

# Thinking Through Relation

Encounters in Creative Critical Writing

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TIM BEASLEY-MURRAY

## ‘Back to Life, Back to Reality’

### From the Game of Academia to the Risk of Creative-Critical Writing

The piece below, the title of which is taken from the 1989 song by Soul II Soul, is concerned with the theory and practice of writing as risk. To take risks, one needs courage. And courage often needs the encouragement of others. Not only this piece, but the whole turn in my work towards new forms of riskier and more creative writing that seek, through play, to transgress the boundaries of academic activity as mere play – none of this would have been possible without the example of risk-taking and experiment that Tim has set, without the intellectual challenges that he has provided, and without his encouragement that has been persistent, patient and kind.

This piece is an edited and adapted extract from a monograph that I am preparing on criticism, literature, games and risk. If the extracts I have chosen propel the reader up and down the M11 between London and Cambridge (or more probably, up and down the train-line between Cambridge and King’s Cross), this also reflects something of Tim’s trajectories. And I am also grateful to Tim for drawing my attention again to the passage in Sartre on the literary graveyard. For all the time that I have known him, as colleague and friend, Tim has always passionately been on the side, not of death, but of life.

#### Reality Checkpoint

First, an excursus. Parker’s Piece is an open, green common in the city of Cambridge and something of an interstitial zone: on its South West side

stands the grand University Arms Hotel, just in front of Regent Street, the long road that runs out of the chocolate-box city centre and up towards the railway station. To the North West: the University, its ancient and opulent chapels and courts. And to the South East: the stumbling stretch of Mill Road, a road that, in the 1990s when I was a student at Cambridge, was notable for its Asian grocers, selling spices that were, at the time, outlandish in an overwhelmingly English Cambridge; for its dampish second-hand clothes shops where *bien-pensant* students could pick up brightly coloured Peruvian jackets; and for its dingy pubs that seemed a world away from the rugby-club blazers and dinner jackets of the college bar. On one side, then, the University, its architectural elegance, its world of scholarship and social and cultural privilege; on the other side, a very different Cambridge of perhaps more socially ordinary lives that, beyond the surface colour of Mill Road itself, flows out into a Fenland delta of greyish suburban streets.

Parker's Piece is crisscrossed by two diagonal paths. At the centre, where the paths meet, has stood, since 1894, a single, ornate, cast-iron lamppost, topped by a candelabra with four globular lamps. Solitary and arising unexpectedly out of the Cambridge fog, the lamppost resembles the uncanny lamppost in the middle of the forest in C. S. Lewis's Narnia, of which Lucy remarks in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*: 'It will not go out of my mind that if we pass this post and lantern, either we shall find strange adventures or else some great changes of our fortunes.'<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1970s, the base of this lamppost has borne a motto, repeatedly inscribed, effaced and re-inscribed, at times scratched into the enamel paint of the pedestal, at times scrawled in marker pen. In 2017, the Cambridge City Council finally despaired of the repeated need to clean it off and, as part of an official art project, the inscription has been neatly painted in Cambridge Italic lettering. The inscription reads: Reality Checkpoint. Reports of its origin differ, but whoever the originators and whatever their intention, the meaning of these apotropaic words is clear: as you leave the world of the University and enter the world beyond, you are leaving a sphere of unreality and entering a sphere of reality where real people live, leading real

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 195.

lives.<sup>2</sup> On one side of the checkpoint, real people in a real world whose lives and actions really matter; and on the other side of the checkpoint, what? Dreaming spires and ivory towers, haunted by ghosts? Dryads, fauns and angels on pinheads, or at least, counters of angels? Maybe Waldzell, the elite boarding school of Hermann Hesse's novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel* [*The Glass Bead Game*], where wan, prematurely aged boys devote themselves to a mysterious and fantastically elaborate game of the mind, the purpose of which remains opaque?

Reality checkpoint: this inscription rests on a dichotomy that is false and speaks nonsense in both directions: first, the lives of supposedly real people are also unreal, consisting also of dreams and fantasies. And, second, the lives of the angel-counters are also real, at the very least in so far as they enmesh with those of other angel-counters, but in so many other ways besides – not least in their position of power and privilege, the underlying structural brutality of which their beautiful surroundings can never entirely obscure. Moving away from Cambridge and its local geo-politics: more generally, to suggest that life within the academy is unreal is, in an important sense, to claim that the way we live it, both singly and collectively, does not matter; that how we think, what we say and do, has no consequences; that it is, in sum, little more than a game.

### 'It's All Academic!'<sup>3</sup>

Let us think more theoretically about games. As Johan Huizinga argued back in the 1930s in his *Homo ludens*, games draw, and take place within, a 'magic circle'. When we step into the game, we step into a special area

2 An enthusiast, Robert Webb, has created an extensive site devoted solely to the history of the lamppost: 'The History of Reality Checkpoint', <<https://sites.google.com/view/reality-checkpoint/>>, accessed 30 November 2019.

