

CounterText, or the Future of Criticism

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From the perspective of *CounterText*, literature is not what it used to be. Whether this implies decline or evolution – or both – is open to debate. (CT 1.1 (2015): v)¹

As an associate editor of *CounterText* I have been following its development from its inception very closely – albeit mainly in an advisory role and, on a couple of occasions, as a contributor of articles. Needless to say that I am very happy to be associated with the important venture that stands behind this still unfolding project of the “study of the post-literary”, as the subtitle of the journal runs. I offer the following as a celebration of the first 5 years of what I believe is a major, maybe even the only platform for current “risk-takingly theoretical” and “critically creative” work on the current state and future of literature and the literary.

Even though I was not present at the innumerable editorial meetings that must have taken place in the vibrant and collegiate Department of English at the University of Malta which runs *CounterText*, I can imagine the extensive and maybe also sometimes controversial debates around what the “countertextual” or the “postliterary” might be, or what to look out for in potential contributions, which direction to take with the editorial instrument of the “special issue”, what associations to seek, and so on. In this respect, the editorials and strategic interventions in the form of articles written by members of the editorial team tell a story of their own. It is this “narrative” of *CounterText*’s unfolding rationale that interests me here and that I wish to track and comment on. Between the postliterary and the countertextual – the two parameters of *CounterText* – the journal aims to map the process of literature’s transformation in the time of “posthumanism” – not a term the journal itself uses, but one which, as I would argue, lends itself to the combination of challenges literature as an institution and practice seems to find itself in today (cf. Herbrechter 2013).

Every rationale, just like every narrative, starts with an opening that sets out the scene, or the challenge and thus creates a space to explore. At the outset of *CounterText* is a classical critical “ploy” or opening gambit – a metadiscursive foundational gesture clad in the form of a simple “observation” – “literature is not what it used to be” (CT 1.1: v). It is a truth universally acknowledged that... leads to the opening of a discursive space governed by two extremes, two poles in between which the narrative of the journal will navigate henceforth, yet uncertain of its outcome: “Whether this implies decline or evolution – or both – is open to debate” (CT 1.1: v).

As Ivan Callus writes, in “Literature in Our Time, or, Loving Literature to Bits” (CT 1.2 (2015): 232-269), however, there is one pre-condition, a minimal consensus, so to speak, without which the discursive but also affective space for the narrative to unfold would not have opened up in the first place:

Presumably you have to love literature in the first place to be able to do anything with it for our time. (CT 1.2: 262)

Let us therefore deal with “Loving Literature to Bits...” first. It sets up the post-literary in its “literal” sense of “literaturelessness [just like humanlessness]” in the form of a “thought-experiment” (235).² A thought-experiment is of course a very specific genre of thinking – a special way of having your cake and eating it. It says: let us take the “end of literature seriously” (i.e. literally – and nothing is less certain that the “literal” and the “serious” really are the same), but let us also not forget that “the ruse created by talk of literature’s dispensability, by literature’s own death”, which, according to Ivan Callus, is “doubtless one example of the traps that literature and literary theory can lay” (237). Again, nothing is less certain than the “and” between literature and literary theory in this phrase. As far as literature is concerned (and one might be tempted to spell it once again with a capital “L” here, or to “anthropomorphise” it (240)), “can affect everything – including, presumably, itself and

including its own death too" (237). This would set up [Literature, or at least the literary, again no easy synonymy here] "as the ultimate resister, the ultimate survivor".

