

Merve Emre Moveable Type Full Episode

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SPEAKERS

Oscar Wilkins, Sarah Edwards, Merve Emre,

Oscar Wilkins 00:12

Good evening and welcome to our event in conversation with Merve Emre. We'd like to thank you all for being here. It's wonderful to see so many faces. And of course, we'd like to thank Merve herself for taking the time to join us this evening to discuss her forthcoming book, post discipline, literature, professionalism, and the crisis of the humanities, and its relationship to her earlier work and writings. Our host this evening is Sarah Edwards, a PhD candidate here at UCL whose doctoral research explores the influence of the internet on contemporary feminist essayists and their readers. She is editor in chief of the journal Movable Type, and she has been the recipient of awards such as the Rossetti Prize and the TR hen prize for experimental literary critical writing. This evening, she is in conversation with Merve to discuss the practice of reading past and present. Merve Emre is an associate professor of English at the University of Oxford, and a truly prolific author of a rich and fascinating body of work. She traced the history of bad readers in peril literary the making of bad readers in postwar America experimented with literary critical form in the Ferranti letters and took a deep dive into the Myers Briggs and personality testing in the personality brokers, which was named one of the best books of 2018 by the New York Times last year, she published the annotated Mrs. Dalloway, which the Washington Post deemed as an invaluable adjunct to Woolf's haunting masterpiece. Now please put your hands together, and welcome to the stage, Sarah Edwards and Merve Emre.

Sarah Edwards 01:48

Thank you, again, so much for agreeing to do this. Really excited. Obviously, we were meant to meet back in January to talk about crisis. So really want to start there and pick up the conversation that yeah, was on pause for a while. I suppose. Yeah, let's start with post discipline. As I understand it, it's about the deterritorialization of literary pedagogy. And I'm wondering just for those in the audience who might not have come across you talking or writing about that topic before. And if you could begin by defining the crisis, and telling us a little bit about that project, and maybe even its origins.

Merve Emre 02:24

Well, so its origins, date back to when I was in graduate school. And I was on the job market, and was not very successful in the first year that I was on the job market. And I had, I don't know what to call him. He wasn't a boyfriend, but he wasn't an ex boyfriend. Exactly. So he, he was in business school at Stanford. And he said, you know, if you can't get a job, you can always come teach literature in the

business school at Stanford. And I said, Well, what are you talking about? And he said, the most popular class that we have here is called the moral leader, leadership and ethics through fiction. And I said, What on earth do you do in this class? And he sent me the syllabus, he sent me the assignments, and I started reading through them. And I started, you know, wondering why it was that these MBA students who almost certainly will not go on to write anything that we would consider literary, or they're much more likely to be writing business memos and emails and engaging in other forms of bureaucratic communication. And, you know, are likely only to read novels in their leisure time. Why was it that an array of novels, many of which we would identify as canonical novels, were being mobilised in this course in the school? And why were they yoked to that concept of moral leadership? So this, this was sort of the origin of the story of the of the project. And I suppose it came out of two related crises, the first being the crisis in the academic job market, although the question of whether or not we want to call that a crisis is an open question, I think, and the second being a kind of crisis in the purpose of literature departments, and what John Guillory would call the historical category of literature. So, what counts as literature, which institutions determine what it is that is considered literature, where does literature circulate? How is it received, who participates in conversation or in discourse about literature? So, that was the that was the kind of origin point as the project has developed, it has taken on a slightly different frame. I have been fascinated by the recent push toward interdisciplinarity transdisciplinarity, towards the disciplining or undisciplined thing, our discipline and this seems to me a recent phenomenon. And it seems to me within the discipline, the kind of inverse or the shadow phenomenon of teaching literature in schools of professional education. So the way to kind of couple, those two prongs of it might be to say that literature has been deterritorialized in two different kinds of ways. On the one hand, the study of literature is flourishing in schools of professional education, like business schools, like medical schools, like law schools, and on the other hand, departments of literature and the discipline of literature is inviting in other kinds of disciplinary methods and objects. And this seems to me to be the really interesting crossroads at which we find ourselves where there is a crisis, not only in the material conditions under which we profess literature, but also a crisis in that category of literature, of what it means to us and what it ought to mean to us going forward. Does that begin to answer your question? Yeah,

Sarah 06:04

it does. And it sketches out a lot of the places I want to go. So that's really brilliant. I suppose something that you just briefly alluded to is the weather crisis is even the appropriate word. Sometimes it is for some of these things. And that's something that I was keen to ask you about, what is it that makes sort of the crisis in humanities serious enough to warrant you know, being called a crisis? You know, what exactly is at stake? Do you think?

Merve Emre 06:29

So I don't know if the use of the term crisis is necessarily determined? Or let me say, I don't know if the appropriateness of the term crisis is necessarily determined by the seriousness of what we are facing. Because when I think of the etymology of crisis, I think of it as marking a kind of turning point two. So the question to me is more is what we are seeing in what I am calling the post discipline that deterritorialization of literary pedagogy. Does that mark a turning point in what we think of as the category of literature? Some people would say, No, so I'm thinking about Chad Wellman and Paul writers recent very excellent book called permanent crisis, which I would strongly encourage everybody