3 With an irony apparently unknown to its originators, 'it's all academic' is the strap-line of the current UCL fundraising campaign, aimed at alumni: <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/campaign/>>, accessed 30 November 2019.

of human activity, marked off from the rest of our lives by boundaries and within which special rules that apply.<sup>4</sup> Taking rugby, for example, the whitewash of the touchlines and dead-goal lines marks out its special, almost holy space, and the referee's whistle at the beginning and the end of the eighty minutes carves out a special, almost holy time. (Huizinga makes this analogy with the sacred, noting: 'The turf, the tennis court, the chessboard and pavement-hopscotch [*sic*] cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle.'<sup>5</sup>) Within these borders, complex rules – arcane to the uninitiated – apply that both sanction and forbid actions that, in everyday life, would be either forbidden (the violent wrestling of another person to the ground) or sanctioned (throwing a ball forwards). That is to say, the space of the magic circle, on the one hand, imposes certain rules and often negative restrictions (in rugby, you may not pass forwards; in basketball, you may not run with the ball in hand; in tiddlywinks, you may not simply drop the wink into the pot with your fingers); and, on the other hand, the magic circle cancels out rules and lifts restrictions that would apply in everyday life.

My argument here is that academic activity in general, and more specifically as a set of sub-disciplines, bears salient similarities to Huizinga's conception of the game. Like a game, each academic discipline has its own demarcated territory and mode of demarcation; and like a game, each has its own rules that govern actions that are permitted or forbidden. It is this game-like quality that can give disciplinary activity (and academic activity more generally) an aura of the sacred: initiates, versed in arcane rules, carrying out special procedures on holy soil, often with specialist functions, equivalent to the specialist positions on the playing field. And this can also give to the business of academia and its disciplines a sense of hermetic irrelevance to the concerns of everyday, so-called real life. Just as, when we step out of the magic circle, the game no longer matters, so too with academic activity: once we have stepped off its terrain, all that

4 In Huizinga's words: 'A closed off space is marked out for [play], either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain.' Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Angelico Press, 2016), 19.

5 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 20.

previously seemed so deadly serious, now can seem remarkably irrelevant. It is in the light of this that we can think of the double and opposite meanings of the word 'academic' in ordinary speech: both immensely important and special in a way that transcends everyday life, on the one hand, and trivial and irrelevant to it ('that's an academic question'), on the other hand.<sup>6</sup>

## Derrida in Cambridge

On Saturday 9 May 1992, a letter was published in *The Times*, signed by a distinguished, if motley group of philosophers, including the editor of *The Monist* and Willard Quine, at the time the world's most eminent living analytical philosopher. Its publication was a curious moment in which the rarified sphere of academic philosophy came into contact with the sphere of everyday life, where, for a moment, the press peered into the goings on inside the ivory tower. The occasion was the nomination of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, for an honorary doctorate at the University of Cambridge. For the first time in thirty years, a nomination – Derrida's – was being challenged and the resulting controversy was an important battle in the ongoing culture wars that pitted so-called 'theory' against a more politically and philosophically conservative establishment. What did Derrida's opponents object to? Well, according to the signatories, while Derrida describes himself as a philosopher and, as the letter sniffily puts it, 'his writings do indeed bear some of the marks of writings in that discipline', his work was, in their view, trivial and insufficiently serious, failing to 'meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour'. As a central paragraph puts it:

Derrida's career had its roots in the heady days of the 1960s and his writings continue to reveal their origins in that period. Many of them seem to consist in no small part

6 Similarly, the word 'trivial' contains an irony: originally referring, during the Carolingian Renaissance, to the trivium, the three branches of knowledge – grammar, logic and rhetoric – that were essential to the liberal arts and hence to scholarly knowledge full stop, only later did it come to designate what was unimportant and not worth knowing.

of elaborate jokes and puns ('logical phallusies' and the like), and M. Derrida seems to us to have come close to making a career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets.<sup>7</sup>

Little did it matter that 'logical phallusies' do not feature amongst Derrida's puns, the charge was that Derrida was merely playing at philosophy, perverting the discipline's seriousness with a form of Oulipian (one suspects that this is what they were trying to get at, rather than Dadaist) and suspiciously literary game.<sup>8</sup>

Later in the summer (I think<sup>9</sup>), following the failure of this campaign and the confirmation of Derrida's doctorate on 14 July, an event was held that was meant to act both as a celebration of the outcome and as a form of reconciliation of the warring camps within Cambridge and British academia more generally. This was held sometime towards the end of my first year as an undergraduate, a year that overlapped with the final year of my brother, now also an academic, and at the time a leading figure amongst student 'theorists' who had mobilised students' support for Derrida (part

7 'Letter from Prof Barry Smith [editor of *The Monist*] and Others' in Jacques Derrida, *Points: ... Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 418.