The De Manian argument regarding the resistance to theory surely comes to mind here and the question whether the "irresistibility" of theory [but maybe also of the "literary"] constitutes a blessing or a curse. A blessing, certainly, should its resistance prove vital, in the sense of maximum saving power in the face of ultimate danger [Hölderlin's and Heidegger's "Wo aber die Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch"] – a curse, however, should its survival simply prove to be a "waste of time". But who really is to say whether reading and literature are a waste of time? Does literature have to be useful (whether it is in a humanist-idealist-pedagogical or a utilitarian-economic-political sense)? Does it have to be "progressive" in the sense of critically "transformative"? The way Ivan Callus phrases this question "in our time" is by referring to the formula L+ (LiteraturePlus) and +L (PlusLiterature). Let me explain how I read this. No one will be able to dispute the proposition about the "renegotiating of literature" in "our time" (and, again, the "our time" might in the end hide more than it proposes to uncover):

There has gathered the sense that twenty-first century modalities for artistic expression must be deeply transformative of the literary and of the **capacitive sensitiveness** of literature before the (post)human world and (post)human technologies. (241)

On one side, there are thus what he calls "twenty-first century modalities for artistic expression" – I guess we all have our anxieties and desires regarding 21C media and their transformative potential not only regarding the "literary" but life in general – and, on the other side, there is literature's "capacitive sensitiveness... before the (post)human world and (post)human technologies". In other words, this asks what exactly may be lost or gained in literature's translation from analogue to digital, from engaging, interacting with or resisting new media technologies with their wider, "posthumanising", potential. The image of the "capacitive sensor" is a good indicator of the new

forms of embodiment, haptics and interfaces that will seize and may be seized by literature given the new “affordances”, or new dimensions of the mystical writing pads to come, so to speak.

However, if we follow Ivan Callus in discarding the idea of a simple “rupture and superannuation” of literature (but is a future without literature really so unthinkable, one might ask) this leaves us with two forms of renegotiation – “*LiteraturePlus*” and “*Whatever-It-Is-That-We-Have-Now-Plus-Literature*” (or, indeed, as a third alternative, maybe simply a condition “*withoutLiterature*”, one might add, i.e. “literaturelessness”, see endnote 2). If this is an accurate description of the “symptomology” of the post-literary condition what of the proposed treatment or cure – the “countertextual”? I quote from “Loving Literature to Bits” again:

If this is indeed the time of the post-literary, which would presumably coincide with the passing of the primacy of texts and of their familiar materiality, and which to one understanding would coincide also with the receding of the centrality of textuality as concept and as channel for thought, then it will be opportune to look at what it is that might be countertextual in the supposedly post-literary present. (CT 1.2: 242)

If one accepts that new media, digitalisation, biomedica etc. challenge “the primacy of texts” or at least “their familiar materiality” (we know that the materiality of the text or, to be more precise, materiality, in general, is a hotly disputed issue not only because of the current proliferation of new materialisms in our time), if one accepts that the poststructuralist notion of textuality (i.e. the world as text, or *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*) as a “channel of thought” is now less pervasive and persuasive, or has been losing in pertinence (maybe ever since the so-called iconic or pictorial turn, at least that is how the story goes), then what has taken its place? And, following on from that, and this is where the countertextual comes in, how to resist it (i.e. that which comes after the text), how to critique it, or transform it?

So, I went through the editorials of *CounterText* once again, in pursuit of a definition of the countertextual, and the first hint I found was this: “artefacts – works or cultural practices that appear in the post-literary as a challenge, manifesting an unorthodox or critical stand on the literary – might be called ‘countertextual’” (CT 1.1: v). Thus, in a time, *our* time, when literature is fighting for its survival, all those artefacts and practices, maybe also “ways of writing” more generally, might count as countertextual that take a critical stance towards, on the one hand, the literary itself, i.e. rewritings of the literary tradition. On the other hand, since these texts may already be considered post-literary, they might be found in artefacts, practices, ways of writing etc. that are creatively and critically engaging with the affordances of our media in our time. This, in the sense of L+ and +L, might lead to either hope or dismay, either a new lease of life for the literary, which, as the editorial says, is “more open and freer than ever” (CT 1.1.: v); or, it might, indeed, lead to literature’s utter devaluation. The countertextual could thus be literature’s only hope for renewal (or, indeed, its complete destruction) in post-literary, posthumanist times.

