But who are all these journal articles for? Writing, reading and our unhandsome condition

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of academic research in the Humanities. It questions whether such scholarship has been instrumentalised to a narrowly individualistic, short-termist and action-orientated pursuit – whether, in simpler terms, there is too much writing and not enough reading. In the first part of the paper, the authors argue that such instrumentalisation is evident in the very language we use; we speak of research 'outputs', research 'impacts' and research 'targets', and all of these terms position Humanist scholarship closer to archery than human understanding. In the second part of the paper, Mahon and Henry foreground particularly the relationship between scholarship and silence as well as the importance of close and careful *reading*. Throughout the paper, the authors draw on the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stanley Cavell in order to highlight a more edifying framework for research in the Humanities – one that might resist the darker impulses of a marketised academy.

Introduction

> Sometimes I was so tired and so sad that I would lock my office door, turn off the light and lie on the floor. I felt like I was being smothered with a blanket of anxiety. The smallest tasks felt like they would defeat me and I beat myself up for the tiniest mistake. I looked at other people, who didn't seem to be drowning like I was, and wondered how they did it. When a colleague told me that she began her research work at 9pm, after the kids were in bed, I didn't feel pity for her – I was jealous of her discipline. (Pine, 2018, p. 175)

This is the moment in Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self* where months and years of academic overwork have culminated in debilitating anxiety and depression. A senior lecturer in a department of English, Drama and Film, Pine recounts in *Self* how she had been struggling in particular with the ongoing demands of multiple research projects and high-budget grant applications. 'I strategized and consulted and drafted and redrafted until I thought my brain would melt,' she writes. 'I don't really blame the austerity-hit university for trying to turn its employees into revenue hunters and, as a consequence, sucking us dry. Well, okay I do' (Pine, 2018, pp. 175–179).

The specific university Pine is referring to here is University College Dublin which, in the discourses of Higher Education, at least, is a place more usually associated with the polemical writings of John Henry Newman – specifically his mid Victorian-era text, *The Idea of a University*. History scholar Jaroslav Pelikan has described Newman's text as 'the most important treatise on the idea of the university ever written in any language' (Pelikan, 1992, p. 9) and certainly the canonical status of *Idea* is undisputed. It can be difficult to imagine any substantial debate on liberal education that does not at some point invoke Newman's text. At the heart of Newman's writing is an emphasis on the university as a place of concourse and co-operation where, in supportive and collegial environs, thoughtful teachers and researchers experiment with the boundaries of their expert knowledge. They embark on purposeful speculation and intellectual adventure. They share ambitions for technical expertise as well as reasoned judgement. And, in Newman's idealistic account at least, these scholars and teachers gift to the university its defining character as a vital and ventilating intellectual space 'where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge' (Newman, 1996).

Our purpose in juxtaposing the two texts given here, one published in 2018 and the other originally written in 1852, is to highlight a rather large gap between ideal and reality. Although both are concerned with the academic and the university, Newman's vision of multiple minds colliding in the untrammelled pursuit of knowledge and wisdom contrasts sharply with the spent and solitary figure of Pine, lying in the dark on her office floor. Newman imagines in his public lectures a liberal ideal where the life of the mind is dialogical and co-operative, but captured in Pine's more candid prose is a neoliberal reality where contemporary academic research is *monological*, competitive, anxiety-ridden and solitary. Indeed, while acknowledging the canonical status of *Idea*, critics still question the relevance of this text to an increasingly diverse and complex institution. Newman's ideal of the university is 'peculiarly contentless', according to Stefan Collini (2012, p. 50). It is hard to see what role (if any) such devotional or fantastical language might have in contemporary contexts, at least if we are intent on facing up to the many difficult realities or 'darknesses' of Higher Education (Bengsten & Barnett, 2017).

In this article we want to push further on these contrasting images of the university scholar and their intellectual work. We begin from a sense of dissatisfaction with our current norms of writing and publishing and with the subsequent proliferation of academic research neither justified nor justifiable. In the simplest terms we ask: Who are all these journal articles for? Why do we expend so much in writing them and so little on reading the work of others? How if at all does this proliferation and commodification of research speak to the core values of the liberal university? What this paper tries to unravel, then, are the multiple ways in which contemporary practices of academic authorship have deviated from the university's founding ideals and it is therefore concerned with the potentially *darker* side of research activity. Bearing in mind the opening image from Pine's essay, it explores whether contemporary scholarship has indeed been instrumentalised to a narrowly individualistic, short-termist and action-orientated pursuit.

