



## Abstracts

### 10 July: Writers as Political Activists

#### **Simon Morgan: “Disability, Authorship and Political Radicalism in the Life and Poetry of James Vernon of South Molton”**

This paper explores the intersection between disability and literary political radicalism in early Victorian Britain through the life and work of disabled Chartist poet, James Vernon of South Molton. Studies of Chartist poetry and song have multiplied in recent years, while the role of poetic composition in the political careers of major Chartist leaders such as Ernest Jones and Thomas Cooper is now well appreciated. By contrast, Vernon was an obscure individual with little or no standing in the wider movement and certainly did not fit the profile of a rebel against the status quo. As a wheelchair user living in a small market town remote from the urban-industrial epicentres of Chartism, he was dependent on local patronage for his day-to-day survival. It is therefore remarkable that he risked his patrons’ displeasure by publishing 24 poems in the poetry columns of the Chartist *Northern Star* from 26 September 1840 to 29 January 1842, ten of which appeared in his only known collection of verse, *The Afflicted Muse* (1842). Although not strictly speaking a ‘celebrity’, Vernon arguably used his literary aspirations to increase his own ‘attention capital’ for various purposes: first within his immediate community in order to leverage patronage by performing the role of ‘deserving’ poverty; secondly in an effort to emancipate himself from this humiliating dependency by accessing a wider audience through the *Northern Star*. He is therefore an excellent case study for exploring the potentials and limitations of literary activism as a strategy for self-actualisation and empowerment.

#### **Divya A: “The Art of Jeyamohan’s ‘Aram’ (2011): Ethics of Writers, Divinities, and Celebrity Narratives”**

B. Jeyamohan’s “Aram” written in Tamil – the title can be translated as “virtue” or “ethics” – is a classic tale of justice meted out to a needy and deserving man of letters in a small town in Tamil Nadu, India, in the nineteen fifties. “Aram” is a crucial literary piece that traces the position and cultural function of the regional writer in this southern state since the Indian independence. My paper highlights migrations across domains such as literary celebrity, politics, and activism in relation to Indian author-activists such as Rabindranath Tagore,

Subramania Bharathi, and Arundhati Roy. I specifically probe the relation between Jeyamohan's fictional narrative "Aram" and the discourse surrounding his public persona to throw light on the relationship between his writing and the affirmation of the cultural status-quo that privileges the majority religion, the higher caste, and the male. I also illustrate how the field intersections of writing and cultural activism are inflected in problematic ways through the lens of caste and gender. Premised as a conversation between two writers – an older writer and the contemporary literary celebrity Jeyamohan – the purportedly biographical "Aram" performs the regressive ideological work of establishing the socio-cultural supremacy of the higher caste in the domain of letters. By affirming the righteousness of the writer in structural ways, Jeyamohan defends the figure as a triumphant cultural sign that reiterates the values of a largely feudal, caste-based, and gender-biased society. This regional trajectory thus remains distinct from transnational and international celebrity narratives that largely revolve around the cause of the truly marginalized.

### **Odile Heynders: "Cultural Authority in the Democratic Public Sphere: Rethinking Literary Authors' Positions and Practices"**

Today, many people experience the public spheres in Western societies as confusing, over-emotional and too much influenced by fake information and the spectacle of social media. Democracy is said to be in danger. Scholars have discussed "the crisis of liberal democracy" (Yasha Mounk 2018), the "against democracy" statement – ignorant people should not make fateful decisions on complex issues, which is why voting is not a good procedure (Jason Brennan 2016) – and even the "end of democracy" (Runciman 2018). We can watch one of the oldest European democracies crumbling to pieces, with the main actor promoting the "people against the Parliament" reasoning (*Financial Times*, 26 September 2019).

The main claim of this paper is that in fragmented public spheres in which there is more information available than ever before, we need public intellectuals as spokespersons, who are able to unentangle fake from real, obsession from observation, nostalgia from rationality, immediate reaction from retrospective thinking. In this paper, first Peter Pomerantsev's *This is not Propaganda* (2019) is discussed and related to the idea that institutions, media, and politicians should take care of the regulation of the public debate. This paper subsequently considers the specific role that public intellectuals could play in serving the people by explaining how political discussions get muddy and manipulative. The concept of 'cultural authority' will be reconsidered. Finally, this paper will discuss the work of literary author Valeria Luiselli and consider her interventions regarding issues of migration in the Trump era.