The next instance, the next twist, so to speak, in this countertextual logic would be a kind of “revenge of the literary”. In fact, the journal inscribes itself precisely within this revengeful space and time:

...the space and time of the countertextual: a revanchism of the literary that finds it returning upon culture in affirmation of its **achronic** rather than **anachronous** qualities, very probably in forms that are not straightforwardly recognisable as literary and which extend and round out ‘the “biography of the idea of literature”’. (CT 1.1: vi)

In other words, the countertextual would still, necessarily, be a “textured understanding of the post-literary” (vi); it would provide continuity in the time of the “achronic”. Its untimeliness would thus be its strength. Is this not precisely what the “counter” expresses, namely a reaction to, but somehow

also a process that runs *counter* to, namely a process that is a necessary part of and therefore co-present with – hence **achronic** rather than **anachronous** – in its own “potentiality” (vi)?

Having thus staked out a territory for itself, with a partial mapping of the main conceptual landmarks, creating enough openings for future exploration, it is time to “move on”. This is maybe where the other first position statement, the companion piece to “Loving Literature to Bits”, one might say, comes in. In “Now: A Post-Romantic Countertextuality of the Contemporary” (CT 1.2 (2015): 186-206), James Corby provides what may be called a “genealogy” that deflects the question of *what* the countertextual is to *when* it is, was or will be:

The countertextual, as it is being envisaged by the editors of *CounterText*, is that quality in any manifestation of the literary that performatively calls literature to account, implicitly raising the question of how it might be otherwise than it is now and has been in the past. Perhaps inevitably, then, the countertextual will be seen as “oriented to the future”... (CT 1.2: 186-187)

To resist the “ubiquitous contemporary cultural tendency towards excitable futurology” (187)

CounterText’s political stance is to emphasise the “now” in order to keep a handle on the contemporary relationship between the “possible and the impossible” and its critical interrogation.

The journal’s (cultural and literary) politics is thus designed to buy time for critique in the face of ambient “futuophilia” (187). The slow and careful genealogical work – in James Corby’s case, tracing the countertextual (and the post-literary) back to Romanticism – is connected to what can be seen as the journal’s principal provocation, namely that “the literature (or the literary) of the contemporary isn’t *to come*, it is likely (necessarily) *already here*, and the challenge is to recognise it as such” (204).

Tending to the countertextual thus becomes the new task for the contemporary critic assessing the post-literary condition. One could even raise the stakes further by calling this task a tending to the ongoing deconstruction of literature (note the ambiguity of the genitive construction, of course). At

the same time, in terms of critical practice in the time of the post-literary or countertextual criticism, as the editorial of volume 1.2 specifies, should also be encouraged to take on a more “ludic” and creative aspect. “[F]un, in literature *and* criticism, is *ok*” (CT1.2: viii), an idea pursued in more detail in CT 2.2 (2016) on electronic literature and admirably exemplified in Mario Aquilina and Ivan Callus’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Electronic Literature, or, A Print *Essai* on Tone in Electronic Literature, 1.0” (CT 2.2 (2016): 236-255).

The idea of a countertextual criticism for our time already implies quite a substantial media-technological shift – namely a shift that tracks literature’s current remediation, that is electronic, or “multisensory” literature, and what the editorial of volume 2.3 (2016) describes, as the “immersive” experience of the literary, in what can only be called another having-your-cake-and-eating-it move:

Literature gives way to the literary to become an experience that is able to traverse multiple platforms, potentially offering storyworlds that function as total artworks. (CT 2.3 (2016): vii)

Needless to say that the danger of this may be to end up with a completely dilated notion of the literary, which basically becomes identical with narrative regardless of the media or multimedia platforms it might cut across. What is of course lost in the shift from (post)literature to the (post)literary thus conceived is the “letteredness” (and this is more than a mere materiality or mediality), which, if one scratches a little at the idea of *lettres* or *belles lettres*, may be nothing but one of the many synonyms of humanism. We are thus faced with the question: is something like a *posthumanist* literature thinkable, possible, or even desirable?