to read, in which writer and Wellman argue that the humanities, both as a kind of umbrella term, but also within each of its subdivisions. Its disciplinary subdivisions have always been marked by crisis since their inception. And writer and Wellman argue that they've been marked by crisis, because the kind of thinking that we do in the humanities is always going to be antagonistic to or allergic to the kind of bureaucratic routinized sped up on demand, I thinking or structure of modernity, and that this becomes increasingly clear to us under late capitalism, or under what some would call neoliberalism. So that would be the argument for why the humanities are in a kind of permanent crisis. I think that that's a very compelling claim of our coward is that people think about the humanities and the kinds of claims that they make for them the kind of values that they ascribe to the humanities. But I would insist that what we're seeing now is, is different. And I would turn to another thinker who I very much admire, the literary critic and sociologist of literature, John Guillory, who in his fantastic 1993 book, cultural capital, argues that, in fact, we are seeing a kind of terminal crisis of literary study, because to quote him, a line that I have sort of burned into the back of my brain, the new professional managerial class, which the university produces no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie. So that's a slightly different understanding of crisis, and it would ascribe to a kind of terminal point right that there will be in the very near future, perhaps already, literature will be a luxury that only very, very, very few people can afford to pursue against both Wellman and writer and against Guillory. I would argue that the reason I'm interested in the proliferation of literature in these ostensibly non literary institutions is because they signal that that crisis may not in fact, be terminal, that there are people who are finding a use and who are articulating value bearing rationales for literary study outside of the Literature Department. And those value bearing rationales may look really unfamiliar and even alarming to us. And in fact, to ally ourselves with them may feel like a kind of Faustian bargain on our end, ie what would it mean to use literature to teach the professional managerial elites of a business school now How to conduct themselves under situations of extremely high pressure. What would it mean to use literature to teach the professional managerial workers of medical institutions? How to Replace a concept of care labor, with an ethic of care? And so I think the question facing us is whether or not we want to look outside of literature departments to see how it is that we can imagine the crisis otherwise. And whether this is an opportunity for us to link up with those other kinds of institutions and their imagination of what it is that literature can do in the purposes to which it can be put, or whether this is a time to claim a kind of autonomy, or partial autonomy for the Literature Department that justifies and rationalizes its purpose contract, those other kinds of rationales of leadership, care, justice,

Sarah 11:04

etc. Yeah, over in moral ethical compass. Gunther

Merve Emre 11:08

Yeah, and really looking back to a moment in the early 20th century history of the institutionalisation of literary history of literary study, where, as Sean McCann argues, literature was both a discipline and an anti discipline, it would have a set of protocols, but it would also provide for a kind of therapeutic care of the self. And so the question becomes, do we want to ally ourselves with essentially elite practices of self care? In order to save what is a material materially flailing profession? Or are there different kinds of interpretive, a hermeneutic aesthetic political claims that we want to make within the Literature Department that are very deliberately unknowingly distanced from those other kinds of rationales?

Sarah 12:00

Yeah. So would you say, I mean, I suppose, who's feeling the effects of the crisis? Is it sort of just within the academy? Or is that kind of a limited way to think about it, you know, to the ramifications? Are they sort of felt in the broader society? So I

Merve Emre 12:15

would say that one way to frame the interest of the book, or the central question that the book raises, is why isn't that within the university literature has become so socially marginal, at the same time that outside the university, we are seeing a kind of explosion in people's engagements with literature, and in fact, a real broadening of the category of what literature can cover. And, you know, as someone who is interested in sort of experimental, new media forms, you must feel this acutely, too, that the kinds of forums and the media that you work with, fall under the auspices of literature, but there are not always people within universities who understand it as such, or can recognise it as such. So it seems to me that this is part of the crisis and the definition of the category of literature, which is how does literature as a kind of Codex bound verbal art is Guillory calls it come into contact with or have to renegotiate its status, visa vie all of these other new media forms, and visa vie all of these other systems of representation, which people now read in a highly literary way, like television, or the internet, but which do not seem to fall under the generic umbrella of literature, per se.

Sarah 13:34

Do you think that's sort of why that can be quite a lot of pushback? If you've got researchers presenting on tweets on forum pages?

Merve Emre 13:41

Do you feel like you've encountered that sorry, to turn the question over to you because you might be able to answer the

Sarah 13:46

judge, because if I'm interacting with people working on similar staff, then you know, the sample was a little bit skewed. But I did sort of have a conversation with a Journal recently, when I pitched them something, they came to me because they wanted something about the internet. And the essay was great. I know about the incidentally, so I can, I can work with that. And the first thing I pitched was thoroughly about essays published online, and then how they were edited for inclusion anthologies. And that was not literary enough. So what they actually did was for me to talk about writers who had published essay collections that could potentially have been influenced by the internet. But their authors, actually the one we set it on, has barely any presence on social media. So I found that quite strange, actually, even when it sort of felt like there was sort of a literary push behind proposing originally actually, it didn't quite fit under this sort of rubric. So I just sort of wonder, yeah, you've thought about that at all.

Merve Emre 14:49

Yeah, I mean, it comes down to how you think about that term literary. Right. So I know that there's at least one good bhakti anyone in the room. Who would who would tell us that that is It's not an it's not an ontological category right there, unlike what the deconstructionists would have us believe there is not a

concept of literary Enos that is grounded in something like the infinite potential, the infinite tropic potential of language, whatever, that what is called literature really varies from century to century. And it varies based on the kinds of institutions that consecrate it as such that teach people, this is literature, and this is not so the example of someone commissioning an essay, I think, is a really good example of that, right? Because journals are part of that ecosystem of institutions that regulate what it is that counts and does not count as literature. So, when an editor says, This is not literary enough, they are assuming a kind of socio historical position, they are weighing in on the concept of the literary in ways that they might not even realise that they are doing right. They might just have a sort of instinctive reaction to it and say, Oh, here's a tweet. It's not literary. Oh, here's something that was published in a blog. It's not literary. But behind that kind of judgement, is a whole sociological infrastructure that allows them to make that judgement relatively uncritically. It sounds like. And so, yeah, I think that pushback can always itself be read symptomatically as what are the conditions under which someone feels authorised to make a claim about the appropriateness or the inappropriateness of an object as literary? What are the what are the assumptions about how things circulate how they're received, how they're read, how they're produced, how they're responded to, that allow for that judgement to be to be made?

