# Simon During, Crisis Talk, and the Legacies of the 1980s

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The 1980s and 1990s continue to have an outsized influence on how literature is taught and studied in Australia. In this article I develop an account of the theoretical transformations that took place in this period and compare that account with the changing environments for funding and sustaining higher education in Australia. I do so in order to offer a critical history of our present. We are caught in the long 1980s, I suggest, and it is time to shift our attention and energy away from the terms we have inherited. They are, at the very least, misdirecting. This is not an attempt, however, to advocate for any particular curriculum reform programme or research priority. Instead, I am seeking to reorientate the current terms of debate about our discipline on these shores.

I will focus on the work of one of the main protagonists of the theoretical and organisational changes in the discipline in Australia in this period, Simon During. I am doing so because, more than almost any other figure, he has been significant both as a critic and as an administrator for what it means to study literature here. By reading his body of work as well as his reflections on his career, I am able to follow the relationship between the critical developments of the period and the larger structures that enabled them. The history of the discipline in the Antipodes can be told through his scholarship and leadership, I suggest, as it effectively illustrates key developments in the theory and institutional circumstances for literary studies. In that sense, this article will treat his work, broadly considered, both as symptomatic of its historical moment and at times as having its own power to inaugurate disciplinary norms. There is a larger project here, of course, and we might consider what follows as merely the first foray in a greater attempt

to reckon with the legacies of literary studies in its theory moment – a project that extends well beyond what I examine here.[1]

I will trace During's career through three main modes. The first is 'transgression', in which During sought to disrupt the prevailing critical approaches that he encountered in New Zealand and Australian literature departments. In both cases that I examine, he did so in relation to the apparent 'father' of the respective national literature (Frank Sargeson and Patrick White). The second mode, 'consolidation', examines the various handbooks, readers, and introductions that During wrote in the 1990s, including *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1993) and *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (2005). In this moment, During acted as an advocate for institutionalized cultural studies – albeit often with uneasy reservations about the role that capital consolidation was playing in the disciplinary formation. I address in passing the financial arrangements for literary studies. The third mode, 'return to literature', explores how During expresses dissatisfaction with the new paradigms for literary studies that he helped to embed. I conclude by suggesting that a more material and engaged approach to what I am calling 'crisis talk' is necessary, as we seek to pick up the pieces from past disciplinary shocks and situate our discipline anew.

## 1. Transgression

As Patrick Evans writes, K. K. Ruthven's question in a symposium in *Landfall* in 1977, 'Why is the criticism of New Zealand Literature so old fashioned?' turned out to be 'the thin end of a

[1] In undertaking this research, I am beginning a line of inquiry that brings into contact three seemingly disparate formations. These are: (1) the emergence of cultural studies as a form of cultural populism; (2) the eclipse of the concept of cultural value associated with literature, which happened at the very moment of the expansion of consumer choice; and (3) theoretical practices emerging from the French avant-garde that became embedded as disciplinary norms in Australian universities. The purpose of this paper is not to explicitly thematize these issues and how they are related, however. Such topics remain for future study.

poststructuralist wedge' (Evans 22). New Zealand literary criticism changed profoundly over the following decade, as younger critics in magazines such as *Parallax* and *And* adopted new approaches drawn from the theoretical revolutions taking place elsewhere. During's 1983 essay in *And*, 'Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits', remains one of the most significant works of criticism in New Zealand from that period. As John Newton comments in a recent discussion, the essay sought to 'shake up the reading of local literature, to make us work harder' (288). In that regard, both During's contribution and the wider critical movement in which was embedded succeeded beyond all measure. The '*And* intervention', as Newton concludes, changed the 'critical game […] quite decisively' (288).

'Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits' was truly controversial, in a way that few paper are today. The day after it was presented at a seminar at the University of Auckland, an anonymous memo was attached to the common room noticeboard:

> Little Jack Horner sat in the corner
>
> Deconstructing a pie
>
> He put in his thumb and pulled out a plum
>
> And said, 'What a clever boy am I'. (Newton 294)

While there was no doubt resistance to the patterns of reading During was developing, which I will discuss below, much of the animus was likely a consequence of his direct treatment of homosexuality. Sargeson was closeted to the wider public, and the young critic identified gay desire in the fiction in a way that was not often publicly articulated.[2] Old habits of silence were deeply engrained: the essay, after all, preceded by three years the passage of the *Homosexual Law Reform Act* (1986), which decriminalized sex between men in New Zealand.[3]

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[2] As Patrick Evans notes, however, 'strictly speaking, Sargeson was first "outed" by D'Arcy Cresswell in their contribution to […] *The Puritan and the Waif*' in 1955 (221, n49).