The problem that the actual, the concrete, material countertext or the countertextual might always frustratingly remain elusive was already announced in the editorial of volume 1.2 (CT 1.2: vi), or that it might, indeed, remain “elsewhere” – not very surprisingly, in *différance*, from a deconstructive point of view. Calling a journal *CounterText* will always have guaranteed that the countertext will

function as, and will therefore have to remain, quasi-transcendental. While aspects of countertextuality will be eminently traceable almost everywhere, *the* countertext will have to stay elusive, postponed, deferred to the next issue or volume, while, thankfully, always differing from itself. The editorial to volume 3.1 (2017) articulates this problematic:

But what is a countertext?... are examples identifiable... would there be consensus around such identifications... How is the *countertextual* more than a synonym for, say, *experimental*?

(3.1 (2017): v-vi)

Looking for the countertextual thus becomes *CounterText's objet a* in which it will recognize and through which it will legitimate itself.

As the search progresses, institutionalisation solidifies. Consequently, the editorial of volume 3.2 (2017) is now able to position itself and the post-literary with some authority:

The post-literary, as we conceive it, is the expanded field of literature today, encompassing all aspects of literary culture, whether they be judged good, bad, or indifferent. Countertexts would be regenerative texts, practices, or performances that in one way or another call the literary to account and perhaps push the boundaries of what might be thought *proper* to the literary. The animating and provocative idea here is the possibility that today, increasingly, whether we like it or not, the literary might be elsewhere than literature. The literary, that is to say, might be migrating beyond the predominantly textual realm of literature, colonising, as it were, new spaces, new practices, new platforms, new media... (CT 3.2 (2017): v-vi)

This is indeed fascinating to watch – the inevitability of it, the tone, the establishment, the constant remapping – fascinating to witness the narrative and discursive logic unfolding, the repetition, the difference, the critical reflexes...

The post-literary here has already become a field in itself, in fact, it *is* the field of literature as it presents itself today – a new aesthetic *and* literary sociology of and for our time, one might say. Literature only survives as the post-literary in its new variety and multimodality. In its mapping and future mappability the field becomes encompassing; it is both extensive and complete in its global reach and world-making ambition. It almost necessarily includes some colonial, if not potentially imperialist traits (the literary is said to “colonise” new spaces, new practices, new platforms, new media – almost in a viral fashion, just like theory, in its time, used to be said to have a viral quality of infecting all sorts of disciplines and fields). In this sense, the literary will, of course, be resisted (and through this very resistance will be absorbed and triumph) even as it develops its own (ir)resistibility playing out, once again, the classic autoimmunitarian scenario and logic. Unfortunately, but also inevitably, in doing so, the literary will ultimately betray literature, betray it in order to save it, or at least what is proper to it. In return, literature will detain a kind of “hauntological”, nostalgic, or one might say “zombie” presence, that will further prompt the search for genealogical traces of the post-literary and countertextual moments, and so on... If this sounds like a new, old chapter in the deconstruction of metaphysics, then it probably is precisely that.

The next twist in the *CounterText* narrative, the raising of the stakes, so to speak, is the inclusion of “the poetic” in CT 3.2 (2017). The poetic as a somehow pre- or proto-literary notion, more fundamental, more deeply ontological, or deeply aesthetic maybe – let us remember that it is “poetically” that man “dwells”, according to Heidegger, and maybe, in posthumanist times may no longer do so. The poetic points towards an even bigger loss, as the editorial to volume 3.2 (2017) readily admits:

We can understand readily enough the fear that the post-literary might be the receding of poetry. What we may not wish to entertain is that it could also be the receding of the poetic.

(3.2: vi-vii)

But why should the loss of the poetic indeed be an even greater devastation than the loss of the literary, if we were to disregard the Heideggerian fundamental ontological trajectory here, for once, with all its implications. Is the “Letter on Humanism” poetic, is it countertextual? Are we not already (or is Heidegger not) talking about a humanism in utter despair? It may be that behind “Loving Literature to Bits” and maybe also behind the entire venture of *CounterText* there is another question that has not quite run out of steam yet, namely, “What is or was (literary) theory?” And, was it a good thing? Did it do any good to literature, to criticism, to culture more generally? Did it go far enough, or maybe too far? Or, did it miss the point entirely? It is funny that we (humanists working in the humanities) should all care so much about literature, the literary, the poetic and their futures, while really what we are mostly worried about seems to be the future of criticism. It is almost like caring more about humanism than the human.