Sarah 16:52

Yeah, that's brilliant. Right? Okay, when next, and now

Merve Emre 16:55

you have a response to that editor is down. I mean, the other thing, sorry, the reason I invoked Bakhtin was because I was just thinking about how, in fact, in the concept of literary language that comes out of Bakhtin is that the literary is what is produced at the intersection of a certain set of old recalcitrant discourses, and newer, evolving discourses. And it seems to me that social media is kind of the perfect example of where those new evolving discourses might be and how they might come into contact with, and especially how they might come into antagonistic contact with older discourses of the literary as Codex bound, as regulated by the classroom as enjoying a kind of AI. AI, is there being certain limits to who can comment on it, which the internet really does a good job of levelling. Yeah. So it seems like that would be you know, the project that you're working on? Seems like it would be the perfect place to think about some of these questions of what counts as the literary. Yeah, absolutely.

Sarah 18:12

I mean, this, this was going to work well. Brilliant. So I had a little bit of insight into this just before everyone finished arriving. So I kind of know that I think the answer is gonna go, but I've got to ask again. So in 2015, you were one of the editors for the Los Angeles Review of Books, series new crisis, which took a look at sort of the state of literary and critical thinking in the 21st century specifically. And I was rereading the introduction to this series when I was preparing for the span. And Caleb Smith, in his introduction suggested that critics lost their way when they lost touch with the classics, that they made the wrong political commitments, that their writing become ugly and sort of jargon ridden, and that they end up justifying austerity measures. And the part that really stood out to me most from his introduction, sort of thinking about crisis was his suggestion that the crisis was the effect of economic and administrative decisions and not a failure of ideas. So I was really interested in that language of austerity and administration, economics, political commitments, because it does sort of evoke that

precarity of the arts of, you know, literature departments, especially in the UK, especially now. So I wonder if that resonates with your conception of crisis now?

Merve Emre 19:33

Yeah. So I think about this, I was thinking about that I can't remember which. I can't remember which institution it was that recently fired or announced its plans to let go have its medievalists and early modernist and to replace them with people working in new media and Critical Race studies in the creative industries. And part of the really productive his rationale was, well, we have been told that mediaeval studies and early modern studies are bastions of white supremacy and misogyny. And so isn't it, in fact, more progressive for us to be replacing those earlier periods with these more kind of industry facing extra institutional roles? So I think that there are two responses to that. Right? The first response would be to say, look, administrations are going to look to justify things in whatever way that they can. And ultimately, there was nothing any English professor could have done. In order to prevent that from happening, they were going to latch on to the most convenient kinds of political justifications that they could find, to do something that is essentially, you know, that is that is that is politically quite harmful. Right. So that's one reaction to have. The other reaction to have, and I should say, just from the outset that I don't know what I think about these two things. So I'm just offering this to you as another way to think about it. Another reaction to have would be to say what Hillary does and cultural capital, which is that it was a mistake for the left to see the definition of cultural capital to the right. And the instead of sort of systematically producing rationales that could be seized on by administrations to gut our own labour and our own labour conditions, we should have been coming up with stronger justifications for an integrated curriculum. Like I said, I don't know what I think of those, I think I probably err more on the side of the former than the latter. But I do think that one thing that is missing in much of the conversation about literary study is some concept of an integrated curriculum is some concept of general education is some concept of why it is that people should read a really broad array of texts that is not yoked to any kind of presentist political or social justification. And I don't think that this would have changed anything that admin administrations did or are doing, right. But I wonder what the profession itself would look like if people weren't so eager to say things like, well, you know, only 12 People read what I write anyway. So why does it matter? You know, what would it look like if we made stronger claims to speaking to a general audience or stronger claims to speaking to a larger public as opposed to speaking within a very kind of narrow professional? Yeah, I institutional? I, arena of listeners, yeah. Have you found

Sarah 22:51

any syllabuses kind of like those that you describe? They're not necessarily you know, within a university, it could be a different kind of setup, I just wonder how you get Do you know, of any space once synthesis

Merve Emre 23:01

is one of the things that's actually fascinating to me about doing the project on literary study and professional school. So part of the project that I've been working on with my really wonderful research assistant, Haley, Haley Toth is that we've actually created a syllabus database, where we have written to the people who teach courses in all of these professional schools and ask them to fill out a questionnaire and also ask them to send us their syllabi. And so this database is about to we're about

to release it and make it open access so that people that are interested in literary sociology can work with it. And we are doing some more I'm not Haley is doing some, you know, text mining data analysis on that syllabus to see what comes out of it. And one of the things that I've noticed just from reading across those syllabi, is how extraordinarily wide ranging they are that most of the syllabi for instance, in for instance, the moral leader class starts with the ancient Greeks and goes to Ishiguro and I can't imagine teaching a class that starts with the ancient Greeks and goes to Ishiguro I would say the same thing is true of the medical humanities courses, they have an incredibly, incredibly wide range. And what's fascinating to me about it is because they have different value, bearing rationales for why they're doing what they're doing. They don't have to justify their syllabi on the basis of, say, an area. I'm teaching you literature in English from 1830 to 1910, as I do to my students at Oxford, right? They don't have to justify it based on an area on a particular language or on a time period. So it's very interesting to think about how our whole profession how our whole pedagogy might be organised differently if we essentially hadn't become what Edward Saeed in his 2001 essay of return to Philology, called at technocratic specialists in either period, or language or nation or increasingly in method. And I wonder what it might look like, for instance, to have undergraduate education that was organised not around the English language. I mean, this is something I've been thinking about a lot since working with the international Booker prize is, you know, what would it look like if we no longer had departments that were so invested in English as the language as the umbrella term under which all their literature had to be gathered? What would it look like if we brought back some of the sub disciplinary initiatives that were basically weeded out of literary study with its professionalisation in the 20th century? So for instance, Philology, or oratory, or even grammar? What would it look like to go back to the trivium in some way, and try to explore that for mass education, as opposed to for very, very, very small groups of people. And I think that these initiatives are actually imaginable within other nations university systems, and other nations primary and secondary educational systems, right, because you can't really reimagine the university without reimagining primary and secondary education. And when I think about the way things are organised in, for instance, the province of Quebec, because I taught at McGill for a little bit, or when I think about how things are organised in Germany, I there are other models for organising the study of literature that I do not think run into the same kinds of problems that ours do. But they also require a much stronger democratic socialist state with a much stronger commitment to education at every single level. Yeah. So those problems of you know, the organisation of the university and the organisation of the state are always going to feed one another.