[3] As a young man Sargeson had been convicted of 'indecent assault' (in 1929), after he had sex with a man named Leonard Hollobon. Hollobon had named Sargeson to police in a separate blackmail investigation. While both men

During's essay centres on a reading of Frank Sargeson's 'The Hole that Jack Dug', a short story in which a knockabout male narrator tells us about his friend Jack, who digs a large hole in his garden, only to fill it in again. The article calls into question what During thinks of as a longstanding strategy in the reception of New Zealand writing, which he terms 'underreading' ('Revision' 75). He proposes instead to 'overread' Sargeson, 'to confront the social context and political effects of literature' ('Revision' 76). This practice is deliberately combative: 'literature ought to be examined with a provisional suspicion and aggression', he writes, 'in order to uncover its conditions, promises, and effects' ('Revision' 76).

During suggests that Sargeson's story works by demanding that the reader ask 'why is Jack [digging this hole] and then by implying that the answer will be found on three levels: a psychological level to do with Jack's relation to his wife'; 'an ideological level which points to the state of the world'; and a 'cultural level in which Jack's action acquires the resonances of parable' ('Revision' 79). He offers further interpretive possibilities beyond these: 'one could also see, for instance, Jack's digging the hole as a moment in the history of the sublime (as Michael Neill has in conversation) or as a metaphor for the text's own failure to be sufficient to interpretive acts (as Jonathan Lamb has done also in conversation)' ('Revision' 84). But all are ultimately inadequate, because while the story proffers 'impulses to interpretation', it never actually confirms them ('Revision' 82). The story, he says, is ultimately 'an allegory' of the 'kind of criticism […] that demonstrates that [it] means more than it means to mean' ('Revision' 85).

During suggests that the failure of the text to sustain any particular strategy of reading – other than the symptomatic – is a consequence of the division that lies within language and people, properly considered. 'Ironically and despite itself', During writes, 'the story makes it clear that we don't simply speak for ourselves, for we aren't unities that have one place to speak from' ('Revision'

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were convicted, only Hollobon was imprisoned. Sargeson, meanwhile, was 'released on probation' and placed 'in the care of his uncle, Oakley Sargeson, who lived on a remote King Country farm' (Brickell 120).

84). This strategy is strongly aligned with deconstructive criticism, of course, in particular Paul de Man.

It is an approach, as Newton concludes, that assumes that 'intention and consciousness have no orienting value' – this was the essay's greatest intervention (289). During comments that 'Freud says that the unconscious knows no no' ('Revision' 81). At another moment, he finds that the 'hidden rivalry between Tom the narrator and Mrs Parker comes into the open' through a 'Freudian slip' ('Revision' 81). Such thoughts give licence to the more speculative critical acts that take place in the essay, as he finds Sargeson's unconscious speaking itself in a multitude of ways – meaning more than it means to mean. There are moments of real insight that emerge through this approach: as During points out, Sargeson's sentence, 'Just about any man, I should say, would find it awfully trying to be a woman married to Jack', *is* indeed remarkably indirect and beguiling ('Revision' 81).

The cost of this approach, though, is that it refuses to address the story's clear commitments – in large part because that would credit the text with the ability to generate its own preferred interpretations. For Newton, this is a crucial problem with During's essay, as the young critic does not address the question of how Sargeson himself conceives of the relationship between Jack and the narrator. 'If we are actually to understand [Sargeson's] project,' Newton writes, 'we need to ask for whom he is writing for, and what he wants them to hear? To know what the sexual subtext "means" we need a particular kind of thick description: that is, we have to make a call about what it means *to him*' (289).

Contrary to During's influential reading, the story does in fact give us quite significant information about the hole at its centre (even if the narrator remains blithely unknowing). That is: the text says no to the idea that the hole is an allegory of the kind of criticism During was practicing. The narrator recalls that he met Jack 'in camp during the last war', World War I (224). 'The pair of us had been in the last war', he says, and Jack is right to be worried about what is coming soon.

We are then told proleptically that Jack's son dies in the Italian campaign. The story ends with the Japanese scare, when Jack earns money digging shelters, but fails to dig one for his family. His wife and her friends think he is being callous, putting them at risk of being 'blown to bits' (229).

In light of the war, the hole directly recalls the trenches. We might note, for example, that Jack digs not only with his shovel but also gelignite. 'Once he struck rock, he brought some gelly home from the quarry and plugged a bit in and set it off' (227). Like the diggers, he puts in 'props', to ensure the hole does not collapse. Jack too ends up covered in mud. 'The day was another scorcher but blowy as well, and the dust had stuck to him, and run and caked, and stuck again, until about all you could see that was actually him was those eyes of his' (228). He tells his wife over the noise of some planes flying overhead that 'we have more important things to do than those boys flying up there. Or at any rate, he went on, just as important' (228).