In making particular reference to this commodification of the scholarly life, we position our discussion within broader critiques of the neoliberal university. We begin with an exploration of what research in the humanities is (or might be, or should be), and go on to explore alternative images of the contemplative life as these are embodied in the work of the American philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stanley Cavell. Our overarching aim is to explore philosophically the related concepts of thinking, reading and writing in the Humanities.

Section I: productivity, performance and 'aversive thinking'

We begin with an etymological consideration. The English verb 'to research' has its roots in the Middle French *recercher* (meaning 'to seek out, or to search closely') which goes back to the Latin *circare* (meaning 'go about, wander, traverse'), itself rooted in *circus* (meaning 'circle'). The common idea here is of research as a cognitive or intellectual roaming around; implicit are notions of open, circular or certainly non-linear exploration.

This etymology is interesting when we consider the prevalent discourses surrounding academic research in our contemporary moment. We speak of research 'outputs', research 'impacts' and research 'targets'; we write of 'grant acquisition' and 'grant capture'. Funding bodies require increasingly detailed outlines of all aspects of the research process, requesting information on 'tasks', 'phases', 'milestones' and 'deliverables', with project scheduling tools like Gantt charts increasingly present in the humanistic as well as the scientific disciplines. As Anne Pirrie argues in her excellent book, *Virtue and the Quiet Art of Scholarship*, the prevailing idea that research is a predictable, plannable and controllable activity is inscribed further in our Teaching and Learning requirements that our graduate students supply plans and methodologies as soon as possible and that at regular intervals they demonstrate their achievement of key milestones to their peers, their supervisors and their doctoral panels (Pirrie, 2018).

Conceptualised in this way as linear and mechanistic, the empiricist bias of contemporary scholarship is increasingly evident in university planning and strategy documents. Emphasis is placed on 'new knowledge', 'new solutions', 'frontier research' and 'research intensity'. 'Research' as a driving term is rarely uncoupled from its partner terms, 'innovation' or 'excellence'. At a departmental level, such empiricist bias is particularly evident in Schools of Education where similar discourses are prevalent and where intellectual/strategic alignments are increasingly made not with the Humanities but with the Social Sciences. 'Talk of "research" makes it easy', write Conroy and Smith, 'to forget that, in the context of Education, non-empirical disciplines such as philosophy count as research as can mixed disciplines such as sociology or history' (Conroy & Smith, 2017, p. 701). Indeed, fluency in these same discourses makes it increasingly difficult to understand or appreciate literary, philosophical or cognate modes of scholarship because our university vocabularies are simply skewed against the non-empirical. They are skewed against the evaluation of cultural or literary texts in slow or reflective ways, for example, or the critique of familiar orthodoxies in ongoing reading or interpretation of ideas and cultures. Indeed, in contemporary university parlance, the term 'reading' is rarely mentioned at all.

As Stefan Collini has pointed out, research in the Humanities is less about producing knowledge or influencing policy and more about human insight or understanding. One of the consequences of insisting on this distinction, he writes,

> is the recognition that whereas knowledge is seen as in some sense objective, 'out there', a pile or hoard that exists whether anyone is tending it or not and which any suitably energetic person can climb to the top of, understanding is a human activity that depends in part upon the qualities of the understander. (Collini, 2012, p. 77)

In the context of the humanities, then, *judgement* plays a central role. As Collini's alternative emphasis on human insight and judgement counters the empiricist bias of contemporary research, he argues further that academic publication is not always a matter of new findings or new theories. Rather, in his own words, 'it is often the expression of a deepened understanding which some individual has acquired, through much reading, discussion, and reflection, on a topic which has been in some sense "known" for many generations' (Collini, 2012, p. 77).

Bearing Collini's insights in mind, there seems then to be a serious mismatch between the conceptualisation and the practice of academic research. What scholars in the Humanities actually *do* – thinking, reading and writing – is rarely reflected in university or even departmental parlance. Discursive priority is given instead to performance, to output, to innovation and to excellence – to 'developing capability in research analytics' in the terms of UCD's latest strategy document, so that 'research performance expectations will be set and performance will be measured' (UCD Strategy, 2019).