8 *The Cambridge Review* devoted a special issue to the controversy the following autumn, including a lengthy written interview with Derrida and contributions by a range of generally supportive critics, including Brian Hebblethwaite, Marian Jeanneret, Christopher Norris and Christopher Prendergast. See *The Cambridge Review*, 113/2318 (1992). See also Niall Gildea, *Jacques Derrida's Cambridge Affair: Deconstruction, Philosophy and Institutionalality* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020).

9 The novelist, Candida Clark, in a piece written shortly after Derrida's death for *Open Democracy*, recounts at length her confessedly unreliable impressions of this event. Her account differs substantially from mine, in fact and in interpretation, and her piece has an overblown and almost hagiographic tone: 'Jackie, as I understand he preferred, later to be known' presented an argument that 'seemed ethereal: not just hard to catch hold of, but liable to pass through walls [...] its ghostliness was an aspect of its modernity.' But she concurs with the sense of 'thrill of the forbidden', the 'hullabaloo' and the 'aura of celebrity'. Candida Clark, 'Jacques Derrida, a Cambridge Epiphany', *Open Democracy* (2004), <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/2181/>>, accessed 30 November 2019.



of which had been publication of their own rejoinder letter in *The Times*). Tickets for the event were hotly sought after, but my brother had arranged one for me, and so I went along, knowing little about Derrida and only dimly aware of the what the fuss was about, to what was clearly, in the light of the excited buzz around the Sidgwick site, an event. Derrida was impressive, resplendent, I fancy, in a luxuriant grey silk tie. I remember little of the lecture and understood less. But what I do remember was the Q&A: the Cambridge philosopher chairing the discussion (I am tempted to say that he was in tweed but of course he wasn't, most likely an open-necked checked shirt and faded trousers) poses a question and Derrida responds, at length, on metaphysics or logos or similar, addressing himself primarily to the audience. And then he stops, turns to his interlocutor and smiles. 'Well, enough joking, let's be serious now!' And then on he goes, more metaphysics and logos. And then he stops again, turns again, smiles again. 'Anyway, enough joking around, let me speak seriously now!' Again and again, in a repetition that was perhaps comic, perhaps petulantly childish, certainly tiresome and always exaggeratedly polite.

Does this story need comment? In Derridean fashion, the great man's ironic gesture is an undercutting of the (illusion of) solid ground from which his position – any position, indeed – might be undercut. By subverting, obscuring, deconstructing, indeed, the distinction between seriousness and joking or play, Derrida suggests that all play is serious and that all seriousness is play. In his interview in *The Cambridge Review*, Derrida refers to the contradiction in the original *Times* letter between a charge of excessive influence and a charge of triviality, a contradiction that he characterises as both 'extremely funny' but that 'does not detract from the seriousness of the symptom.' He argues:

In the responses that are called for here, and in spite of the discouragement that can on occasion take over, we must stay sensitive both to the comedy and to the seriousness, never give up either the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

10 'An "interview" with Jacques Derrida', trans. Christopher Johnson and Marian Jeanneret, *The Cambridge Review* 113/2318 (1992), 131–138 (133).

Much to the frustration of the Cambridge philosophers, one imagines, he also implicitly declares that part of the recognition involves the declaration of one's right unilaterally to change the rules, with the effect that losing (along with winning, admittedly) can no longer be a prospect. And so, one also imagines that, that evening in the Senior Common Room before hall, the Cambridge philosophers' talk over sherry was little imbued with the spirit of reconciliation.

## Game Theory

What does it mean to conceive of the business of academia and the business of the humanities, in particular, as a sort of game? When I was a student – and still now in some quarters, I imagine – the initiation into the business of serious literary scholarship – what was presented as its methodologically and philosophically rigorous side, namely literary theory – was carried by means of the following ritual procession: first, the polemical and whimsical Russians (*literaturnost*' and Formalism) and then literary theory's reluctant Godfather, Ferdinand de Saussure. With our initiation into the mysteries of his *Course on General Linguistics*, we were introduced to the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, to the bracketing out of the referential world.<sup>11</sup> As this process continued, we were now introduced to notions of difference/*différance* and of signification as play.<sup>12</sup> Language, we were assured, did not so much speak about any real world, as – and this above all, in language in its highest incarnation, namely literature – as about itself, in an intra-linguistic play that took nothing seriously, that brought all that was high (truth, certainty, tradition and so on), low in a

11 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).

12 Derrida's notion of *jeu libre* played a key role here, formulated, above all, in Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 278–294.

re-carnivalization of the world.<sup>13</sup> This play, moreover, we were told, was important in some vaguely but centrally political sense. The fixedness of seriousness was on the side of power (ideological, hierarchical and normative power), we learned, and the job of the critic was to reveal the linguistic and conceptual play that was irrepressibly and ubiquitously at work, undermining the foundations of seriousness and its pretensions to permanence. In so doing, the critic aimed to strip power of its veil of seriousness and reveal that, in reality, it was all impermanence, all a game.<sup>14</sup> And to do so, we were, as budding critics, implicitly encouraged to perform, and to underscore the nature of academic activity itself as a game, albeit one that, in some inchoate way, might actually be serious.