## **17 July: Literary-Political Networks and Organisations**

### **Ellen Wiles: "Live at the Polari Salon: Literary Performance as Activism"**

In this webinar I will talk about literary performance at Polari, an LGBTQ+ literary salon, and discuss how it functions as a form of political activism. Live literature events have become central to literary culture in the digitalizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but have been largely neglected by scholars until recently, and are often viewed by the publishing industry as mere vehicles for book sales and publicity. Through ethnographic research at contemporary literary events, I have revealed that the experience of literary performance has powerful effects on participants which shape their notions of value, identity, and community.

### **Benedict Schofield: "From 'Engaged Authors' to 'Engaged Citizens'? Transnational Literary-Political Networks and the Future of Europe Debate (A.L. Kennedy, Robert Menasse, Katrin Röggla, and Ali Smith)"**

What happens to our understanding of authorship – in theory, and as an actual practice – when literary writers engage with politics? How do authors develop a political voice both within their

fiction, but also beyond it in their public self-fashioning as authors, and in the transnational literary-political networks they form to sustain their political activism? My paper addresses these questions with reference to the Scottish authors A.L. Kennedy and Ali Smith, and the Austrian authors Katrin Röggla and Robert Menasse. I argue that for these writers, the fracture of Europe not only prompts a literary reflection of the European crisis, but active interventions into political discourse. This increasingly public performance of engaged authorship, however, also requires authors to adopt roles beyond those of the purely “literary”: Röggla as Vice President of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, creating a network of pro-European artistic institutions, and increasingly leading on street protests; Smith’s public engagement with charities and politicians; Menasse in his self-stylisation as the “moral conscience of Europe”; and Kennedy in her already multifaceted “performance” of authorship across literary works, stand-up, and journalism. My paper assesses how these authors reflect explicitly on these shifts in their authorial role and responsibility, and how these intersect across borders: in Kennedy and Röggla’s exchange of letters on European political authorship; in the reflections on authorial co-creation in Smith’s Brexit-inspired *Seasonal Quartet*; and in Menasse’s attempt to fashion a new form of “engaged” European authorship as both an existential commitment, and a dynamic political activity.

## 21 August: Female Authorship and Activism

### **Anna Paluchowska-Messing: “No ‘mere passive spectactress’: Frances Burney and the Engagement of the Eighteenth-Century Writer in Politics”**

In 1793, Frances Burney, then already an acclaimed novelist, published a pamphlet entitled *Brief Reflections Relative to The Emigrant French Clergy*, the purpose of which was to raise funds for the French Catholic émigrés to Britain in the aftermath of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror.

Slim though the *Reflections* are, their publication marked for Burney a bold step out of her usual comfort zone of prescribed femininity. By openly engaging in activism, she was acknowledging her own celebrity status, the authority it generated, and her willingness to use it if required. None of these, of course, harmonized too well with the model of retired respectability she generally assumed in public. In order to preserve the image of a proper lady therefore, Burney performed in the pamphlet and its preface a considerable feat of rhetorical acrobatics. In the process, she redefined both the acceptable boundaries of feminine interest in public matters and the very concept of politics, and that without seemingly questioning either. As a result, the women she envisaged in the *Reflections* were no “mere passive spectactresses of the moral as well as of the political oeconomy of human life” and yet they retained their female delicacy intact.

This paper explores the *Reflections* and other passages in Burney’s texts where her struggle with such dilemmas is most visible. Though it is often apparent that she saw her writing as a means of entering socio-political debates, it is also clear that she understood well that by deploying her reputational capital beyond the sphere of literature she risked damaging or forfeiting it entirely.

### **Eva Sage Gordon: “Nellie Bly and Fanny Fern: Fame in the Gendered 19th Century”**

To be a woman and to write for publication in nineteenth-century America was a high wire act of gender subversion and self-protection few could manage. Aside from the difficulty of breaking into a male-controlled industry, the very notion of existing as a public figure went against expectations of feminine life in the nineteenth century – expectations involving marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and a quiet existence in the private sphere. Yet the public label of “celebrity” afforded some select women a path through which to transgress social boundaries of feminine acceptability and enter the world through their writing.

Focusing on Nellie Bly and Fanny Fern, New York City-based female journalists who achieved considerable fame writing under pseudonyms and delicately balanced their reputations in private with their public notoriety, this paper looks at two nineteenth-century progressions in the United States – the rise of celebrity culture, and the rise of female journalists – to explore ways in which the cloak of celebrity status affected gender norms in the period.