In order to offer a fresh perspective on these discourses of productivity and performance, we turn now to the work of Stanley Cavell. Cavell is an interesting figure to involve in these conversations, not least because of his own uneasiness as a professional academic in a department of philosophy in the mid- to late- twentieth century. Cavell was uncomfortable particularly with the label 'philosopher' being given too easily, or sometimes not easily enough, and central to his extensive oeuvre is an ongoing intellectual effort to win back the label for those who had been wilfully denied. For Cavell, this involved in practice not only a reclamation of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as founding philosophical voices of the American tradition, but a reconsideration of usually overlooked cultural and literary texts as having profound philosophical significance – the melodramas and comedies of 1930s Hollywood being perhaps the most unlikely example.

For Cavell, the term 'philosophy' and 'philosopher' had to be won back in every encounter because philosophy as a discipline exists in a modernist condition. When it comes to modernist works of art there is simply no stable authority to help us distinguish between the authentic and the fake (think of Duchamp's *Fountain* or John Cage's *4′33″*) and Cavell underlines in a similar manner the lack of stable authority or stable discourse for the procedures of philosophy. There is no special domain for philosophy, he urges, no 'special class of persons to be called philosophers, who possess and are elevated by a special class or degree of knowledge' (Cavell, 1989, p. 161). Any attempt to distinguish between the genuine and the not-so-genuine can never reliably get off the ground because appeals to a fixed or stable authority are groundless. Philosophy exists, in other words, in a condition highly susceptible to fraudulence. As he expands:

the persistent threat to philosophy is not, or not alone, irrationality (in the form of bias or superstition or fanaticism, any of which argumentation can serve) but fraudulent serious-ness, call this sophistry, born with philosophy, as it were its envious (because despised) twin. I take Nietzsche's call for joyfulness, following Emerson's, and Austin's and Wittgenstein's punctual hilarities, as expressible of the irreducible vulnerability of philosophy to false seriousness. (Cavell, 2005, p. 168)

The implicit suggestion here is that philosophy must continuously question and con-tinuously re-affirm its own identity. Because of its vulnerability to 'false seriousness' it must constantly account and answer for its existence and for its development. In practice, for Cavell at least, this is a matter of accepting responsibility for one's use of philosophical language, of realising what is at stake every time one expresses oneself philosophically, and of not taking philosophical expression for granted. Cavell makes a similar point when writing of philosophical authority: 'Philosophical authority is non-transferable [...] each claim to speak for philosophy must earn that authority for itself' (Cavell, 1989, p. 19).

Given his sensitivities to the labels 'philosophy' and 'philosopher', it is perhaps unsurprising that Cavell resists in general the professionalisation of the university. Recounting the reaction to his first books (*Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The World Viewed* as well as *The Senses of Walden*), he ventures with painful honesty that his intellectual offerings 'were treated more like thefts' (Cavell, 2010, p. 497), that within his own professional community, 'I had the unmistakeable sense of having said hello a number of times without anyone saying hello back' (p. 521). He had elaborated at an earlier point: 'The writing had cost me something, in such a way, perhaps, that it has to, and should, cost the reader something. I did not feel that I wished to make my reader pay a price' (p. 442). It is hard to know exactly what to make of these words. Implicit at least is Cavell's acknowledgement of his work as viewed publicly as in some way incomprehen-sible, even inexpressive. He has from his earliest papers been acutely aware of the perception of his writing as professionally maverick if not downright scandalous.

Certainly, there is something of the old-fashioned – the quaint, the romantic, the embarrassingly over-eager – to Cavell's work, something perhaps more in sympathy with the nineteenth-century writers he admires rather than with his own contemporaries. Eldridge and Rhie have written of 'the curious air of untimeliness' (Eldridge & Rhie, 2011, p. 5) to Cavell's work, and certainly he has always been an uneasy fit with the professional philosophy of academic departments. Michael Fischer has understood the risks and performativities of Cavell's work as the philosopher's idiosyncratic attempt to critique the university while still publishing work that is meaningful for those within it. Cavell 'continues his conversation with academic philosophy without any guarantee of institu-tional impact', Fischer writes. In so doing, he exemplifies 'another way of doing philo-sophy': he acts on the hope 'that some individuals somewhere will find in his own words their own repressed thoughts returned to them and be encouraged to continue' (Fischer, 2006, p. 478).