Such an approach, I have to admit, lay behind my first piece of published academic work, an essay on the Slovak novelist, Pavel Vilikovsky, that argued that the ludic nature of his self-referential, meta-literary and experimental novel, *Ever Green Is...*, was in some sense important: that, as a 'postmodernism of resistance', it had a powerful and derailing impact on the ideological narratives of an authoritarian nationalism, then dominant in

- 13 For Bakhtin, carnivalization is the ludic turning-upside-down of 'gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutise a given condition of existence or a given social order.' Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 160. First introduced in the Dostoevsky book, carnival is the subject, above all, of Bakhtin's later book on Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984). Western scholarship discovered Bakhtin's writing largely in reverse chronological order and has tended to lay disproportionate emphasis on the place of carnival in his thought. It is this 'carnivalizing' Bakhtin that had a particular influence on 'theory' in the 1980s and 1990s.
- 14 Lyotard's notion of the collapse of culture's 'grand narratives' into the provisional 'language games' of postmodernism was formative here. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Significantly, in a later interview Lyotard was to claim of his book: 'I made up stories, I referred to a quantity of books I'd never read, apparently it impressed people, it's all a bit of a parody.' Quoted in Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 26.

Slovakia.<sup>15</sup> Whether I fully believed in such claims at the time (and part of me remembers, or wants to remember, that I had doubts, and that at some level I was aware that Vilikovsky and I might simply be dancing in a magic circle), I am much more skeptical about them now. Today, I think that it might well be the case that the greatest trick those ideological narratives have played on us is to have persuaded us of the political importance of literature and literary scholarship as a game.

### Risky Business

Games are all about risk and its calculation and management. Let's take backgammon, snooker and, of course, rugby, to start with. In the first case, when her or his counters are stuck far from home, it is quite literally a matter of mathematical calculation of probabilities, determined by the role of the dice, that tells the player when to risk striking out for glory. In the second case, a term exists specially to designate the minimising of risk: 'safety play', a cautious mode of play that, nonetheless, a skilful player must know when to break out of in order to attempt the risky long shot that might, if it succeeds, pay dividends. And in the third case: well, rugby is less suited to the mathematical calculation of risk than backgammon and does not meditate on it as explicitly as snooker does, but it is, nonetheless, all about risk and its rewards. So, for example, the long pass across the field in one's own twenty-two risks being intercepted and gifting the opposition an easy try, but – if it comes off – it sets off a team-mate on a glorious run up the line, to the cheers of the crowd, on the way to a score from nowhere. A game without any risk, one might suggest, is not going to be a game at all, but mere ritual.

15 See Pavel Vilikovsky, *Ever Green Is...*, trans. Charles Sabatos (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002) and Timothy Beasley-Murray, 'Postmodernism of Resistance in Central Europe: Pavel Vilikovsky's "Večne je zelený ..."', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 76/2 (1998), 266–278.

What is special about the risks of game, however, is that they don't really matter. Yes, it matters whether one wins or loses, whether the risks that are taken pay off, but – contrary to Bill Shankly's *bon mot*, more or less accurately quoted, that 'football is not a matter of life and death, it is more important than that' – it matters only, strictly speaking, within the confines of the game. After all, a key feature of the game is that, whatever happens on the pitch, however brutal the tackle that one player has made on another (albeit within the rules of the game), whatever the score line, once the whistle is gone, all that is irrelevant, and the two players can shake hands, as if nothing had happened. It's just a game. Games, then, are a special sphere that are constructed in order to facilitate risk, specially constructed in such a way that those risks are not risks at all, to shield game-risk from the risks of real life. As part of the idea that the function of games and play is primarily socialisation, it is often argued that the origins of sports lie, in part, in the preparation of men for hunting and war (in the function of games like, e.g. Lacrosse in Native American societies, or in jousting, fencing and all sorts of martial games and sport, we might see grounds for these speculations), as a way for warriors and hunters to practise risking their lives, without actually risking them at all.<sup>16</sup>

## Academic Risk Assessment

The game-like nature of academia means that it bears a complex and curious relation to risk. Academia demands that its practitioners calculate risks and often that they play safe. An example: at a recent appraisal, I outlined my research and the central themes of the two projects I am

16 Piaget warns us to be wary of such speculation, however: 'If [...] we consider hunting games, cultural games and even games of chance as hereditary remains of the activities of primitive societies, we enter the realm of fantasy and there is nowadays not justification for so rash a hypothesis.' Jean Piaget, *Play, Dream and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. F. M. Hodgson and Caleb Gattegno (London: Routledge, 1999), 107.

engaged on, keen to elucidate the subterranean way these connect to each other. Both projects, I explained, are concerned with risk: in the case of my work on silence and reticence, I am concerned with the fundamental and existential risk that is involved in speaking (or, perhaps better, in speaking out) full stop. And in my work on games and literature, I am concerned with the risks that are involved in a more specific form of utterance: in writing about real, living people, where what one writes may come back to punch one on the nose. Moreover, I went on to say, both projects take risk not only as thematic content but also incorporate the very risks they speak of in their modes of writing.