The story ultimately suggests that Jack is unconsciously repeating the last war just as the new one has broken out. After all, Jack is digging trenches, throwing grenades, covering himself in mud, and ignoring the planes flying overhead. The twist at the end is that he eventually makes money out of all of this. During cites Freud twice, but not *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919), an essay that would have been more apposite. Here Freud addresses the sadistic compulsion to repeat wartime experience that is part of what he calls 'war neurosis' in soldiers. All of this may seem like another level of allegory, but it is the one that is licenced by the text. The war matters an awful lot for both characters, ultimately shaping every attribute of the story. This is mateship, gay erotics, and cultural thought, as manifested among returned soldiers. The hole demands to be understood in this context, for it to be described, initially at least, in these terms.

What remains from 'Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits', I would suggest, is less the substantive argument, which turns away from key aspects of the story, than the act of critical transgression itself. It crucially approached Sargeson with what During called at the time 'aggression' and 'suspicion'. That transgressive impulse was a transformative one in the history of

New Zealand literary criticism, as it suggested a different tenor of reading that could be taken forward in the treatment of a generation of literary nationalists. Sargeson, the father of the nation's literature, could be treated with much less reverence – albeit without necessarily taking us much closer to his writing.

The same transgressive impulse is at work in During's *Patrick White* (1996). Here he seeks to read White as a symptom both of private drives (the author's sexuality and family romances) and public circumstances (the need for Australian institutions to produce a 'great writer' of their own). The work does not undertake substantial close reading across its hundred pages – in this it is markedly different from the essay in *And*. Instead, it is more of a survey, and the approach is synoptic. During's intention remains critical, however. The book turns on the view that White's career is concerned with his identity as a writer (*PW* 1). The shortcomings of White are in that sense symptomatic: the national project is the cause of much of the scholarly attention to the work; the novelist self-consciously formed himself as a writer for the nation. In turn, his fiction bears the hallmarks of this deforming mission.

During opens by discussing the impact of the maternal relationship on White's writing. 'White became a writer at least partly because he was encouraged to be one by his snobbish, doting and intimidating mother', he suggests, and this 'mode of motherly love had an immense impact on the writer that White turned out to be' (*PW* 1). Specifically: we can read White as 'enacting the desire to rid himself of the maternal origins of his will to write by destroying his mother in his writing' (*PW* 1). In turn, During finds that White's attachment to his mother connects to his homosexuality (because same-sex attraction is identified with the heterosexual desire of his mother). These intersecting desires enable White's exploration of, for example, incest (*PW* 69).

During is clear throughout the book that White is a limited writer. He explains that there is little to admire in his prose. 'The exteriority of [White's] will to write helps explain how difficult it was for him to write at all', During finds, 'it was a curse, a constant effort and something that, at

the level of style and sentence-formation, he did not do very well' (*PW* 1). In the conclusion, he sums up his own picture of White, only a little hyperbolically, in the following terms:

> It is hard to tolerate the White that I have criticised: the elitist White, the White who fictionalised contemporary Aboriginal life away, the misogynist White, the White who affirmed incest, even the White who thought of himself as a genius because he was psychically sick or damaged, and the (intimately related) White who considered art and literature as too profound to be simply available as an administrative and educational resource. Those aspects of White I find hard to accept too. (*PW* 100)

Yet all this opens up a difficult question: why bother reading White at all? Moreover, why bother criticizing White when, as During himself suggests, few actually read him anyway? During does not have a satisfactory answer at this point. He finishes by suggesting that future readers might find something interesting in how White's novels 'do not help produce good citizens or a good society' (*PW* 100). It is a limited conclusion: we might read Patrick White's fictions in years to come, he thinks, primarily because they testify to then-prevailing social attitudes, ones that were damaging for all kinds of people.

While During suggests that there is an Oedipal relation at the heart of White's work, in his writing on the fathers of New Zealand and Australia's national literatures there is a remarkable, almost overwhelming aggression. This is a critical mode that is clearly intended to depose Sargeson and White, especially in a moment when their visions of their nations had achieved prominence within their literary communities. In *Patrick White*, During suggests that 'the struggle between the creative writer and the academic critic is commonplace', and in turn that 'critics gain prestige to the extent that they can exceed a writer's own self-interpretation' (*PW* 11). In this transgressive mode, During gained prestige through interpretation that was directed against the wisdom supplied by both nationalist critics and the writers themselves.