The echoes of Emerson here are not accidental. As a perceptive reader of Cavell's work, Fischer is highly sensitive to the importance of the transcendentalist thinker in Cavell's intellectual development. Interestingly, it is often to Emerson that Cavell turns when trying to work through his own problematic relationship with academic philoso-phy. In particular, Cavell returns to Emerson's ideal of 'aversive thinking' – an ideal

which exemplifies for Cavell, with all his particular anxieties about contemporary philosophy, a more receptive and less grasping model of the intellectual life.

In his 1978 lecture 'Thinking of Emerson', Cavell describes the uniqueness of Emerson's thought. This he understands primarily as receptivity, as 'the receiving or letting be of something, as opposed to the positing or putting together of something' (Cavell, 2003, p. 15) – as a very deliberate comportment associated with *listening* and *patience*. Cavell cites a sentence from Emerson's essay 'The Poet' to describe such a comportment, comparing it in this context to an attitude of 'abandonment':

> As the traveller who has lost his way, throws his reins on his horse's neck, and trusts to the instinct of the animal to find his road, so must we do with the divine animal who carries us through this world. (Cavell, 2003, p. 18)

In foregrounding the disposition of trust over insistence, Cavell argues, Emerson takes a riskier path towards knowledge:

> The idea that philosophical knowledge is receptive rather than assertive, that it is a matter of leaving a thing as it is rather than taking it as something else . . . makes knowledge difficult in a particular way . . . because it is hard to bear. (Cavell, 2003, p. 205)

Aversive thinking in the Emersonian sense is an oppositional or non-conformist mode of intellectual endeavour which goes against the grain, so to speak. It avoids clutching or grasping or seeking to assert. It foregrounds the practice of receptivity. It is a perfectionist practice involving the other as well as the self that involves 'being drawn' or 'getting in the draw, or the draft, of thinking' (Cavell, 2003, p. 149). On this model, according to Cavell, 'thinking may present itself as stopping, and as finding a way back, as if thinking is remembering something' (p. 162). This means of recovery is in many ways a re-initiation into language. It involves a careful comportment towards both speech and writing, where such care has up to now been distorted by practices overly assertive or even aggressive. Comporting oneself in this way is a tool of transformation.

In Cavell's interpretation of 'the aversive' as a central component in Emerson's work, he offers the work of the transcendentalist thinker as in certain senses an antidote to the more damaging impulses of academic philosophy – those that would prioritise our own thoughts and desires over others, at least, or those that would consistently privilege the productive over the receptive. Emersonian aversive thinking pushes back against these impulses as it embodies an altogether antithetical approach. It embodies an entirely different way of doing philosophy as it implicitly challenges the standing forms and procedures. David Robinson has made a similar point in arguing that Cavell's understanding of Emerson 'was thus in part a critique, indeed a rebuke of academic philosophy, and Emerson emerged as a thinker who might be capable of saving what is supposed to be thinking itself' (Robinson, 2013, p. 58).

Following this critical Emersonian (and Cavellian) line, it is worth pausing to consider the restoration of the aversive, as it were, in a contemporary intellectual context. It is worth pausing to think again about how we might orientate ourselves more positively within our practices of university writing and publishing. Is it possible to avoid what Emerson terms the 'unhandsome' in our condition – to reject the impulses of *clutching, grasping* and *asserting* – and to move instead in a non-conformist mode? It is noteworthy that for Cavell it is *characteristic* of the human condition to assert rather than receive. The

Emersonian line – 'I take the evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition' – is cited continuously throughout Cavell's work (e.g. Cavell, 2003, pp. 117, 146) and is in many ways a manifesto for his intellectual life.

In the contemporary context of Higher Education it is perhaps understandable why an 'unhandsome' condition manages to take hold. Cowed by the pressures of publish-or-perish, as scholars we are rewarded (if not explicitly encouraged) to write in safe and rarely risky ways. We rarely dare to collaborate outside our own disciplinary comfort zones. We follow certain trends in scholarship and do not imagine different ones. Acting out of our 'unhandsome' or grasping condition, we reach out aggressively at the world and assert ourselves in desperation. Here we might think of the scholar who obsesses not over their research but over their *research profile*. This is a development explored in Bruce Macfarlane's recent work where the research academic effectively internalises an ethic of neoliberalism and so can no longer point to it as an external destructive force (Macfarlane, 2021). Thus the research academic, in the words of Conroy and Smith, becomes obsessed with 'self-importance and self-aggrandisement, the "bigging up" that has now entered the language, become chief among the academic virtues'. Noting specifically the dangers of the new emphasis on 'impact', the authors expand on their worry:

> Our principal concern is that the emphasis on impact is in danger of changing the character of the people who work in universities: of fundamentally altering the myriad patterns and possibilities of the academic life and how they might be lived: of reducing them to a deracinated core where Professor Lookatme and Dr Loudmouth – long familiar campus figures, of course – broadcast their importance across the ruins. (Conroy & Smith, 2017, p. 706)

Conroy and Smith are right to alert us to the myriad dangers – to personal academic character as well as broader academic life – that are posed when 'research selves' become 'research profiles'. Rather than reading the work of our peers, rather than letting our minds wander – rather than taking our time – our focus as academics shifts to constant productivity and quantitative measures of success. In terms of the latter, 'article metrics' are now made increasingly visible on journal article homepages, listing the number of views, citation counts (from CrossRef, the Web of Science and Scopus) and the 'Altmetric Attention Score' (charting the online attention – Twitter likes and retweets, for example – that an article has received). This latest metric is a particularly interesting one. In the words of publisher Taylor & Francis, the Altmetric Attention Score

> is designed to give an indicator of the amount and type of online attention a single research output has received, but cannot tell you anything about the quality of the research or the researcher. It's important to remember that attention can be good and bad; an article may have a high score because of negative attention, and equally very good quality research may not have received much online coverage in the sources tracked by Altmetric. (Taylor & Francis Online)

Such focus on quantity over quality is worrying on a number of levels. What it encourages in researchers is a narrowing of focus and a privileging of output. Scholars spend their lives writing again and again about a narrow cluster of themes and pre-occupations and on a narrow set of established thinkers. Research becomes an

individualised pursuit. We write before we are ready; we rehash old material; we stay in narrow silos of expertise. On the level of style as well as substance we stop learning from others; such is our increasingly impoverished approach to writing and to scholarship. It could be that it is only at the academic conference that we genuinely allow ourselves to listen to others' work. Even then we beat ourselves up if we are not giving a paper ourselves. 'No, I'm not presenting this year,' we tell our colleagues apologetically.

One way to understand aversive thinking is to think of it as a problematisation of these scholarly norms and cultures. We might think of Emersonian aversion as a challenge to what prevails. However, given that it goes against many of the practices that have become ingrained in our psyche as postgraduate and early career scholars, there is nothing easy or straightforward about Emersonian aversion. There is nothing easy or straightforward about going against the norms of our profession, particularly (of course) for those of us in precarious employment positions. And yet such aversion or 'going against' is profoundly important. What Emerson calls for, as Cavell writes, 'is something we do not want to hear, something about the necessity of patience or suffering in allowing ourselves to change. What discipline will call for this if philosophy does not?' (Cavell, 2003, p. 223).

Section II: symmetry, slowness and 'letting-be'

> I think we need to ponder the question of the relation between scholarship and silence. It is possible to be a great thinker and not publish anything. [...] in our scholastic rage to stuff libraries with publications, something got lost [...] now in the academic world what we have is a cacophony, but what we should seek is the symmetry of scholars interested in reading and taking up carefully what their colleagues are producing. (Waters, 2004, p. 78)

In his now infamous reading of *Das Kapital*, Louis Althusser, following his interpretation of Marx, asks, 'what is it to read?' At face value, this may appear an innocent question, but in the same piece Althusser warns us that any philosophical reading must be distinguished from an innocent reading: '[A]s there is no such thing as an innocent reading', he writes, 'we must say what reading we are guilty of' (Althusser, 1979, p. 14, cited in Boulous Walker, 2017, p. xii). It is not our intention here to unpack the 'guilty' reading Althusser goes on to elaborate. What Althusser's comments shed light on, however, is the impossibility of reading's neutrality or innocence: *who* we read, *what* we read, *where* we read, *when* we read, *why* we read and *how* we read has effects on the kinds of relations we build with one another, with ourselves, and with the world.

In the context of the contemporary university, such questions seem particularly pertinent. Indeed, we often hear of colleagues bemoaning how difficult it is to find time for reading. In the daily morass of emails and steering committee meetings, reading becomes a matter of flurried skimming the night before a deadline for submission, with slower, closer reading practices assigned to the cossetted (and sadly necessary) realm of 'research leave' (and, even there, the spectres of those outputs promised in your application loom large). In this sense, the innocence of reading is lost in its very evasiveness. In reflecting on the significance of aversive thinking for practices of writing and publishing in the academy, a turn to what it would mean to read more *slowly* seems appropriate here.