When, in their report on the appraisal that they had conducted with me (an important part of me still knows that what I am writing here is risky, that it deals with real people and that my words here might eventually have an impact that I might not want – hence, the risk-averse coyness with which I use the camouflaging pronoun ‘they’), my appraiser summarised our discussion, they wrote as follows: ‘Dr Beasley-Murray is engaged on two research projects that he describes as risky.’ On reading this, I immediately recoiled from the assessment of my work contained in the adjective ‘risky’, an assessment that seemed – transferred into another’s mouth and, black on white, into another, more formal context – irredeemably negative, that seemed to be a verdict on my work as unserious and trivial. I wrote back to my appraiser, asking them to replace ‘risky’ with a safer adjective like ‘innovative’.

Now, here, I wish to express publicly my regret that I did not wear the badge of risk with pride. With the paragraph above, I have perhaps allowed the game of academia to get out of hand, have broken its rules and have intervened in the life that lies beyond the game. Nonetheless, I now embrace the – albeit managed – risk of writing it. Yes, there is no doubt that academia often discourages risk-taking and punishes those who take it. For a pedagogical and institutional machine, the purpose of which is, in part, its auto-reproduction by means of a complex system of disciplining, risk can be a spanner in the works that threatens to damage the internal mechanism. Moreover, the license to take risks is often thought of as something that is granted only when it has been earned: by seniority, or by a prior display of scholarly *Sitzfleisch*. (Let’s ask, *en passant*, was Derrida

risking anything in the Cambridge episode? Probably not much.) Or this license can be granted, even if unearned, to a few alone: I am acutely aware that it is often those who already have it all (people like me, who occupy privileged positions in hierarchies of gender, race and class) who are most willing to risk, because, at the end of the day, we do not stand to lose anything of any importance.

More generally, though, academia, insofar as it does what it ought to and aims at the production of something new rather than mere auto-reproduction, does, indeed, encourage and reward risk. A risky, original and apparently ground- or rule-breaking piece of research can result in a new way of thinking and the acclaim of peers, just like the risky pass in rugby. But, on the other hand, the risk is mitigated by the fact that, when all is said and done, when the whistle has gone, there is the sense – most palpably in the humanities – that it doesn't really matter.<sup>17</sup> After all, it is just a game. *Glasperlenspiel*.

## The Literary Graveyard

There is something grey and bloodless, both deathless and dead, about the mere game – whether we are thinking of the vital bloodiness of war, reduced to the click of wooden pieces in chess, or the arid games of scholarly unworldliness. Towards the end of the first chapter of *What is Literature?*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes a striking passage that is both a scathing attack on traditional literary criticism – or better, critics – and a source of inspiration. Most critics, Sartre suggests, are men who have not

17 I am happy to concede the fact that my arguments about the ludic and trivial nature of academia hold most strongly for the humanities. In the case of research involving real human beings, for example, or in medical research where what is at stake might be the cure for a disease, things may look different. Still, even here, there are forms of magic circle. So, for example, a line separates medical research, with its room for experiment and error, from the sphere where medicine is practised and where lives are more directly and immediately at risk.

had much luck in life and who, consequently, turn away from life where they have been disappointed and are themselves the source of disappointment to others – he caustically claims that the critic ‘lives badly; his wife does not appreciate him as she ought to; his children are ungrateful; the first of the month is hard on him.’<sup>18</sup> Instead, critics seek solace in the graveyard of literature among dead writers and dead books. Here, in the literary cemetery that is the library, the critic encounters only those who have ‘long since been washed clean of the sin of living’, whose lives are known ‘only through other books which other dead men have written about them’. Here:

Written by a dead man about dead things, [literature] no longer has any place on this earth; it speaks of nothing which interests us directly. Left to itself, it falls back and collapses; there remain only ink spots on musty paper. And when the critic reanimates these spots, when he makes letters and words of them, they speak to him of passions which he does not feel, of bursts of anger without objects, of dead fears and hopes.<sup>19</sup>

In constructing literature as a sphere of the dead, in writing only about dead writers and dead books, criticism makes of literature a sphere that is drained, not only of vitality, but of open-endedness and risk (the ‘fears and hopes’ with which the passage ends). I am thinking about (and seeking to practise) the way that what we do in the humanities might be brought back from the dead and out of the sphere of death; how can we who, in Sartre’s provocative words, so often ‘don’t want to have anything to do with the world except eat and drink in it’, we who ‘never bet on uncertain issues’, embrace the risk of the real world?<sup>20</sup> How can we, with full awareness and acceptance of the risks involved, step out of the magic circle and return to life?