Such treatments no doubt arrived as shocks to the local critical scenes. But criticism of this kind was unable to supply a meaningful alternative to how literary pedagogy should be undertaken in the Antipodes. Literature, when treated with suspicion and aggression, and when understood as a site for our critical energies and prestige, tends to reveal itself to be inadequate – valuable only insofar as it shows up cultural pathologies. When our literary tradition is devoid of icons, it is hard to articulate the purpose of literary reading and teaching at all. Transgression of this kind cannot sponsor much of the work that goes on in a department of English. Rather, it is anti-institutional, set against the idea that there is a disciplinary core that organizes our practice and deserves public funding. The issue is that when we say that writers are not worth reading, and that much of what we do in English cannot be defended, university administrators tend to agree. Like it or not, to be supported by the public, we actually need to have a concept of public good in mind – and not just as a form of critique.

## 2. Consolidation

In the 1990s, cultural studies transformed the study of literature in Australia. During was a central figure in this shift. He set up a cultural studies programme at the University of Melbourne with David Bennett and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'on the grounds […] that the students needed the opportunity [to critically] study contemporary culture in all its diversity and richness'. The programme was an area of growth in the period, and it remains in operation at the University of Melbourne today (albeit now integrated with screen studies). During also led expansion in other areas that were, as he puts it, 'aimed primarily at overseas students' or motivated by 'commercial reasons' – media, creative writing, publishing and editing. Meanwhile, English came under pressure. 'As Head of Department [at Melbourne] in the 1990s', During recalls, 'I spent a great deal of energy restructuring the department' ('Literary Academia, Part 2').

During suggests that shifting models for university funding forced his hand as an administrator. He recalls in particular that he told his then colleagues: 'if we did not develop the new programs, literary studies would languish anyway since the new managerial model did not support disciplines as such' ('Literary Academia, Part 2'). This acknowledgment of the realities of changing university economics mirrors some of his comments in the late 1980s about the consequences of university reforms occurring at that time. In 'Woodchipping in the Groves of Academe' (1987), for example, he concludes that the 'Dawkins plan will shift legitimation away from those faculties which embodied [the university's] modern idea most closely – the pure sciences and the humanities – to those the functions of which have been instrumental or more purely certifying: law, medicine, engineering, applied science and so on' ('Woodchipping' 114). This has indeed turned out to be the case – and of course the process is ongoing.

It was in this environment that cultural studies as a disciplinary formation came to prominence in Australia. The awkward consolidation of transgression into institution happened amid a new uncertainty, where it was possible for short-term booms and busts to expand or contract departmental budgets dramatically in any given year. During in this period began to articulate a new account of the value of critical theory and the study of cultural objects more generally: they contribute to political equality. The relationship between the shifting economics of humanities study in universities and During's new accounts of its value is of course difficult to divine. Yet is at least true that his resistance to – or even systematic avoidance of – political economy in these justifications for the new cultural studies was part and parcel of the discipline's institutional development and enabled by culturalist political paradigms. This is difficult to reconcile with the view that cultural studies was committed to political equality. I expand on this issue below.

In *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1993), During offers a history of the new discipline via generational change. Cultural studies emerged, he says, 'out of Leavisism' in the 1950s (*CSR* 2). It

traversed Marxist-inflected analyses of culture in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, before expanding, especially internationally, into 'analyses of racism, sexism, and the culture industry' in the 1980s (*CSR* 15). For During, the discipline in effect 'became the voice of the other, the "marginal" in the academy', affirming otherness and absorbing the 'radical wing of anthropology' (*CSR* 17). In 'Teaching Culture' (1997) – a piece first given as his inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Melbourne – he concludes that cultural studies had become 'the first academic discipline to be defined by consciously political orientations'. It rejected the 'thought of the ideal nation as possessing one history, one culture, one ethnicity, one sexuality, and one language' ('TC' 102).

This account of how cultural studies contributes to the public good in effect reversed the criticisms During had offered about the Dawkins reforms in 'Woodchipping in the Groves of Academe'. By the mid-1990s, he was suggesting that consumer power links the 'relative decline of literary studies' with 'the emergence of cultural studies':

> I want to argue that cultural studies has become popular in large part because students' preferences have a growing influence on curriculum. It is student choice which leads to more and more courses on rock culture, television genres like soap opera or talk shows, the theory of popular culture, aboriginality, relations between postcolonialism and postmodernism. […] At the level of policy, contemporary educational bureaucracies have moved from idealist and collegial models to market-, corporate-, and student-based ones so that student enrolments are an important source of funding, and student evaluations are an important measure of quality-assessment. ('TC' 101)