Sarah 26:59

Yeah. I'm thinking about that sort of database. You've now Oh, yes. All those different courses. I think you've come back. Is it the moral leader, you've come back to a couple of times was that before?

Merve Emre 27:10

Oh, yes. Just because that's, you know, attached? Because you know, it's connected to this ex boyfriend, not ex boyfriend. Coming back to that? Yeah. No, I

Sarah 27:18

was just wondering whether any courses that really stood out, you know, as like a good potential model

Merve Emre 27:24

I don't know if they're good potential models. I mean, what stands out for me are the courses that have kind of seated all of the other courses. So for instance, the moral leader originated at the Harvard Business School in the 70s with a guy named Robert Coles that some of you may or may not know, he was a physician. He was very close friends with Walker Percy and William Carlos Williams. In fact, Walker Percy's last novel is dedicated to Robert Coles. He was a kind of Kennedy liberal, he wrote the cover story for The Atlantic on Ruby Bridges. And he was extremely interested in using literature to teach ethics and morality. And so his course is kind of the blueprint for all of the other moral leader courses which exist in almost every business school in the United States right now. I, I am interested in how Rita Charon at the Columbia University started the whole field of narrative medicine in the United States, and how her readings of Henry James, have seated the rise of what Narrative Medicine imagines itself to be doing across across the US and how this is, in fact, coming back into literature departments as a possible model of thinking about intersubjectivity and inter subjective ethics. And in law schools, there are those kind of big founding textbooks of long literature that were put together by Boyd White and others in the 1970s at the University of Michigan, and have really served as the basis for how those courses are imagined. So I would say less that they're doing something right or something that we should be emulating, and more that there are fairly structured models for what's happening elsewhere. Such that lest we want to think about the Literature Department as being the centre of a kind of disciplined practice of, you know, hermeneutic or, you know, interpretive activity, and everything else is being it's kind of undisciplined or chaotic other. And this is the argument of my first book, as well. Really, yeah.

Sarah 29:35

Yeah, gosh, that's really interesting. I just need to go off-piste moment Narrative Medicine. Please tell me more.

Merve Emre 29:42

Well, has anyone who isn't Does anyone here work in medical humanities? Because usually when I talk about this stuff, there's at least one person who had who does Yes,

29:50

but a little bit and we now research group with those with that and in competency in Madrid, yeah. The Domino's English Yeah, it's basically what you said that it was done in Colombia. And the idea was to bring the humanities based approach to the Sahel region and kind of vice versa as well. Yes, exactly. They

Merve Emre 30:14

can encounter. Exactly. You know, I think that's really right. And that that encounter is modelled on the patient doctor encounter, right. So a lot of what is stressed in Rita Charon's work, for instance, is how is it that people learn to pay attention? How is it that doctors learned to pay attention to their patients? How is it that they learn to essentially construct narrative out of being given what appears to be information? How is it that thought and feeling can be reconciled in those encounters? And Henry James becomes an important figure in figuring this out, in part, because I imagine, because so many James novels are centered around these massively complicated moments of inter subjective thinking, right? I'm thinking that you're thinking what I'm thinking about you. And so that becomes a really

interesting model to try to work out what it is that happens in any kind of interaction where someone is supposed to be telling someone else, but has any kind of hesitation, or any kind of scruples about telling them something directly. So I find that fascinating, and I find it fascinating when I said it's coming back into literature. Dorothy Hall, who's at the University of Berkeley, has just written a book, the name of which is escaping me, but that I'm going to Google and tell you right now, because it's on my desk, and I can see the cover. And for some reason, I can't remember. I can't remember the title of the novel and new ethics, the novel and new ethics, whose final chapter has a reading of Chiron, and of what Chiron is, is doing. And you know, Hale is ultimately trying to kind of counter or say that, you know, Taryn isn't really reading Henry James correctly. But that seems to me like a less interesting claim than what it is that you have to believe literature is or what it's good for, in order to read Henry James the way that Sharon does, and in fact, in order to institutionalise an entire kind of sub field of literary study around that practice of reading around that kind of ethical intersubjective imagination. Yeah,

Sarah 32:30

that's really interesting. Do you think a lot of those courses are around sort of the moral and ethical is that sort of what you take away from most of them?

Merve Emre 32:37

I think they I think they are around the moral, the moral, the ethical. I mean, increasingly, I think a lot of the courses that are in law schools are around the around questions of political around questions of justice, and how it is that we enact justice, how it is that literature gives us a certain set of interpretive tools in order to be able to draw distinctions, very kind of fine grained distinctions when we are thinking about who is deserving of what. And and I think that, you know, one thing I would say is that I am not at all, I have no qualms at all, with using literature to think about ethics, or to think about morality, or to think about justice. In fact, I sort of wish more people did that. The question becomes, how are those ideas yoked to or how were they grounded in larger institutional, and social contexts that make it possible for only certain kinds of people to do that sort of thinking about what the literary offers? And maybe I would say that the flip side of all of this, and one of the reasons that I brought up the 92nd Street Y when we were speaking earlier, is that I think at the same time that you see the concentration of a certain kind of literary ethical thinking among the elites of the professional managerial class, you're also seeing these really interesting and important initiatives that are trying to broaden access to that kind of ethical and therapeutic thinking. So programmes like the 92nd Street Y that are bringing literature to working class, to members of the working class that are offering continuing education or adult education classes are one example of that. Another example of it might be prison literacy initiatives, which are, you know, really sort of taking off on the east and west coasts of the of the US. And there's a really wonderful book that I would recommend that everyone read called reading with Patrick, that is memoir by a woman who went to do a programme called TFA Teach for America, which is very popular in the US where they basically take utterly unqualified college graduates and put them in school systems that don't have enough teachers. It's a really sort of disaster like well intentioned, but fairly disastrous setup. But it starts with this woman participant. Sitting in TFA, and then learning that one of her students has been imprisoned, and she starts visiting him in prison to read with him. And so it's a really kind of fascinating and I think troubling look at what it means to try to expand that essentially, liberal humanist therapeutic understanding of literature at the sight of liberalism's most spectacular failure, which is the carceral state, right, which is the prison system. And so these are the

