

EDITOR'S PICKS

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Five Books That Have Influenced Your Career:

- The Theory of the Novel (1916) by Georg Lukács
- The Art of the Novel (1986) by Milan Kundera
- Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (1957)* by Erich Auerbach
- Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (1928) by Owen Barfield
- The World, The Text, and The Critic (1983) by Edward Said

Although I primarily work on poetry, my initial venture into literary criticism was through criticism of the novel. As an undergraduate, Georg Lukács' philosophical approach to the novel (The Theory of the Novel) was revelatory for its treatment of historical change, and Milan Kundera's insight (The Art of the Novel) as a practitioner illuminated the importance of laughter and humor to a form that I naively thought was predominantly serious. When I reached graduate school, I became interested in the history of words and forms. Erich Auerbach's famous essay "Figura" changed my understanding of etymology as well as demonstrated the importance of language to critical interpretation. Much like his contemporary Russian Formalists, Owen Barfield (Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning) taught me that "strangeness" underlies the power of literature. As Barfield states in the last sentence of his penultimate chapter: "Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand; aesthetic imagination when we do." While Said's Orientalism looms large in any discussion of his work, it was his early collection of essays, The World, the Text, and the Critic, that opened my mind to new vistas of possibility. Said's central argument that texts are part of the world ("worldly") rather than simply "texts" ("textualism") found restatement in his late works as the concept of "critical humanism," a concept that honors and promotes an engagement rather than a retreat from the human.

*See also Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach (Princeton, 2014). This collection contains "Figura" as well as several other essays from the out-of-print Scenes from the Drama of European Literature.

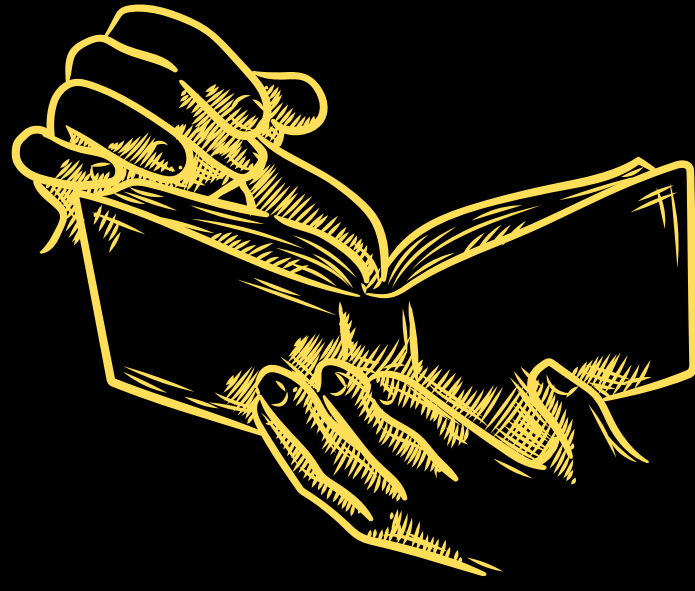


Five Critical Works That You Would Recommend To Our Readers

- The Topological Imagination: Spheres, Edges, and Islands (2016) by Angus Fletcher
- Spenserian Moments (2019) by Gordon Teskey
- What's the Use of Use: On the Uses of Use (2019) by Sara Ahmed
- Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form (2020) by Sianne Ngai
- The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space (2019) by Anna Kornbluh

Angus Fletcher's early work on allegory should be included in the first list, but his recent and last book (The Topological Imagination: Spheres, Edges, Islands) breaks new critical ground for our understanding of the imagination, specifically how the mind stretches, bends, and shapes reality. The Topological Imagination, moreover, extends Fletcher's pioneering work on the poetics of cognition, which argues that literature affords and embodies alternatives to the philosophical or scientific definition of thinking. One of Fletcher's disciples who has significantly contributed to the burgeoning field of cognitive poetics is Gordon Teskey. Although Teskey primarily focuses on Spenser and his contemporaries in Spenserian Moments, he nevertheless provides a provocative, comprehensive, and theoretical reading of what constitutes thinking in poetry that is germane to the discussion of poets outside of the early modern period, including Wordsworth, Stevens, Ingeborg Bachmann, and others. Drawing on thinkers across various disciplines, Teskey illuminates how poetry "is open to the otherness of the unknown." Poetic thinking does not seek answers, conclusions, or ends, but continually questions, meanders, as well as errs.

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My reading and understanding of Sara Ahmed's work, but in particular What's the Use: On the Uses of Use, is that she is the great cultural philologist of the twenty-first century. Not only does she "follow words around, in and out of their intellectual histories," she also interrogates "how word[s] are exercised, like a muscle, in everyday life." Ahmed, as in all of her work, turns a powerful lens on society, providing a critical lexicon to understand as well as change it.

Sianne Ngai's reconceptualization of aesthetics has reshaped the landscape of literary studies and reinvigorated Marxist literary criticism. In her newest publication, Theory of the Gimmick, Ngai not only extends her taxonomy of contemporary aesthetics (e.g., interesting, zany cute,) but also tackles a concept that has never received much critical analysis--the gimmick. Ngai's work deserves attention, and deep attention at that, because like Lukács, Adorno, Jameson, and to some extent Said, she demonstrates how form is socially conditioned, a "structured way of seeing."

Form is also the subject of Anna Kornbluh's groundbreaking study, The Order of Forms. Kornbluh's argues for a constructive view of form where form functions as a mode of modeling or thinking new possibilities into existence. Rather than the dominant view of form that "breaks down popular pleasures, dismantle[s] generalizations, and anatomize[s] domination," Kornbluh argues for an alternative idea of what she calls "form-thinking" or "political form" that builds, makes, and figures new realities.



Three (or Four) Books That You Are Looking Forward To Reading

- Some Versions of Pastoral and Structure of Complex Words (critical editions by Oxford, 2021) by William Empson
- Hooked: Art and Attachment (2020) by Rita Felski
- The New Science (2020) by Giambattista Vico (translated by Jason Taylor and Robert Miner)

I have always admired Rita Felski's work; one might even say that I have developed an "attachment," which is fitting, since her newest book, Hooked: Art and Attachment, addresses "how people connect to art and how art connects them to other things." I feel that Felski's trilogy, The Uses of Literature, The Limits of Critique, and Hooked, are important correctives to the ethos of why we teach and write.

William Empson's work has been critical to my development as a scholar of Renaissance literature. Although Some Versions has remained in print since it was published in 1935--mainly due to the efforts of New Directions--Structure of Complex Words has been out of print for several decades. Neither, however, has received a critical edition, which I eagerly await.

Everyone from Joyce and Derrida to Said and Harold Bloom has praised Vico's argument for poetic origins. This new translation is much needed and will hopefully bring Vico a new readership.