While I would certainly want to defend the merits of theory, by which most people I assume mean poststructuralism and deconstruction, what the recent shift towards (critical) posthumanism spells out is, amongst other, mainly technological and ecological things, a further extension of the textual and inscription beyond language and even culture. There were good reasons for seeing the world as “text”, and Roland Barthes’s programmatic phrase “from work to text” of course already implied a certain post-literary disillusion. Should we not accept without any nostalgia or regret that “the post-literary... is the absence of illusion about the literary” (CT 1.2: 265)?

This is where it becomes (even more) complicated, however. Two impulses, two faultlines, have opened cracks and have led to a partial loss of control over the countertextual narrative, which has taken a number of hits. In CT 3.3 (2017) and 4.1 (2018) the countertextual takes a geopolitical or translational turn. “Thinking literature across...” takes the idea that literature might be elsewhere literally, so to speak. Literature – a very Western and Eurocentric concern it seems, even though that might depend a lot on its definition and its potential inclusiveness – in its as yet recognizable or so far

unrecognized forms might be seen, at least from a broadly postcolonial or “indigenous” point of view, especially in the time of globalisation and the Anthropocene, as questionable. Its survival may therefore be an obsession unshared by the rest of the world. Thus, depending on how literature comes “across”, the post-literary (just like the postmodern used to be) might turn out to be yet another instrument of continued Western cultural imperialism claiming a universal condition for something that “on the ground” and in various localities, indeed, looks quite different. The countertextual could thus become another occasion of the “empire writing back”, which, in turn, would prompt desires of recuperation and would confirm the countertextual as the most prized object for the survival of literature in its post-literary condition. This must be of particular concern for a journal based in Malta with its own complex postcolonial and postcolonised cultural legacies and their “aftermaths” (CT 4.2 (2018)).

The question of whether to take the idea of the post-literary literally or metaphorically informs the CT narrative from its the beginning, but one can say that it has been gaining in urgency due to the double impact (or at least the belated realisation) of the transformations of print culture and of what one might call, following Richard Grusin, the “nonhuman turn” (in the humanities and possibly beyond). Already in CT 4.1 (2018), J. Hillis Miller’s repositioning towards “fiction’s ever more diverse affordances and reach” (CT 4.1: vi) spells out an “elsewhere” for literature that could be seen as both an explosion and an implosion. Fiction – for a long time almost monopolised and institutionalised by literature – has moved on, so to speak. This thought, whether the post-literary understood as fiction’s “passing on” is to be seen as literature’s disappearance or its completion is taken up by James Corby, first in a review in CT 4.3 (2018) and in a further developed article in CT 5.1 (2019). In “The *CounterText* Review: Post-Truth and the Post-Literary”, James Corby’s understanding of the post-literary has developed towards “the contemporary devolved and expanded field of the literary – the literary both in and beyond literature” (CT 4.3 (2018): 432). The move or the “vigorous spread of the literary [or Hillis’s “fiction”, one might add] beyond the traditional confines of ‘literature’”, or, indeed, “the growing absolutisation of the literary” (442), since its Romantic beginnings, reaches its

“completion” in contemporary “post-truth politics”. So, while the institution of literature might be in decline, the literary might see its complete triumph in an entirely affect-driven politics based on purely fictional or “mytho-poetic” claims. If one sees the post-literary as the completion of the literary under post-truth political conditions, the countertextual also begins to develop a new political meaning. Countertexts under post-literary-*cum*-post-truth conditions would be those (literary or fictional) texts that “disrupt the completion of the postliterary” and instead “resist this completion, articulating again the revitalising, interruptive question of literature” (CT 5.1 (2019): 64-65) – a hypothesis James Corby nevertheless goes on to relativise somewhat by reminding his readers of literature’s historical tendency towards “complicity” (66).