contradictions in each of these programmes that I'm that I'm interested in, which is, what does it mean to take these values that I think are, you know, essentially, I yield really productive and rich and philosophically sound a rigorous readings, and yoke them to these particular institutional contexts? What contradictions arise there in?

Sarah 35:45

Yeah, to kind of push for a little bit more, because I'm thinking about the political settings, obviously, when you've got the aims of the course. But within the political settings of an institution, I was drawn to something that I rediscovered recently when you were writing about this sort of managerial early, for modernism's modernity. And to quote you to you sorry. You've written one must not retreat from the operations of power, even if they make new and more troubling forms of inequality visible, only then can we begin to reassert the specific importance of what we do now, why we do it. And I wonder, from your point of view, what some of those operations of power might be?

Merve Emre 36:26

Oh, I think that was just to answer the complaint that I had been getting when I was giving talks on those professional schools. You know, why should we care about what's happening in those professional schools? Yeah, when they are the people who will go on to administer our lives, and to make our lives more, to make our lives harder, and it makes it harder for us to do our jobs and deny us resources and deny us lines? Why is it that we should care about that particular class of readers if we want anything to change? And my argument would simply be that I think that that allows us to understand what it is or allows us or forces us to articulate what it is that we want to do differently if we don't want to just train the professional managerial class, which is what essentially we're doing when we teach English, right? So I think about where you are within a certain segment of higher education. That's what we're doing when we teach English. So when I think about my own students, what are they going to go on to be most of them are probably going to go be management consultants or something even though they're getting English degrees, right? They're going to work in industry, they're going to, you know, be managers. If, if those aren't the kinds of people that we want to produce, what is it that we need to be doing? So actually, the second half of the book, which I'm finishing now, is interested in some of those sub disciplinary categories that I was mentioning earlier. So there's a chapter on Philology, there's a chapter on grammar and there's a chapter on oratory are persuasiveness more generally. And one of the things I'm interested in is how there is a class of literary workers that wants us to sit at the heart of the discipline before it was thoroughly professionalised, who had been pushed to the margins of it. And I'm thinking about people who teach language as opposed to those who teach literature. I'm thinking about people who teach composition, as opposed to people who teach literature. I'm even interested in people who are brought in to teach, say, journalism, or public writing, as opposed to those tenured professors who teach literature. And part of what I wonder in the second half of the book is what would it look like if the kinds of labourers whose work was deemed merely preparatory, or menial or separate secretarial? Were actually brought back into the fold? And if those that kind of labour was valued equally, with the valid with the labour of, of literary education? And one thing, it seems to me that it would do is that I mean, one fact, just to point out is that the majority of those kinds of workers are women. One thing it seems like it would do is it would have a kind of feminist politics baked into it, that you are no longer treating language education, for instance, as the as something that happens prior to being given your proper higher order literary education. So I'm interested in how we

can make kind of smaller political claims for what happens within the discipline by rethinking the structure of the discipline because you can't really solve the problem of neoliberalism. And you can't solve problems of austerity and you can't like eliminate the Republicans or the Tory party, right? Without being willing to, you know, engage in acts of considerable violence. So I'm not advocating. But it seems to me like what you can do is think about what happens within a department within a discipline, and how intellectual labour has its own set of politics, and how you can, on some smaller level address those, so you're not just doing more of the same. Yeah. And it seems valuable to me to not do more of the same.

Sarah 40:29

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I find that interesting. I mean, you touched on it just then that you sort of used to get complaints when you sort of present on this sort of thing. And I think you've written about it as well, I think he wants talked about in an article somewhere, someone in the audience kind of laughing at sort of learning about these forces. As if these forces kind of delivered like a, I don't know, a deficit model, like they were teaching bad readers. It was a bad experience of literature. And I wonder from the other side, like, what is it? They would Faraday's, you know, the the laughing people in the audience? What is it that they would prioritise for getting out of literature? Do you think?

Merve Emre 41:05

Well, I don't think they know, because I think that laughter is a kind of knee jerk response. Right. And it's like, look at how shallow that reading is. Look at how untutored it is, look at how uncritical it is. But sometimes I just wonder what they think is happening in their own classrooms. Like I mean, not to not to knock on my own students, but it takes a considerable amount of energy as a teacher, right, to try to get people to produce real thought that about their literary objects. And it's not at all clear to me, that the people who read outside of the literature classroom are reading any worse than the people who read within it. Yeah. Because the one thing that you can't do when you teach right is like, actually sit over your students shoulders and be like, What do you think of that word? Why is it like that? You know, like, you can do it a little bit in class, but you can't be there with them. And students read in all sorts of ways in our classrooms that we also do and that we try to disavow. So I do think that that laughter is usually if I were being psychoanalytic about it, I would say that that laughter is usually an act of projection of our own untutored, uncritical and professionalised habits onto the others, that we may expel them from ourselves and treat ourselves as these sort of hyper professional readers. Although I would say that what's interesting to me now is that I feel like that figure, the spectre of the immature is making a kind of comeback. But people are eager to try to revalue and revalue, arise all kinds of practices of amateur reading of fandom of *Biblia philia*. And I find that to be an interesting counter to the kind of hyper professionalisation of the 80s 90s and early aughts. And I think that that is a kind of counter that we could also read as speaking to these larger, contextual institutional issues, which is to say, like, if people can't get hired for being very good professionals, if you do everything that you're supposed to do, and you have all the credentials that you have, and you still can't make a living, doing the job that you've been training to do, then what what incentive is there to be a professional? Right, you may as well be an amateur. And we may as well embrace all of the discourses that orbit the figure of the amateur, or perhaps more generously the figure of the generalist, which is opposed to the figure of the specialist. Yeah. Do you have a sense sort of

