On Engagement: A Postscript on Critical Practice in Times of Crisis

Sonja Pyykkö
Freie Universität Berlin

1 In the introduction, we highlighted the importance of detachment in cultivating a self-reflexive critical practice. Remaining self-reflexive, even self-critical, is doubly as important in times of crisis, which can make jumping to conclusions all too tempting, as the writers of *LARB*'s *Quarantine Files* also acknowledged: Rushed diagnoses, whether medical or cultural, are likely to do more harm than good, especially at moments of urgency. At the same time, it is in the nature of a crisis to refuse to be simply ignored but to insist upon engagement from those affected. Humanities scholars responding to the coronavirus pandemic find themselves embroiled in (at least) two crises at once: A global health crises draws our response from without, while the permanent crisis of the humanities—a compelling oxymoron, as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon have recently argued (1)—threatens our position within the academia. And this is not factoring in whatever personal crises—financial, emotional, physiological—scholars may or may not be experiencing, whether as a result of these global crises or independently of them.

2 If it is true that crises demand we engage with them, however inconvenient or unpleasant it may be for us, it is worthwhile considering what is meant by 'engagement' in the first place. For the purposes of this conclusion, I chose the word engagement intentionally for the specific type of proximity it entails: To engage 'in' something is to become involved in an activity from which it is difficult to break away—reading can be such an engrossing activity—whereas engaging 'with' someone or something requires establishing an intentional, meaningful connection with a person or a phenomenon. We are preconditioned to demand that others engage with us: newborn babies are barely out of the womb by the time they utter their first insistent demands. On the other

 DOI: 10.25364/27.2:2022.1.5

hand, when someone or something is demanding our engagement, refusing to comply is rarely a matter of indifference. Intentional disengagement from a prior engagement can be infuriating, devastating, even (or especially) when it is strategically wise.

3 Contained in every en-gage-ment still lurks the archaic meaning of "gage," to pledge an "object or one's life . . . as a guarantee of good faith" ("gage"). While engagements these days are somewhat more superficial, we still refer to 'previous engagements' as a way of saying that the reason for our failure to engage is an earlier promise, and speak of those who have pledged their lives to one another as 'engaged to be married.' Making an engagement is thus comparable to making a promise, a pledge, or an oath, all of which J. L. Austin discusses as examples of performative utterances in *How to Do Things with Words*. Unlike constative statements—I extrapolate based on Austin's lecture—performative utterances are inherently social: They imply a speaker acting in a world populated by others, with whom she makes (and breaks) engagements at will—in Austin's succinct phrase, "*our word is our bond*" (10; emphasis in original). As with oaths and promises, engagements also imply a legal or moral obligation to do as one says.

4 Based on these qualities, engagement seems a rather apt model for critical practice in times of crisis. Contrary to "attachment," which Rita Felski has recently been calling for as a means of overcoming the critical "detachment" and "aloofness" she had identified in *The Limits of Critique* (viii-x), modeling critical practice after engagement offers several benefits. An attachment implies the ability to detach at will, as Felski writes in her most recent book Hooked, which makes it more akin to "Velcro than superglue: connecting parts that move against each other, that can often be unhooked and rehooked" (3). The brief exposition above already shows that, even though engagement and attachment both describe a kind of connection, they imply very different types of contact: Attachment calls to mind the affective and the tactile, whereas engagement implies the ethical and the contractual. Whereas attachments can be made and unmade with little harm done, engagements are made for life and are therefore never frivolous or free of ethical implicature. While every engagement retains a shrapnel of 'gage,' whose most evocative symbol is the glove tossed on the ground as a challenge to a duel, critical engagements need not be combative or lead to deaths on either side. What they do need to be is serious, which does not mean, however, that they cannot also be playful.

5 Just as becoming engaged to be married is the opposite of hookup culture, proposing engagement as a model for critical practice is in many ways the opposite of Felski's call for attachment: Like a Velcro strip attaching to anything with a suitably porous surface, and detaching only to be reattached to the next favorably textured thing, attachment is free of deliberation—indeed,

as Felski acknowledges, attachments often operate on an unconscious level. Engagement, on the other hand, is not merely conscious but *self*-conscious. Just as one cannot make (or keep) a promise without conscious effort, one cannot go around engaging 'in' or 'with' things flippantly without considering the basis and future implications of each engagement. Understood, perhaps, as a specific *kind* of attachment, engagement may respond to an outward demand to engage, or it may result from an inward desire, obsession, even compulsion, which causes one to seek meaningful engagement 'in' or 'with' something or someone. Given the complex moral dimensions of engagement, it is not only a critic's moral duty to engage with the crises that require her engagement; keeping these engagements must also become a priority.