Slowness and its benefits for scholarship have characterised critiques of the academy for some time. A contemporary example of this is the work of Maggie Berg and Barbara

K. Seeber, in particular their book, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. In what is in many ways a manifesto for the contemporary academy, Berg and Seeber write the following:

> The Slow movement can get us back in touch with what it means to carry out scholarly work. Instead of 'I am producing . . .' we might say to ourselves and others 'I am contemplating' or 'I am conversing with' or even 'I am in joyful pursuit of'. Slowing down . . . gives meaning to letting research take the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. It gives meaning to periods of rest, an understanding that research does not run like a mechanism; there are rhythms, which include pauses and periods that may seem unproductive. . . . we might say that the emphasis on the quantifiable, applied, and profitable compromises intellectual community (pitting individuals, departments, faculties, and universities in ever stiffer competition) and intellectual diversity. It homogenizes what scholars do and it threatens to make certain forms of inquiry extinct. (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 55)

Michelle Boulous Walker posits an image of slow reading much in tune with the priorities of Berg and Seeber in the passage given here. She expresses interest in a

> reading that comfortably returns, time and time again, to the same terrain – the same books, the same passage, the same title – to ponder its significance with all the benefit of unhurried time, the passage of time and the silence and space this time affords. (2017, p. 9)

How seductive an image this is, though for us its seductions lie less in the slowness of pace that Berg and Seeber seem to call for (though this can be important), and more in the existential possibilities afforded by such 'periods of rest'. Slow reading is not just a matter of pace, as Nicholas Burbules has recently pointed out: '*it is a rethinking of what the point and purpose of reading is*' (2020, p. 1447).

For Boulous Walker, what is distinctive in her account of slow reading is that such reading is neither 'finished' nor 'conclusive': reading slowly is not only about resisting a certain kind of pace in our reading practices, but is also (perhaps more importantly), an existential matter of openness and attention. To read slowly is to expose oneself to the limits of one's own imaginings, to open oneself up to transformative possibilities that would otherwise escape 'everyday, casual, quick and hasty modes of reading and being' (2017, p. 10). On this meaning, to read slowly becomes less about 'uncovering' what already exists (how 'literature reviews' are often imaged in contemporary university-speak seems inadequate here), and more about bringing something new into existence through an attention to what cannot itself be manipulated or controlled. In this regard, Boulous Walker writes of how an 'ethical engagement with the other or with the text is one that opens us and changes us – transforming us over time. Slow reading is important precisely because it provides us with the attentive quality necessary for openness to occur' (2017, p. 179). Put differently, slow reading offers scholars the chance to relate to others in ways that are non-rapacious and non-competitive: reading slowly is both attuned to, and necessitated by, the fact that the speech of another cannot be reduced to what I alone desire to 'comprehend' or 'grasp'.

In this sense, slow reading is not an atomistic or decontextualised exercise that attempts to cut scholars off from their lives with others; we do not propose slowness and stillness in order to reinscribe a rugged individualism (exposed, for instance, in the co-optation of mindfulness and meditation practices in contemporary 'staff well-being'

initiatives). Rather, slow reading is always necessarily relational and because of this situates even moments of supposed 'quickness' (flashes of insight, hurried scribbling in the margins of a much-beloved book) within a more receptive, less grasping, mode. Reading slowly is not about pushing back against speed simply because of its speediness in a superficial sense. On its model of care, of sensitivity and of attunement, slow reading more fundamentally pushes back, in an aversive way, against the rapaciousness of our 'unhandsome' condition.

Drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray (2002), Boulous Walker situates this non-rapacious relation to the other within a discourse of 'letting-be', not dissimilar to Cavell's earlier framing of receptivity in terms of 'the receiving or letting be of something, as opposed to the positing or putting together of something' (Cavell, 2003, p. 15). For Boulous Walker, the Irigarayan discourse of 'letting-be' is helpful for understanding what it means to read slowly in its resistance to modes of engagement that subsume the other within the limits of one's own priorities. Irigaray writes of how letting-be 'opens a place of resource and of meditative gathering' where the 'other is not at our disposal' (2002, p. 116). She likens this 'place of resource' to a 'refuge' or 'shelter' of sorts (p. 118) with the potential to recalibrate how we relate to others. This is a new kind of 'being-with' that is much more accommodating of difference:

> One takes shelter in this refuge of letting-be, and the space this provides allows us to work towards creating a dwelling with the other . . . . Being-with comes from the refuge of letting-be. This letting-be allows us to step back from our habitual relations with the world and the other, relations that place both world and other at our disposal, favouring making and productivity over connection and speech. (Irigaray, 2002, p. 118)

In these terms, the salience of Althusser's earlier reading *of* reading holds true: reading is not a neutral and private practice but has direct effects on the kinds of spaces we inhabit and create, and the modes of relationship made possible within such spaces.