It can surely be said that the stakes have been raised significantly by and within *Countertext* within the past five years. Not least, because there is now another reason why the term post-literary might soon be taken literally, as the editorial in CT 5.1 (2019) explains. This latest inflection of the post-literary is discussed in Marija Grech’s “The *CounterText* Review: Nonhuman Writing, Nonhuman Reading – Towards a Post-Literary Anthropocene” (CT 5.2 (2019): 253-268). It arises from the question: “might there be a textuality that lies beyond the purview of human rhetoric, human language, and human thought?” (255). Posthumanism has been creeping up on the CT narrative, so to speak, and it is now opening out to its postanthropocentric conclusions: the countertextual, in the time of the Anthropocene, becomes “geological” – a text that has inscribed into it the possibility of existing without humans, a text not written by, for or even about humans. This would be a text that not in any way depends on the assurance of a human reader, a text “without” humans; a text that is either “ancestral” (in Meillassoux’s terms) or “futural”, in any case, beyond any anthropomorphisation. Surely, this must now be the ultimate horizon of the post-literary in the Anthropocene:

A non-metaphoric understanding of Anthropocene textuality and Anthropocene inscription invites us to ponder the possibility of a post-/non-literary post-/nonhuman writing and reading

of the earth that exists and will continue to exist beyond any human stratigraphic or literary practices, beyond any human reading, beyond any human-conceived epochs and narratives.

(CT 5.2 (2019): 264)

Writing ourselves out of the picture, in a combination of postanthropocentrism and posthumanism, does not of course solve any of problems humans have created, especially not the planetary ones at the moment, in what seems to be less and less “our” time. It is a very particular literature, based on a very specific notion of the (post)literary that currently speculates on “a world without us”. Maybe, so the idea goes, this would be the ultimate countertext – a text without humans, not in the sense of a text written by nonhuman forms of agency, which is something that happens all the time. Also not a text that is not destined towards a human reader (which means, not or no longer a letter, no longer anything arriving at any destination, no postal principle, no metaphysics), or simply code – not much new there either. Remains the question, however, of why at the looming degree zero of “literaturelessness” (still) cling on to literature, text, reading...?

All narratives only have temporary closures. Nothing is ever really ending until the ultimate (extra-diegetic) end. It is about how “we” want it to end. As this sketch of a tracking of how a journal develops and unfolds according to its own narrative basis it has given itself in its rationale might show, *CounterText* has come a long way – and long may it continue to flourish by adding twists and turns to the two powerful and strange attractors – the post-literary and the countertextual, caught up within their dialectic permutations – and the space it has chosen to map in between: the contemporary “field” of literature, its practices, institutionalisations, translations.

One thing comes with five years under one’s belt, and that is confidence, both in tone and decision-making. This is what I hear in the editorial of 5.2 (2019; the most recent issue at the time I write this) when the editors say, reassuringly and maybe also defiantly: “we publish only what we deem to be relevant to the question of the literary today, regardless of what form the piece might take” (CT 5.2

(2019): vi) – “from bold, risk-taking theoretical writing, to adroit critical analyses, to sharply perceptive essayistic reflections, to wide-ranging interviews and conversations, to review pieces that press further the question of the (post)literary, to ‘creative criticism’ that often ranges unfettered across all these categories” (v-vi). With this admirable programme now firmly in place, the future of criticism may already be here...

Notes:

¹ All references to editorials and articles in *CounterText* are given as CT volume, issue and page number. All CT editorials are signed by Ivan Callus and James Corby.

² The theme of “literaturelessness” is taken up again by Ivan Callus in CT 5.1 (2019): 89-113. Taking the “post-literary” literally, in this sense, by conjugating all possible meanings and implications of a time and a state of before, after, without literature or the “absence of the art of the word” will remain, as Ivan Callus announces a “serial exercise, which will require further episodes...” (111). My modest contribution is nothing but an extended footnote to the anxiety caused by “...Literaturelessness...”