On this account at least, what he was calling 'globalisation' – which in this handling is broadly translatable to what we now call neoliberalism – was opening up possibilities for the discipline. This new formation, responsive to student needs and the changing media landscape, was for the first time able to attract significant income from tuition fees. Consumer choice – which at this time he thought to be no bad thing – 'permits the academy to move away from its aim to inculcate

students with an autonomous, balanced personhood based on the reading of a traditional canon' ('TC' 102). Graduate employment prospects had improved: 'Globalisation also means that (high added-value) cultural production is increasingly important to advanced economies so that an increased proportion of jobs are to be found in the cultural sector. Cultural studies prepares students for these jobs' ('TC' 102). Cultural studies and neoliberalism went together in the university and wider economy. Both, on this view, were contributing to justice.[4]

Yet even as During was in effect canonizing cultural studies, his writing from the period also shows reservations about the discipline's political direction. The celebration of otherness at the heart of cultural studies, he thought, seemed to be amenable to a kind of 'cultural populism' that ignores the role of markets in producing the objects of our analyses. In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, he finds that in the case of Madonna – who was the focus of an influential reading by John Fiske in the late 1980s – that the "'needs of capital" […] ha[ve] not been exactly irrelevant to her career' (*CSR* 18). This awkward thought is significant for a scholarly paradigm that imagines itself to be working in the interests of those who have the fewest resources. Critique was sliding into celebration of popular culture, which in turn seemed to be worryingly doing the work of capitalism for it.

During's misgivings intensified over the following decade about the relationship between cultural studies and the larger political and economic transformations it was navigating. In *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (2005), he reflects on the triumph of the discipline in Australia. 'As it turned out, cultural studies went on to be more successful in the Australian academic system than

[4] In During's more recent writing, as in his 2022 piece for *The Conversation*, a skepticism about neoliberalism has more clearly started to emerge. As he put it in 2012: 'the various post-1960s political programs that the academic humanities directed toward the larger world—the demand for justice, for recognition of oppressed identities, hopes for unimaginable revolutions to come, the description of ongoing social destitution, the demand for better and more democracy, and so on—in the end have just solidified the market-state's instrumentalization of the education sector' (*Against* 57). Note, though, that this account is still operating from the inside out rather than the outside in: it is 'post-1960s political programs that the academic humanities directed toward the larger world' that have led to the instrumentalization of education. I would have thought instead that the instrumentalization had largely been led by the wider adoption of market rationality for the delivery of state goods from the 1980s and 1990s.

in any other. This has meant that its claim to radical political value has been harder to maintain: it has been quickly normalized there' (*Critical Introduction* 26). Moreover, what During calls the transformation of higher education into 'enterprise universities' has 'empowered the older tertiary technical training departments in areas such as communications' (*Critical Introduction* 26). He wonders if 'Australian cultural studies offers us a glimpse of what the discipline would be like were it to become relatively hegemonic in the humanities' (*Critical Introduction* 26).

At play in these reflections is a nagging question: is the success of cultural studies not so much a consequence of its intellectual breakthroughs but instead related to economic and political shifts? Some of this is surfaced in *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, when During notes that 'postmarxist theory, like cultural studies, mimics capitalism's restlessness and formidable powers of innovation and destruction' (*Critical Introduction* 33). The trajectory here is from enacting the work of cultural studies critique to criticizing it in the mid-2000s, as he finds that the scholarly paradigms that he helped to make possible mimic the cycles and rationality of capitalism. This late-arriving ambivalence about the relationship between neoliberalism and cultural studies perhaps helps to explain his comments from 2005 about the economic transformations, in which he sought to balance the apparent 'good' of the reforms with the 'bad'. Unwilling to fully detach himself from the positions articulated in 'Teaching Culture', he reflects that 'no easy political judgment of entrepreneurial culture is possible' (*Critical Introduction* 16). While entrepreneurialism may have enervated effective resistance and increased economic insecurity, he still finds that it had increased economic dynamism and brought down old social barriers.

The missing element of During's reflections at this time is how the study of culture in Australia is sustained in material terms. As I have been suggesting, the absence of political economy is symptomatic of the larger project of cultural studies as it became embedded in the nation's universities. It was wedded to a boom-bust cycle of student preferences, in which the discipline had to keep ahead of shifting enrolment patterns and attitudes toward popular culture. It moreover

imagined that political transformation would occur through developing new analyses of cultural objects as opposed to what we might more simply call class struggle. 'Creative economy discourse', as Sarah Brouillette has termed it, is one of the key enabling forces of During's cultural studies in the 1990s, and it was very much a legacy of the Blair and Clinton eras. As she argues, though, that discourse has tended only to 'embolde[n] an established management conception […] of the reflexive individual's enterprising and expressive labour' (5). In time, Australian cultural studies would become vulnerable when the structural conditions that had helped to enable it also began to shift – and its styles of analysis, in turn, did not produce meaningful sites of resistance.

