguably always been written for the worker with time to read and write in a guise other than a professional one, are on the side of those pushing now for the importance of fairer working conditions and more time for meaningful activity after work. The novel is a form that may still flourish – as it always has – under conditions where both fairly compensated work and time from which to look back on work defines the life of all its readers.

Funding Open access funding provided by Royal Library, Copenhagen University Library

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