Engaging with recent work on nineteenth-century literary celebrity by Bonnie Carr O'Neill and Loren Glass and periodical studies by Karen Roggenkamp and David Haven Blake, this paper explores the centrality of perceived intimacy and a collaborative identity construction between the celebrity and the viewing (or reading) audience. Noting several contributions to early celebrity culture, including technological advancements, the role of professional authorship, and the rise in daily penny newspapers, this paper specifically examines the possibilities embedded in celebrity culture for transgressive gender performances by female writers.

## **28 August: Authorial Border-Crossings and Freedom of Speech**

### **Kieran Hazzard: “James Silk Buckingham: Celebrity Anti-Colonial Campaigner”**

James Silk Buckingham was by turns a traveller, adventurer, writer, newspaper editor, political activist, and MP. He shot to fame in 1823 after being banished from India by the East India Company. As a writer and editor in India he had constantly attacked the inequity and violence of Company rule, and, despite his property being seized and being sent into exile, refused to be silenced. On his return to Britain he was received as a Radical martyr, gaining friends and patrons from prominent Whigs and Radicals looking to reform not just British government but that of the British Empire.

My paper will show how Buckingham carefully cultivated his own newly found celebrity and connections, first to take on the Company in court, and then to found a new journal to savage them in print. Buckingham was also a serious networker and self-promoter, gaining many influential political and literary friends, whose works he would champion and publish, and who in return would support Buckingham's causes.

These causes were many, starting with the campaign against the East India Company, but soon encompassing advocacy of improved working conditions, electoral reform, education and temperance. Many of these he took on the road in speaking tours across Britain and then America. He would eventually become an MP for Sheffield to bring his campaigning to the centre of power. Despite, or perhaps because, of this, he faced an extremely hostile reception in Parliament and in the Tory press, with most his schemes being thwarted in his own lifetime.

### **Elisa Bizzotto: “Vernon Lee: Female Celebrity Activism across Cultures”**

As a well-known English writer living in Italy, though cosmopolitan by education, Vernon Lee (1856-1935) enjoyed a transnational celebrity status that enabled her to participate in many contemporary discourses. Brilliant and assertive, she became well-connected within European circles of artists and intellectuals and was perceived as exceptional, especially from the perspective of turn-of-the-century Italian culture, in which women seldom made their voices publicly heard. In Italy in particular, she stood out not only for her international affiliations, but also as an eccentric blue-stocking who discussed current topics of debate with important establishment figures. Lee exploited the public recognition she enjoyed for the purpose of campaigning against, or in favour of, certain issues. In 1897, for instance, she wrote letters to newspapers to lament the planned demolition of the medieval centre of Florence. Although familiar to Lee's culture of origin since the eighteenth century, the 'letter to the editor' was an unusual form of protest in Italy which she successfully adapted to local needs and circumstances. This social activism firmly established her as a voice of protest and placed her

in the limelight in her chosen country of residence. During and after WW1, when she left Italy for England, Lee employed analogous forms of literary activism to support global pacifist campaigns. My paper will consider how and how effectively these later texts took up Lee's previous strategies of socio-political commitment, empowered through her celebrity status, and spread them beyond Italy.

### **Hyei Jin Kim: "Authorial Rights as Human Rights: Negotiating the Idea of the Writer between PEN International and UNESCO"**

This paper explores the complex relations between PEN International, its long-time, multistate partner UNESCO, and the figure of writer in literary activism. While PEN does use the cultural capital of celebrity writers when defending free expression, the organisation, as this paper shows, also promotes an idea of the writer as a human rights icon, particularly when engaging with UNESCO. As PEN gradually prioritised the defence of the imprisoned writers in 1960s, it depicted the writer as a symbol of struggle against the state, focusing on making free expression and linguistic diversity central to its activist endeavours. I locate this figure of the writer in its 'Declaration of the Rights of the Writer' (1977), a lesser known statement which PEN imagined as a 'complement' to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It attempted to persuade the UN and UNESCO to adopt it as well but without success. This failure, I argue, not only reveals the difference between non-governmental and multistate organisations but also forms a telling contrast to the 'Poets Behind Bars' section in PEN International, PEN's official magazine funded by UNESCO. From 1982, the section regularly featured writings by imprisoned writers from around the world, enabling PEN to promote its activism to its Centres, to a wider readership, and to UNESCO. By examining these cases, the paper overall highlights the role cultural institutions play in shaping public ideas of 'the writer'.