## 3. Return

After *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, During began to look for meaningful alternatives to the discipline as it had developed in Australia. His move to the United States after the publication of *Modern Enchantments* (2002) gave him the opportunity to revise his scholarly career, and to attempt in earnest to develop new approaches. In particular, this period marked a return to the literary, and with it an investment in literature as a distinctive object of culture. In his later writing, During seeks to explain how literary experience is unique and important. This marks a significant departure from, say, *Patrick White*.

In *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory and Post-Secular Modernity* (2009), During opens by recounting the disorienting experience of going to the Sydney Museum of Modern Art and seeing an advertisement for an exhibition under the rubric, 'Revolutions: Forms that Turn'. Capitalism tends to banalize all experience, he reflects, as it packages up revolution and makes it into something recognizable and consumable for upper-middle class educated professionals (*Exit* vi–vii). His book 'is written as a way out of – *against* – that generic experience' (*Exit* vii). At this point

in his career, During casts what he terms 'democratic state capitalism' as the cultural dominant from which we must seek escape (*Exit* vii). He uses this phrase to mean a form of government and social structure that has become compulsory, in which markets make everything equivalent, and democratic rule closes off access to alternative modes of experience. 'My claim', he writes, 'is that we find ourselves not at the sanctioned "end of history" but at something like its opposite. Capitalism without hope, hopeless capitalism, endgame capitalism' (*Exit* vii).

He expands on this topic in *Against Democracy: Literary Experience in the Era of Emancipations* (2012). Here he notes that democracy has expanded beyond formal politics into 'cultural, domestic, and sexual life' (*Against* 5). This means that the desire to level judgments and create hierarchies and canons – central to literary thought – has come to be viewed with increasing suspicion (*Against* 5). 'Democratic fundamentalism' ultimately leads to 'the belief that all cultural forms have equal value and should invite equal access' (*Against* 6). In these comments During shows that he has changed which side of the argument he is on regarding the distinctiveness of cultural objects. Yet he does so even while maintaining a commitment to the politics of liberation. It is from this position that he promotes what he refers to as a 'left-conservative […] critique of and resistance to democratic capitalism's cultural apparatuses' (*Against* 75).

At this moment in his career, During describes his return to the literary as a turn back to an earlier mode within cultural studies. 'While I do think of [*Against Democracy*] as a British cultural studies book, it is both more historical and more literary than most cultural studies is now. In fact the book's model is Raymond Williams, although it shares nothing with him politically' (*Exit* viii). He expands on his thinking about this tradition in chapter four of the book, which covers the Birmingham School. He explains its later turn away from 'theory' by suggesting that the 1970s in Britain saw the 'disappearance of the social and economic conditions which underpinned

traditional laborist ideology' (*Exit* 112).[5] In turn, British cultural studies from *Policing the Crisis* (1978) onward ended up embracing 'pluralism and identity politics' as opposed to theory proper (*Exit* 114). Little now remains, he finds, of the 1950s and 1960s project of the likes of Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson. Instead, cultural studies lost touch with the moment of the 'demand for theory' and came to occupy a 'utilitarian, bureaucratized, and concentratedly pedagogical institutional space' (*Exit* 114).

Yet what does it mean to use Raymond Williams as a model but to share nothing with him politically? To what extent is Williams's analysis really extricable from his political vision? Departing from Williams's political economy, and absorbing it into what he terms 'theory', leaves During mourning leftist failure in a way that feels at odds with his attempt to articulate literature's potential contribution to anti-capitalism. It is leftist politics but without class consciousness. The analyses offered in these books fit a longer pattern in During's writing, in which, even amid a rhetorical commitment to the politics of liberation, material engagement with left political projects remains somewhere over the horizon. The potential of cultural studies, which During conceived of in the 1990s as a grand opening up of politics through analyses of the wider object domain, he now articulates through melancholia. In *Against Democracy*, he concludes the future lies in a 'minority much smaller than even [F. R.] Leavis imagined' – left conservatives (*Against* 75).

It is here, in thinking about Leavis, that we better understand the critical impulses that underlie some of these comments. As has long been noted by the likes of Stefan Collini, early postwar British cultural studies can be viewed as a kind of left-Leavisism.[6] During too makes this point, as he notes that 'Raymond Williams […] shifted the direction of Leavis's own emphasis on the "common pursuit" and the "ordinary"' ('When Literary Criticism Mattered' 133). The Leavises,

[5] One could instead very easily instead see the 1970s as a period of organized reaction and capital consolidation, which took place at the expense of left institutions (including political parties and trade unions). Certainly, the 'social and economic conditions' that motivate left politics did not disappear with the decline of large, unionized workplaces. The period after 2008, when both *Exit Capitalism* and *Against Democracy* were published, has only further affirmed the extent to which class remains at the heart of social and political organization.