The answer to this, I suggest, is a conscious move that takes the ludic freedom of play and liberates it from the restrictions of game. This might result in a mode of academic activity that will not be merely academic – a mode that might be, using Sartre’s term in a shifted sense, ‘engaged’. Here

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtmann (London: Routledge, 2001), 18.

19 Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 18.

20 Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 19.



are the famous words with which, a page or two on from the passage discussed above, Sartre concludes his introductory chapter and which, because of their rhetorical power, I can only quote in full:

But since, for us, writing is an enterprise; since writers are alive before being dead; since we think that we must try to be as right as we can in our books; and since, even if the centuries show us to be in the wrong, this is no reason to show in advance that we are wrong; since we think that the writer should engage himself completely in his works, and not as an abject passivity by putting forward his vices, his misfortunes, and his weaknesses, but as a resolute will and as a choice, as this total enterprise of living that each one of us is, it is then proper that we take up this problem at its beginning and that we, in our turn, ask ourselves: Why does one write?<sup>21</sup>

### (Dis-)engagement

What does this mean, to engage oneself completely in ones work and 'not as an abject passivity [...] but as a resolute will and a choice'? Well, to answer this question, let us first think a bit more the game and, in particular, the game-player. When the person who is going to play a game steps onto the pitch and into the magic circle, a curious bifurcation and transformation occurs in her. Entering a new set of relations (the relations of the game) that do not exist in the world beyond the circle, she also becomes – insofar as we are defined by the set of relations in which we exist as much as, if not more than, by what we are in any essential sense – a new person, a player of the game. And what she does, she does as the player of the game, and it relates only in an occluded and attenuated sense to the whole human being who exists off the pitch in the rest of life in very different sets of relations. (This occlusion and attenuation are similar to the occlusion and attenuation that occur between the sphere of the game and the sphere of moral concerns.) That is to say, in becoming a player of the game – and, in a more complex game like rugby, more specifically a player in a particular position, like fly-half, prop or hooker – we lose

21 Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 23–24.

sight of who she is otherwise. She, in her fullness, is overshadowed by her rule-bound and rule-determined role and the functions that she performs in it. She becomes abstract and exchangeable, as, indeed, the function of substitutes and substitutions in many sports indicates – in ways that the commodifying mythology of ‘sports stars’ and ‘sports personalities’ (the phrase ‘BBC Sports Personality of the Year’ surely contains a weak contradiction in terms) can never wish away entirely. The result is that the spectators judge her not in the fullness of who she is, but in terms of her role on the pitch. She is divested of risk and ethical responsibility for what she does as a whole human being, responsible merely in the terms of the game and her position in it. As Goffman, puts it:

The whole domain [of games] is considered to be cut off from the ongoing world, an ‘artificial’ universe, neither make-believe nor real [...] So anxiety about the opponent’s intent, reading, and resources, hence anxiety about what is really going on, is kept within bounds [...] bettors can tolerate such great losses and wins without becoming quite beside themselves; after all, in games it is not ‘themselves’ that they could get beside.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Goffman adopts a magic-circle understanding of games and underlines the risk-free, anxiety-free nature of activity within the bounds of the artificial universe that they establish – something that I have already discussed above. What interests me particularly here, however, is the unusual phrasing of the last sentence where Goffman suggests that, in the game, we lose ourselves, with the consequence that, no matter what is at stake, we have nothing to lose. In playing the game, we become somebody else, determined by the game, and to a certain extent, nobody.

## The Lights Are On, but Nobody Is at Home

In playing the game, we become, to an extent, nobody: something similar holds in academic endeavour. Yes, the researcher appears in their academic

22 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 456.

work, but, for the most part, only as a shadowy and sometimes barely discernible presence. Scholarship justifies itself – and we encourage our graduate students to think in this way – in objective terms: as a need in the scholarship, as a problem to be solved in the primary or secondary literature, as a question that is out there somewhere and needs to be answered, not as a need, problem or question that originates in the researcher, a need to articulate a certain way of thinking about the world that they intuit in some inchoate way before the material has come into sight. And yet without these latter sorts of needs and intuitions, the work would surely never come into being – a need, however, that is then sublimated beyond recognition in the activity of scholarship, erasing the researcher who stands behind it and from which it emanates, as if the researcher themselves were scaffolding, necessary for the work but to be removed once the work has been completed.