Sarah 43:45

what a bad reader is? Obviously, you sort of talked about this before you've written about it before. But I wonder within the context of this conversation, and it looks a little bit different, you know, on the reason post has been bad readers, I've been trying to say

Merve Emre 43:58

no, no, I only you know, in my first book, I used that term in a very tongue in cheek way, right? I mean, the whole idea is sort of what I just said that people project their own uncritical tendencies onto others and make them the bad in order for the person doing the projection to be the good. So I would say that in many ways, this project post discipline is a kind of continuation of my first book, in which I am interested in seeing how I how reading practices that exist outside of the literature classroom have these very kind of well worked out very systematic I practices attend attached to them. So yeah, I think I think you know, with the caveat that that term is very tongue in cheek. Yes, I think that they are bad readers by, by by those standards, but laughter is what is Yeah, giveaway. Yeah.

Sarah 44:51

So it's sort of the I mean, this the whole discussion really is always haunted by a good reader, sort of visual of what the good readers should be and what the bad reader should be, I suppose Yeah, I

Merve Emre 45:00

mean, maybe one thing to just say is like I have I have been, like increasingly stunned by the fact that many academics I know seem to be embracing not reading, which, you know, is is is really stunning to me. And and this is maybe where that earlier question we were talking about Sarah about the interface of social media with other practices of reading and writing becomes interesting. Because I'm always I have a I have a chapter on not reading actually in this book. And I have a kind of contrarian friend, every time he sees an academic tweet something about like, look at this article, I'm not reading it, but it's a piece of shit, you know, he sends it to me. And so I have this kind of auxiliary database with my post discipline database of academics pronouncing judgments on things that they haven't even read yet, which seems to me this unbelievably anti intellectual exercise. And I can't wrap my mind around it like what does it mean, to devalue the intellectual work like the bedrock of what it is that we do, in order to make a certain set usually, of political and social claims. And the most popular version of this that I can think of that I'm sure many people will be familiar with, is, you know, how almost every year some article comes out, about a woman not reading David Foster Wallace. And I cannot I cannot understand this for the for the life of me why it is that people who are in our profession would pronounce judgments on things prior to reading them. And in fact, what I'm increasingly seeing is people claiming this as a kind of pedagogical imperative that what we teach graduate students to do is to make judgments about things having only read, say, the introduction to the book, and I am stunned by this. I am really, really stunned by this. I think it's so so so dangerous. And so maybe that those are who I would identify as like truly bad readers, not in a tongue in cheek way at all our people who just don't do the reading, but have an opinion about it. And you've all everyone's had a student like that in class, right? The guy who's just like, raising his hand all the time, and you just know, he hasn't read a single word of the novel in front of him, but somehow that's actually become a kind of politically validated, oppositional stance for our colleagues to assume. And it is so wrong. Yeah, those such judgments. Yep, definitely, I should have saved that for the q&a. That's my most polemical, my most polemical belief is that people

should read things. You know it because sorry, let me just say one more thing about that, because because in some ways, like the ability to read is itself such a marker of a particular kind of privilege, right? And what we often don't consider when we have any of these debates about what we read, or how we read is that they're always happening within this bubble of literacy of people who can read write, and you think about everybody, all the classes of people that exist outside of that bubble of literacy. And you think, what does it mean to be proud of not reading something in a world where people still do not have access to the basic means of literacy? And why are we so narrow in thinking about these things? And one answer to that surely has to be that these debates are so rooted in the university, that literacy is already presupposed. But were we to think more going back to what I was saying about an integrated curriculum, where we as university educators to actually speak to secondary school teachers, to primary school teachers, were we to think of our work as coextensive with theirs, then I think the conversations we have about literacy, about reading and not reading, how to read how not to read would be utterly different. And also, we would have a much, much, much stronger labour coalition. I think.

Sarah 49:07

I want to sort of go on a tangent, yes, I see your time running away from me. I want to ask about your feminist thinking. Because obviously, we've mentioned once in future feminist and I wonder, does this influence to the way you think about bad views the way you think about post discipline? Like I'm getting the sense it does, actually, when you're when you're starting to talk about it more? Yeah. But it's just because I've seen your writing before questions about sort of how women's colleges taught students like Mary McCarthy, Jacqueline Kennedy to read novels and and also questions about Fulbright Scholars. So yeah, I'd really love to just give you an opportunity to Yeah, well, what