6 An unlikely champion of engagement, George Bataille, refers to us humans as "*discontinuous* beings" (12; emphasis in original)—his term for the condition of *being alone together* discussed in the introduction—which on a very basic level means that, as a species, our reproduction demands the presence of two distinct beings. Beyond this physiological discontinuity that we share with most vertebrates, Bataille argues, humans derive pleasure from conjoining independently of the reproductive drive. Bataille terms this pleasure "eroticism," which for him includes a physical as well as an emotional and a religious dimension. All three types of eroticism, Bataille argues, seek to "substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity" (15). The physical eroticism of sexuality, the emotional eroticism of intimacy, and the religious eroticism of transcendence, provide a powerful model for mapping the distinctly human modes of engagement discussed throughout this issue. More importantly, Bataille's eroticism also has potential as a model for critical practice. We recall that, decades before postcritics began lamenting the state of critique, Susan Sontag had demanded that in the "place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art" (14). As a model of critical engagement, Bataille's eroticism can overcome suspicious aloofness without falling into the trap of un-self-reflexive, egotistic, or unconscious attachment. Whereas engagement in the above-described Austinian sense can seem dry, duty-bound, and outmoded, eroticism offers a more tempting alternative to postcritical hookup culture à la Felski: A cultivated, intentional, and pleasurable practice, eroticism provides a model of engagement that is meaningful without being overly serious—a "quest," in Bataille's words (11), instead of a duel, but a pleasurable one.

7 Unlike attachment, whose practical applications remain somewhat opaque throughout *Hooked*, eroticism offers more than a buzzword or an abstract model for critical practice. The playful dynamic of eroticism offers a wealth of practical applications for the study of literature, as Peter Brooks argued already in *Reading for the Plot*. In this landmark volume, Brooks sets out answering

the same question as Felski and Sontag before her: How to find a way out of the dichotomy between strict formalism and the horizonless close reading of suspicious hermeneutics? His answer: Critics must learn to "read for the plot." As Brooks demonstrates with an inventive reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which becomes his "model for a 'textual erotics'" (37), reading for the plot requires a heightened awareness of the "text as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (xiv). Compared to the self-probing of postcritical attachment, Brooks's approach to textual erotics encourages engaging not primarily with one's own affects or attachments but with the work of literature itself, which should be studied with what Amanda Anderson, cited in the introduction to this issue, might call a carefully cultivated critical detachment. Combined with Bataillesque eroticism as a model for critical engagement, Brooks's method of textual erotics allows critics to engage in the work of elaboration, interpretation, and analysis without becoming either engulfed in the text or overriding its concerns with one's own—and to have fun while 'doing it.'

8 Erotic engagement may sound novel, even esoteric, as far as models for critical practice go, but if the essays in this issue are anything to go by, such an engagement constitutes an intuitive, even instinctive approach to works of literature. In *Play It as It Lays*, a self-destructive desire for textual and psychological fragmentation initially structures the novel, Didion's vision of intimacy going from dismal to abysmal in the course of a few hundred pages. By the end, Maria has become untethered not only from other people, after a psychotic episode has led her to being consigned in a mental institution, but from reality itself. Yet, as McKenna demonstrates, the novel insists upon a rereading, demanding that the reader return once more to the "affective fix" provided by the secular communion of the highway—undoubtedly a version of Bataille's religious eroticism. By contrast, the novels in Dirschauer's and Pyykkö's essays, Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Ma's *Severance*, seem intent on overcoming discontinuity through their own fictional forms: Like Didion, both depict emotionally and socially alienated subjects who at times court an almost Deleuzian level of schizoid disconnection. Yet, as the authors of these two essays demonstrate, neither Moshfegh nor Ma is content with allowing their protagonists to take up permanent residence in the fragmented state of dissolution where Didion abandons her protagonist: By the end of each of novel, some connection with reality has been re-established—and continuity, intimacy, and connection have become possible once more. Only by engaging with the internal tugs and pulls of "textual erotics" can the authors in this issue overcome the discontinuity of distinct beings and establish continuity, if momentarily, between themselves and the novels they interpret.

Works Cited

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things With Words.* Oxford UP, 1962.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality.* Translated by Mary Dalwood, City Lights Books, 1986.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative.* Vintage Books, 1985.

Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment.* The U of Chicago P, 2020.

---. *The Limits of Critique.* The U of Chicago P, 2015.

"Gage." *Oxford Dictionary of English.* 2020.

Reitter, Paul and Chad Wellmon. *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age.* The U of Chicago P, 2021.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation.* Vintage Books, 2007.

Biography

Sonja Pyykkö is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of North American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, where she is finalizing a dissertation on the poetics of confession in postmodern novels. She is spending the academic year 2021-2022 as a visiting scholar at Columbia University.