In place of the researcher, what academic writing tends to offer is the more-or-less anonymous voice of the discourse of scholarship, a voice, yes, that differs, is modulated, takes on varying diction and accent, according to discipline, according to ideological and scholarly affiliation and affinity, but that is not really meant to be, as such, the voice of the researcher as a whole human being. Yes, one way of explaining this bifurcation of the academic subject is to point to the double nature of academia as both profession, something more or less impersonal, and vocation, something intimately personal. Still, the researcher, in the moment that they step into scholarly writing, takes on a role, just like the game-player does when they step onto the pitch. And the result, then, is that, in their research, the researcher is no longer accountable as a whole human being but rather solely as a researcher with the constraints this brings to their personality. So, for example, we can hold the researcher to account for the accuracy of their reading of the primary text, for their handling of debates in the secondary literature and so on, but we cannot – for this would be well beyond the rules of the game – hold them responsible for their choice of author, choice of theme, of indeed, more fundamentally, academic discipline; just as one can hold a fly-half responsible for his tactical kicking or for his distribution of the ball to the three-quarters, but not for his lack of sense of humour or for the fact that he has not chosen to play basketball.

## Risking the 'I'

What is the key constraint that that the researcher takes on when he or she steps onto the playing field of academic research? What is the key determinant of their role? It is their commitment to objectivity. Objectivity, so conventional wisdom holds, is the means by which the researcher can be held to account. It is what enables the cut-and-thrust of academic debate. Any element of subjectivity, such wisdom goes on to say, removes what the researcher has to say from the domain of accountability. Allow me to quote from an online study guide to the matter (sometimes these sorts of things are the most telling of all):

Nobody really wants to know what you 'think' or 'believe'. [...] The thoughts and beliefs should be based on your lectures, reading, discussion and research and it is important to make this clear. In general, avoid words like I, me, myself. [...] Subjective information – whether it is in written or spoken form – is generally considered to be a single person's opinion. It has a viewpoint, or possibly a bias, regardless of the information it provides. Objective information on the other hand is meant to be completely unbiased. There is a feeling of the writer or speaker being outside of the information, and when they present it they do so without taking a stance or expressing their feelings in relation to that information.<sup>23</sup>

A subjective view, 'I like this novel because I like it', is the mere expression of personal whim and arbitrariness, a single person's opinion. It is something that others cannot argue with. But what if the real situation of things were exactly the opposite? In seeking to be objective, in seeking not to allow who he or she is to come to the fore, in being 'outside the information' and 'without taking a stance or expressing their feelings', in denying bias, we might conclude that the researcher who pretends to speak for everybody may, in fact, end up speaking for nobody.

In order to think about these things further, let me turn to something a little more – yes, I am going to use the word – serious than an online

23 Andy Gillett, 'Features of Academic Writing: Objectivity', *Using English for Academic Purposes in Higher Education*, <<http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/objectiv.htm>>, accessed 30 November 2019.

study-guide, to Mikhail Bakhtin's early work, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*. For Bakhtin, in the much more abstruse vocabulary of this early work, to exist in the world as a specific human being – to take part in what he calls the 'once-occurrent event of being' – means necessarily to adopt an 'emotional-volitional stance'. Here, so-called objectivity (a term that he, admittedly, does not use) has no place, or rather, only a possible, but not an actual place:

What does it mean to assert that historical mankind recognizes in its history or in its culture certain things as values? It is an assertion of an empty *possibility* of content, no more. Of what concern is it to me that there is an *a* in Being for whom a *b* is valuable? Insofar as I affirm my own unique place in the unitary Being of historical mankind, insofar as I am its own non-alibi, i.e., stand in an active emotional-volitional relationship to it, I assume an emotional-volitional position in the values it recognizes.<sup>24</sup>

There is no being-in-the-world that is neutral or objective, since, by necessity we take up a stance towards the world at the particular place and time where we find ourselves, a stance that contains an evaluation, a judgement. To claim that this is not the case is to claim what Bakhtin terms an 'alibi-in-being':

I can ignore my self-activity and live by my passivity alone. I can try to prove my alibi in being, I can pretend to be someone I am not. I can abdicate from my *obligative* (*ought-to-be*) *uniqueness*. [...] A life lived on the tacit basis of my alibi in Being falls away into indifferent Being that is not rooted in anything.<sup>25</sup>

Claiming to be indifferent, to be unmoved by the world around us, to be neutral, to be objective, that is, is to claim to be somebody else (e.g. to be playing a role) or to claim not to be there. And this is ethically impossible: we have to take a stand, in the double sense of that phrase: both to accept our position in a real and concrete world (as an 'I') and also to accept that we thereby take an evaluative position towards our environment. What is more, when we take a stand, then we also take responsibility for our being. After all, if we speak as everybody and as nobody

24 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 47.