[6] See, for example, Collini 138–55; 200–06.

he says, 'were politically on the left', but their 'emphasis on literature and culture displaces formal politics' (128). The return to the literary in During's later writing is deliberately, even wilfully, disengaged from what he is calling 'formal politics'.

I do not wish to quarrel with much of the Leavisite programme as During outlines it. There is much to redeem in the views that literature is resolutely public in its significance, that it contributes to crucial issues of judgment, and that it is connected with what 'Leavis late in life called "the living principle"' ('When Literary Criticism Mattered' 126). It is intriguing, however, that During notes that Leavisism not only seeks to develop a 'positive practice of criticism', but also to 'theoriz[e] criticism's relation to culture and society', and that it 'does so in terms that acknowledge criticism's institutional requirements' (129) It is this latter point that has ever remained hovering at the edge of During's writing, in each of the modes I have outlined. I am suggesting that we should indeed examine – and struggle for – 'criticism's institutional requirements'. We ultimately get there, though, through sustained engagement with the material circumstances that shape the existence of our discipline in the university.

## 4. Conclusion

While university literary studies may be under significant pressure in Australia, there is at least one area of growth – writing *about* the crisis. In recent years, During has been active in promoting 'left conservativism'. This newly reformed disciplinary orientation, he wrote in a July 2022 essay in *The Conversation*, 'would be on the radical left socially, while tending conservative culturally' ('Demoralisation'). Ken Gelder, taking issue with During's approach, suggested in response that the discipline should incorporate a wider range of specialisms and approaches. He thinks that During's likely focus on a winnowed canon of works and reliance on longstanding methods of

close reading would be unduly limiting. He concludes: 'experiments with a radical, open interdisciplinarity are surely better than closing the door and barricading yourself in' (Gelder).

It is a legacy of the period I have been discussing that crisis writing in Australia has focused on issues of curricula, pedagogy, and research, while avoiding substantive discussion of the economics that support literary studies. This tendency is particularly striking in the context of the Job-Ready Graduates Package (2020), which implemented the largest changes to Australian university funding since the Dawkins Reforms three decades earlier. The JRGP created variable student fee bands and increased total student places, while at the same time it reduced the government contribution as a percentage of the total university funding (from 58% to 52%). Despite most humanities subjects being placed in band 4 ($14,500AUD in 2021), English literature was treated as a language and placed alongside foreign languages in band 1 ($3,950AUD in 2021).

The consequences of the reforms for departmental and school finances are not yet clear, in part because the sector is still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic and related economic shocks. It may well turn out that changes to fee bands will not lead directly to changed undergraduate student demand. As the Australian Productivity Commission points out, students are not especially sensitive to price signals (*Learning to Growth* 51). By contrast, universities tend to be 'highly responsive to course prices' and are incentivized to 'prioritise enrolments in high margin courses' (51). It is this calculus between margin and enrolment that will direct the priorities of university administrations for years to come, including in literary studies. If there indeed turns out to be an increase in enrolment, that could well be set against a disinvestment by universities as they prioritize more profitable teaching – creating the remarkable situation of simultaneously higher demand and lower numbers of faculty. Indeed, some of this has already been observed well before the JRGP, as universities instituted more profitable taught Master's degrees over the lower margin Honours – even while they launched voluntary and forced redundancy programmes. Whatever the case, the effects of the JRGP are enough to warrant scrutiny in ongoing debates.

The tendency in Australia of humanities crisis writing to focus on cultural object analysis and curricula contrasts with the more material orientation that is emerging internationally. The former president of the Modern Languages Association, Christopher Newfield, for example, has written extensively about the economics of higher education and its impact on teaching and hiring. In *The Great Mistake* (2016), he argues that private sector practices and standards in public universities have created a '*devolutionary* cycle that shifts resources away from education while raising rather than containing costs' (*Mistake* 4). In a recent MLA presidential column, he suggests that 'the "crisis of the humanities"' in the United States 'should be seen as a funding crisis' ('Humanities Crisis').