Merve Emre 49:43

you can probably tell us like speaking about the second half of the book is that feminism is ultimately for me a question of labour, that you really can't think about a feminist politics within the institution of the university without thinking of labour and without thinking of the way A that on the one hand, certain kinds of labour are coded as feminised labour, ie emotional labour. And, and second, how certain kinds of labour are becoming increasingly feminised, by which I mean, as the great critics, Yan knight would have it, that certain kinds of labour are being devalued, such that they increasingly resemble the unwaged work that's performed within the household. And this is why the example I kept coming back to when I was talking about the second half of the book was language education. Because who is it that's often tasked with teaching children how to speak mothers, and they are not compensated for that in any way. And so I find a kind of analogue here to the way that language educators University are increasingly women are increasingly adjunct to fight or casualized labour and are increasingly a poorly compensated for the work that they do. And the novel that I think actually brings this logic to light in the most brilliant way. And the novel that is the kind of heart of that chapter in the book is helander wits, marvellous novel, The Last Samurai, which if you haven't read, I would strongly, strongly strongly urge everybody to read. It is a, I think, the best novel of the 21st century so far. And has anyone read it here? One person? Okay, good. Okay. So I'll just tell you how it's structured. It's about a woman who goes to Oxford to get a PhD. And She fakes all of her references, and She fakes grades, and she wastes all of her time studying Arabic and Aramaic, and all of these different languages. And she has a son whose paternity is unknown at the beginning of the novel named Ludo. And Ludo is a kind of

polymath of a boy because she teaches him Greek, she teaches him Japanese, she teaches him Norwegian and she teaches him all of this while also working as a secretary, or working as a kind of adjunct labourer, typing up these back issues of some kind of scientific trade magazine so that she can make money. And what's extraordinary is that that devalued work of being a typist of working for, you know, 10 cents an hour or whatever ridiculous Summit is that she's working as is takes place in the household alongside her teaching her son, how to speak all of these different languages, so that he may have access to a particular kind of literacy a particular kind of language. The ultimate irony of all of this being that within the modern university, there's actually really no place for a polymath like Ludo, who knows everything but refuses to specialise in anything, right. And that novel, I think, really brilliantly excavates the logic that I'm the logic that I'm talking about in that chapter of the book, and the kind of feminist thinking about language and labour, and language and disciplinarity are language, labour and disciplinarity, labour and specialisation, that is key to the second half of the book. When we're thinking, when we're thinking for the next chapter, I'm just gonna say, no, no, you got me in a row, the next chapter of the book, the author at the heart of that or the form at the heart of that is the short, short story. So Lydia Davis, is at the heart of that, and Lydia Davis, her stories are so interested in what it means to be a woman who teaches grammar in universities, right what it means to be a woman who teaches translation, and because of teaching translation has to teach grammar, and what it means that grammar is, in the words of Paul de mon, the kind of sub literary cousin to rhetoric, and Davis's stories are all interested in actually using grammar or in asserting grammar as the basis of literary Enos rather than rhetoric and showing how grammar lends itself to precisely that kind of domani and tropane. And thus, undercuts any claim to rhetoric being the basis of liberal literary in the first place. And that is also 100%, about a certain kind of feminised labour in the university, the teaching of grammar and composition. So those are the two examples that I would give to you. And again, if you haven't read hell into it, and if you haven't read Lydia Davis, you must, must, must, must must.

Sarah 54:19

And Lydia Davis has those very, very short stories as well. So very easy.

Merve Emre 54:24

Yes, very easy. In fact, one of my favourite videos of my son my younger son was when he was two years old, we had him memorise Lydia David's short stories. And there's one called, like, on the phone with mother, and it's two sentences and it's Gainesville. It's too bad your cousin is dead. And so there's a really great video of my two year old son just looking at the camera on Gainesville. Hi, Turkish dad. So you know, it's all it all it's all ultimately really all criticism is Otto biographical. Fantastic. Yeah,

Sarah 55:04

I'm hearing you talk about sort of, sort of typing up manuscripts, for instance, makes me think about them taking Stanaway Yeah, I'm not mistaken. You did time.

Merve Emre 55:13

I did take that up the entire thing. I did type it up.

Sarah 55:15

Yeah. So were you were you were told then

Merve Emre 55:17

they asked me to do Middlemarch and I was like

Sarah 55:28

I'm wanting to sort of was, were you thinking about labour as you were sort of undertaking that? I mean, it's a very different kind I imagined.

Merve Emre 55:34

Well, so I started working on that when? March 2020. Right. So I was thinking of labour I, in part because our children were home from school. My husband and I were both still working. And we had to split the day very evenly into four hour chunks. So one of us would work for four hours in the morning, and the other would work for four hours in the afternoon. And so I was thinking about labour and very much the way that de Witt's character Sibella, in *The Last Samurai* is thinking about labour, which is like really dividing up the hour. And thinking about imposing a wage where one does not exist. Although in my case, I was thinking about it really more in terms of like imposing word counts, where they did not exist before. So I would think, okay, in four hours, I can type up 10 pages, I can type up and I can annotate 10 pages. And if I can type up and annotate 10 pages a day, then I can be done with a first draft of this in, you know, 20 days, although it 20 working days, right. And then I can go over it. And I can you know, allocate those four hours to different kinds of tasks like editing, and revising, finding images for the book, doing all of the work that's required to produce this kind of annotated edition. So yes, that was very much part of what I was thinking about. And it's interesting because your projects don't always come together conceptually in that kind of way. But the annotated Mrs. LOA came together with that chapter on, on philology and language and the kind of menial secretarial work of transcription, translation, annotation, etc, etc.

Sarah 57:29

Yeah. Did you end up writing about the process at all? In?

Merve Emre 57:33

No, I didn't. I mean, I speak about it. I speak about it a little bit. I think in the intro, there's a kind of passing joke like, you know, I said, I would take the manuscript to myself. Actually, well, I you know, I am doing a piece right now for *pmla* that's on producing that annotated edition, and where we can find the traces of a certain kind of physiological labour in the academy today. And so I imagine some of it will appear there, but no, I haven't. I haven't written about it, in part because I don't know if other fields other people feel that this way. But like those four months, from, you know, March to July of 2020, are just kind of a blur for me, and a blur of having to always be on, either always working or always doing child care. And I find that when you're always on, it's actually hard to remember what you were doing. Yeah. You know, in any sort of intense, pristine way. Yeah.