## **25 September: Authorship and Authority**

### **Tore Rem: "On Behalf of the Nation: Knut Hamsun and the Politics of Authorship"**

'He was a warrior, a warrior for humanity and a preacher of the gospel of justice for all nations.' These words appeared in an obituary of Adolf Hitler, published on the front page of the biggest Norwegian newspaper, *Aftenposten*, on 7 May 1945, and they were written by Knut Hamsun (1859-1952). How did Hamsun, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and European celebrity, end up here?

In this paper, I will be looking at the peculiarly national conditions for Hamsun's authorial role. At the end of the nineteenth century, as Hamsun came into his own as a writer, Norway, and Scandinavia more generally, were experiencing a moment in which its national literatures entered world literature. The status of writers was exceptional. At the same time, Norwegian society mobilised its writers in the struggle for national independence.

Initially, Hamsun responded with satire at what he considered the false and inflated authority of writers in his own nation. I will examine why, as well as when and how, Hamsun's attitudes changed. I will also sketch the significance of Hamsun's growing celebrity for his understanding of his own role, including the Nobel Prize and his enormous success in Germany. Finally, I will briefly look at how Hamsun tried to renegotiate his authorial role, as well as his political past, in his memoir *On Overgrown Paths* (1949).

### **Foteini Dimirouli: "Can Dead Poets Speak Back?: C.P. Cavafy in Cold War Propaganda"**

C.P. Cavafy has enjoyed widespread acclaim in the West for his anti-establishment poetics. From the early-twentieth century to the present day, authors, intellectuals, and journalists broadly affiliated with the Left have at once produced his canonical status and set his work to the service of their own ideas. However, the Greek-Alexandrian poet's longstanding reputation as a voice for the marginalized or powerless has obscured his parallel appropriation by the

Right, both in Greece and abroad, especially during the time of the Greek Dictatorship. Unlike the Greek poet and Nobel Laureate George Seferis, who publicly spoke out against the Junta on the BBC, Cavafy had been dead for thirty years by the time army colonels seized power in 1967. Free from a potential intervention by its author, Cavafy's poetry entered the arena of Cold-War politics in unpredictable ways, appearing in the Colonel's official propaganda, as well as in anti-communist publications overseas.

The ways in which both pro- and anti-establishment agents converted Cavafy into a cipher for ideological warfare in the late 60s and early 70s offset this paper's exploration of the autonomy of art and its ability to resist certain forms of cooption. Drawing on sources as varied as the left-leaning *The New York Review of Books* and the Greek dictatorship's official defense of its reactionary doctrine, *The Ideology of the Revolution*, this paper embarks from Cavafy's celebrity status to raise questions about the cooption of literary authority for political ends – questions that come into clearer focus when the artist is no longer able to speak on behalf of the art.

### **Margaret Scarborough: "Socrates Goes to the Moon: the Late, Democratic Pasolini"**

By the time of his murder in 1975, Italian poet, filmmaker, and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini had been a notorious and prominent figure in Italy for decades. Immensely successful, the celebrity director of internationally acclaimed films was also a repeat target of censorship and anti-homosexual discrimination in Italy. My paper examines Pasolini's development from the 1960s onwards as a vocal political theorist and activist. I discuss the ways he propounds and practices, in diverse media, a distinct vision of direct participatory democracy, and problematizes the nexus of authority and authorship in his own person and work.

I begin by examining Pasolini's journalist writings, his turn to theatre in 1965, and his engagement with artistic prizes as small-scale experiences of democracy, honing in on his desire to become a modern Socrates. With his "theatre of the word," for instance, Pasolini tries to restore theatre as an experience of Athenian democracy, a venue to represent and debate prevalent social issues. Similarly, in his newspaper columns and participation in roundtables, he makes the personal political, commenting on current events, dialoguing with readers, and offering private meditations. Then, I discuss late work where Pasolini thematizes a poetic return to, and abandonment of, his prior authorial identities, painting himself as a Socratic fool modeled on Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, to argue that while he clings to art, he envisions it as a therapeutic practice of cultivating a "democracy of the self." I explore the recuperation of this final self-image in Abel Ferrara's 2014 film *Pasolini*.