Personal writing too is laying bear the effects of disinvestment. Sarah Blackwood in a letter to the *New York Review of Books* describes the apparent 'decline' of her department at Pace University in New York City.[7] 'The major has grown by more than 40 percent in the last two years', and the department brings in approximately '$30 million of credit hour revenue per year'. Yet the '50 percent increase in revenue' has been met with 'a 50 percent decrease in long-term investment' (Blackwood). Strong student enrolments and declining permanent positions are familiar stories in Australia, as expanding student numbers in the last three decades have had negligible effects on faculty hiring or prestige. Overseas, scholars are increasingly coming to realize that academic security for the humanities rests more on whether administrators and the government believe that what we do *deserves* funding than it does on how we as academics understand our discipline, what we teach, or what new just paradigm is devised. Low enrolments lead to cuts; high enrolments do not lead to hiring.

One of the curiosities of contemporary debates about literary studies in Australia is that narratives of crisis exist alongside well-established and more celebratory accounts of the

[7] Blackwell's letter was partly a response to a February 2023 essay in *The New Yorker* by Nathan Heller (listed in the Works Cited), which comes to different conclusions.

transformations that I have described in this article. Indeed, even while writing about the demoralization of humanities, the protagonists in current debates still tend to argue that the discipline is more methodologically diverse, more self-aware, and more *just* than in years gone by. The interruption of cultural studies is central to this narrative, as it is thought to have broken up a colonial discipline and put in its place a new and more responsible practice.

In his 2018 retirement reflections, During sought to balance what he sees as the gains and losses of the 1980s and 1990s. On the positive side of the ledger is the new energy and power that these new modes of analysis have brought to literature departments:

> Literary studies' exposure to the sixties political movements—most notably feminism, anti-racism, postcolonialism and the queer movement— […] enabled the theory moment to flourish, led to a massive expansion of the discipline's range and depth. Let us not forget that for a time in the eighties, English became something like a model for advanced studies across the Humanities generally. Speaking personally, that flourishing has been intellectually and politically exhilarating, and, as I've indicated, has also been my career's springboard. ('Literary Academia, Part 2')

On the negative side, though, is the destruction of the literary. Over time 'hopes evaporated' and 'literature itself in its definitive form faded from view.' He finds that the discipline 'lost its ability to give a good reason why, for instance, it is important for thoughtful people, and not just academic specialists, to read, say, John Dryden.' Those who warned in the 1990s that the new disciplinary formations 'would sideline English proper […] turned out to be right' ('Literary Academia, Part 2').

What remains missing from crisis talk here is a thoroughgoing attempt to understand the situation in which literary studies finds itself. The reasons for this absence lie in the history of the discipline as we have inherited it, and in particular in modes of critical engagement that have never seriously attempted to understand the relationship between institutionalized literary criticism and

the wider circumstances in which it is embedded. The cultural vision has displaced the political economic one, to the detriment of grappling with the situation in which we find ourselves. In the work of Simon During, we have seen how transgressive critical impulses were consolidated into a cultural studies awkwardly aligned with neoliberalism. He variously understood this new disciplinary formation as the harbinger of a new dawn for cultural analysis *and* as unduly populist and market-driven. In later years, his critical writing mourns the losses without ever quite giving up the ambition of the project.

In a remarkable passage in *Foucault and Literature* (1992), During reflects on the range and diversity of Foucault's writing. In particular, he finds that there is an agonism in Foucault, motivated by both a repetition compulsion and an Oedipal desire to destroy the monument of his own work:

> [Foucault] seems to regard the version of himself he produced at each stage of his career as a father-figure to be rejected and destroyed. In a fit of enthusiasm, he even once wished that his works could 'self-destruct after use, like fireworks'. This is disconcerting not just because each period in his consistently adventurous work could rewardingly be further developed, but because he often writes in a tone of unimpeachable authority. However, sons who disown their fathers often also follow in their footsteps, and his work which shifts, rejects and consumes itself does also return again and again to the same topics. (*Foucault* 6)

Much like Foucault, During has often treated his own earlier works as materials to be rejected and destroyed. The desire to overcome applies not just to the likes of Sargeson and White, but to his own critical legacies as well.

I suggest that we can now change the pattern of crisis talk – that compulsion to return over and over to the same topics – and ask different questions founded on different premises. Which actions, analyses, and solidarities, I want to know, will secure the discipline in the future?

How do we work together to ensure a legacy for our work? Implicit throughout this paper has been the view that we should conceptualize our contemporary difficulties more in terms of political economy and attempt to incorporate it into how we talk about the status of the discipline. This has been made difficult by disciplinary norms as we have inherited them in Australia. To be clear, though, I am not suggesting that we must all become scholars of the material (indeed, much of my own research is concerned with how literature is a peculiar language). Rather, I am saying that crisis talk can better engage with the realities of university labour as well as the wider structures that enable it, and can in turn lead to more concrete actions that connect up our united struggles. From that place we can teach and research what we want. We get there, though, by thinking and acting together.

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