Sarah 58:33

In an interview of public books, you'd mentioned how you hope the book *The many books at once*, I don't think I'm misquoting that, I think it was many books at one end, a book with some sort of scholarly impetus, but also like a coffee table book. And I really liked that because it felt you know, before it came

out, I didn't really know what to expect. And it felt sort of almost removed from your other work. But actually, it sounds like there kind of is like a conceptual thread that can be linked between the annotator, Mrs Dalloway, and, and your other writing. But I was interested in that sort of tug and pull between the creation of attacks that might not feel scholarly to an audience, but also, something that kind of anticipates readers who kind of, I don't know usually, like a using really approaches that some academics might think of as sort of, almost, you know, within the institution, like subject specific, discipline specific. And I wonder, do you recognise that toing and froing? Is it sort of is it sort of there? Did

Merve Emre 59:35

you manage? Yeah, no, actually. Yeah, no, I'm very I'm very happy with it. I really, I think it's, you know, first of all, I should just say it's a gorgeous artefact, and that is do as much to the designers at Norton as it is to anything that I did. And I think it really has made me think differently about what it is a book can do. I mean, in part, the real The nice, the really nice aspect about the reception of that book for me is just how many people are going back to the novel to read it. And I think that, you know, I don't know, I mean, I think that what you're identifying is just a kind of tension that marks everything that I do now, and that I'm always thinking about, which is how much does one commit to the profession of the scholar? And how much does one try to create something that only you and you alone, authorise as a critic. And I think that when, you know, when I look at it trying to figure out how to say this in a way that isn't throwing, you know, I don't want to come off as I'm I don't want to criticise other scholars, right. i i. And I certainly don't want to suggest that what I'm doing is the only is, you know, the only way to do something. But I do think that many scholars tend to accept their audiences as built in. So when I mentioned earlier, the kind of moaning that I often hear from people, well, only 12 People read our work anyway. Right? I wonder if we have become a little bit too complacent with that assumption. And if there are ways to switch up our genres, such that 12 People can become 128 or 12 people can become 12,000 or 12, people can become 12 million. And I wonder, to what degree our professional apparatuses are actually scholarly, and to what degree they are merely professional. And I think that that is not something that we often think about. Yeah. So I have been, you know, that's just to say, Absolutely, I feel that tension, I feel that to and fro we were I think it is formally visible, or stylistically visible in the book is that the introduction is a very kind of humanist introduction, whereas the footnotes are quite citational. And that's one place where I feel that tension. But also, you know, one thing I was thinking was, well, what's the difference between what an introduction does and what a footnote does, right? An introduction is supposed to just get people interested and pull them in and offer them some way to orient themselves what they're thinking what they're feeling to this novel. Whereas a footnote is supposed to give people who want more information, be that historical, be it interpretive, be it fill illogical Edom, illogical, is supposed to give those people more information so that they can learn more. And so it seems like they're serving two different functions, and can be made to do that work of toing and froing, within a single object. Yeah,

Sarah 1:03:00

I know we have to wrap up. But I want to go back to something you said there about complacency and sort of shirking complacency and maybe think about futures for reading very briefly, because I was just thinking, I mean, you've experimented with collective criticism that is the Ferranti letters, where you sort of have letters between you and three other critics. And, I mean, that sort of does take literary criticism

sort of, out of the kind of stuffy, potentially stuffy. You know, literary critical books we might be quite used to, and puts it in a format that suddenly feels very, very accessible. And I was also thinking, you know, you've talked about sort of sociological methods and how those might actually open up the subject, like a new future. So I suppose yeah, this is sort of where I'm coming from. And I'm wondering, you know, what you think sort of future of reading could look like do say what it should do? Or or? Well,

Merve Emre 1:03:55

gosh, that's such an impossible, such an impossible question. I mean, the pessimist in me would say that really, we are simply going to dwindle institutionally and materially to the point where there will be a handful of elite institutions where wealthy people can go study literature, and that will be it. And perhaps countermanding, that there will be a burgeoning extra institutional public sphere for a certain kind of generalist. Something between an amateur and a professional study of literature. You know, the more optimistic part of me believes that if we address non professional readers, in terms that are challenging but not condescending, there are inroads that our criticism can make and that it can be done As Jaron Marcus says, it can be scholarly without being academic. And so I've been thinking about this a lot, because I'm working on another book at the same time called Love and other useless pursuits. And I'm finishing up a chapter right now that's on Emerson and garota. And that's interested in the idea of love as a kind of aesthetic education. So Emerson has this great short essay called Love, in which he basically articulates how it is that falling passionately, in love, teaches you how to be the ideal Conte and subject of aesthetic judgement, and teaches you how to be seduced by charm, and then how to transcend charm through the use of your reason, to become a kind of disinterested, reasoning subject. And he wants to kind of yoke the history of aesthetics to the history of love as Kant himself does in his polemical essay conjectures on the beginning of human history. And so I've been working on kind of unravelling this argument that Emerson makes, and that he's kind of stealing from elsewhere. And what I've been trying to figure out is like, okay, how can you make these fairly complicated arguments about American Transcendentalism and German Idealism on the one hand, but also just like Link it to stuff that everybody has felt? Right? So how do we understand the fact that you can be super, super super attracted to a person for about like, eight to 10 months? And then get bored? Very quickly, and like ethically, what do you do about that? Right? How do you understand why it is that even years and years and years after a breakup, thinking about those initial moments of meeting a person can still take on that kind of golden pristine charge to it, even if at the same time, you can think Well, I never want to be there again. Right. So you know, there are certain basic issues that I think literature is very good at addressing among them, you know, love, death, faith, family, ethics, morality, justice, etc, all of those things that we've already discussed. And I think that there is a kind of avenue for criticism to orient itself to those questions in such a way that it remains philosophically insightful. But it does not have to remain insular. But like I said, that is me at my most optimistic, and I don't always feel optimistic. And maybe we can leave it on that. Yeah, I

Sarah 1:07:45

I think that's a good place to end and very much looking forward to that book. Thank you so much.

Emre Thank you for your wonderful questions