25 Bakhtin, *Philosophy of the Act*, 42–43.

(without an 'I'), then we are answerable to everybody and hence to nobody. Bakhtin develops his conception of responsibility (or what the translation calls 'answerability') by means of the metaphor of draft and fair copy:

Being that is detached from the unique emotional-volitional center of answerability is a rough draft, an unacknowledged possible variant of once-occurrent Being; only through the answerable participation effected by a unique act or deed can one get out of the realm of endless draft versions and rewrite one's life once and for all in the form of a fair copy.<sup>26</sup>

If I present what I have to say as a draft, I thereby disclaim it. I say: 'Well, this might not be what I really mean; this is provisional. When I get round to producing another draft, I may have improved it or may have changed my mind.' A draft denies responsibility and sidesteps what others might say. Whereas producing a fair copy, standing by the judgements that it contains, accepts responsibility for what we write. Taking a stance, then, speaking from the position of the 'I', does not have to mean removing what we say to a sphere of irresponsibility and uncriticisability. On the contrary, it means submitting what we say to the judgement of others and enabling them to engage with it.

This is a matter of risk. Returning to the context of academic writing: hidden behind a mask of objectivity, the researcher cannot be held to account and, in an important sense, it does not matter what they say. There is no risk involved. In contrast, a subjective approach to what one writes and what one researches, an approach that reflects on where we stand in relation to what we write about, risks judgement and being judged. Subjective, of course, is not necessarily the right term here and certainly does not cover the fullness of what I am getting at. The sort of academic writing and criticism I am talking about is conscious of, and reflects on, its *engagement*: that it comes from somewhere, a place that is determined by who the critic is in the fullest sense, reflecting a positionality that is determined by relations of power and inequality; that it aims at something,

26 Bakhtin, *Philosophy of the Act*, 44.

something that is an evaluation, a matter of the passions, whether desire or fear; that it has biases and *partis pris*, in the positive sense of decisions and sides that it has taken; and that what it does has an impact, can have consequences and can expect an answer back. Here, the writer or researcher does not leave their whole self at the edge of the pitch but rather has the courage to take what Arendt talks about as the risk of self-disclosure: the 'willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own [...] the courage [...] present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self'.<sup>27</sup> This one might gloss, further, as the courage to recognise and reflect on our implication in what we do and how that affects others; and the courage to take the risk-free and bounded activity of unserious game – that ultimately is played by no-one and for no-one – and to turn it into the risky and transgressive activity of serious play.

## Attached

This essay (and the monograph of which it is a part) involves experiment in what is now called 'creative critical writing'. While by no means an entirely new phenomenon, this is a burgeoning field and one to which an increasing number of scholars in the humanities are turning, in part, I suspect, because of an underlying dissatisfaction with academia in the humanities as just a game. So, my intuition is that the impulse towards creative critical writing might be motivated by the following: a sense that the rules of what it defines itself against (uncreative critical writing?) are limits and constraints that have lost their productive power; that these rules need to be broken, in part, in the name of ludic freedom; that traditional critical practice has become a game that now teeters on the brink of ritual, an endlessly repeated game of chess that now always results in stalemate, isolated from openness and risk; and that – often by daring, even if surreptitiously, to re-inscribe the

27 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 179.

subject, not simply as ‘knight’ or ‘bishop’ or ‘pawn’, but as a real and responsible person – creative critical writing can productively and playfully step over the bounds of the magic circle, engaging a world beyond in serious play and playful seriousness. A form of Derridean amphibianism.

In her latest book, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Rita Felski explores and rehabilitates the notion and experience of attachment: the ways in which, as readers, we become attached to works of art through processes of identification, recognition, empathy, attunement and so on. Her argument is that academic critics, on the one hand, disdain these forms of attachment as features of so-called ‘amateur’ reading practices and amateur readers; and, on the other hand, cultivate and propagate an ethos of detachment, priding themselves on not being taken in by a work of art, or resisting its seductions and stickiness. Critical creative writing, by contrast, acknowledges and seeks to give an account of these ties with which we are bound to literary and other works, as well as the affective investments we put into them, investments in which our sense of self is bound up.<sup>28</sup> It seeks to heal the divide between the academic criticism in its magic circle and the affective experience of real readers in a real world. Rather than approaching criticism as a detached game-player for whom the literary work is just another hand of cards, critical creative writing articulates our engagement with the work, as who we are and where we stand, that is to say, as whole human beings in a real world.

28 The example that Felski gives of an account of attunement is an essay by Zadie Smith, ‘Some Notes on Attunement’, in which Smith charts the epiphany of suddenly coming to appreciate the music of Joni Mitchell in conjunction with an experience of Tintern Abbey, the landscape in which the Abbey sits, and, of course, Wordsworth, amongst other cultural references. Although Smith may not use the term, this is patently a fine example of what an academic might call creative critical writing. Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 48; see also Zadie Smith, ‘Some Notes on Attunement: A Voyage Around the Music of Joni Mitchell’, *The New Yorker* (9 December 2012), <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/17/some-notes-on-attunement>>, accessed 30 November 2019.

My discussion of *Hooked* echoes the lecture that Felski gave at University College London in December 2019. I would also like to thank Rita for her generous comments on the larger piece of work from which this essay is extracted and for her encouragement of the project.