In working with the Irigarayan discourse of 'letting-be', Boulous Walker also aims to locate slow reading within the context of the *present*. She writes of how an attention to the present of speaking is so crucial. To alarge extent, our speech lacks the connectivity that bridges the space between ourselves and the other, and this connection can only be created by an attentive listening to the present of speech to an awareness that the other 'speaks in a voice different from our own' (2017, pp. 117–118). Here, attending to the present becomes, for Boulous Walker, a matter of the here-and-now: to read slowly in the present is to be receptive to the givenness of the moment, and to the diversities of speech inherent to that moment. To read slowly is to receive the text for what it is, now, in all its fullness and complexity, without streamlining or footnoting that complexity within, for example, one's future 'research agenda' or past 'research profile' (to borrow the parlance of current university recruitment processes).

At this point, a note of caution is perhaps needed. The irony of writing an article on how we are all writing too many articles is not lost on us and in this context one might rightfully ask: where does slow reading leave the work of scholars in the academy, particularly the work of producing articles for publication and consumption? After all, is a slowness of reading only possible when pieces of writing are produced for us to read? And is slowness itself merely the preserve of the privileged among us? Any attempts to

romanticise slowness must acknowledge at the very least the very limiting factors of social class, gender and precarious employment in academic life. As Heather Mendick rightfully points out, the move to slow is potentially a problematic one because 'only some selves are in a position to take on slow ways of being and to gain value through so doing' (Mendick, 2014). Burbules captures this point equally well in his acknowledgement that 'Slow food, or slow cooking, is fine – but if we are too slow we starve' (2020, p. 1452).

In beginning to address these questions, Ziarek's commentary on Irigaray is helpful:

> It would be a mistake to assume that Irigaray disparages or underestimates the importance of making and production, for making, as she remarks several times, is indispensable to human development. Rather, what Irigaray wants to question is the predominance of making over letting-be, which has led to a certain inability to let be, misunderstood as a symptom of powerlessness and inaction. (Ziarek, 2007, p. 72)

In Ziarek's reading, the desire to produce is not in itself problematic for Irigaray: rather, it is our approaches to engaging in such work, and our reasoning behind such approaches, that risk eroding the conditions needed for letting-be. For Boulous Walker much the same can be said of reading in relation to writing: to read in order to write can be fruitful, insofar as that reading is engaged with in ways that resist *reducing* that engagement to what can be easily and hastily produced. Slow reading, in these terms, is not averse to production so long as the quality of what is produced is not sacrificed for productivity's sake.

Conclusion

We opened this article by juxtaposing the writings of Emilie Pine with those of John Henry Newman and by raising the specific worry that the university as a communal and contemplative place is increasingly under threat by the commodification and competition of scholarly life. Our suggestion throughout the piece has been that our minds as academics are ever more colonised by harmful discourses of contemporary research practice (research 'outputs', research 'impacts' and research 'targets' prominent among them). Certainly, we would wish to see the idea of close and careful reading as articulated herein as one important concept in ventilating such discourses – in opening up new ways of thinking and talking about current work in the Humanities and the necessity for such work to continue.

And if there is a role here for slowness, we would argue that there is one also for silence, for symmetry rather than cacophony, and for the very human rhythms of circling back before moving forward. At issue here is an alternative set of academic virtues – those of patience, of listening, of humility and of trust. As Lindsay Waters points out:

> There are too many people eager to publish, and not enough people who are biding their time and letting a project grow great within them [...] there are times when it is good to build up ideas, to play with them, and experiment with them and not rush with them to print. (Waters, 2004, p. 82)

Our development as scholars might well be best served by such modes of receptivity rather than assertion, not always by 'active speech' as Paul Standish points out, 'but sometimes rather by silence' (Standish, 2004, p. 105).

This article is written not only for those in the Humanities but for all thoughtful academics disposed to reflect on the current state of research and scholarship. In terms of the *practical* consequences of our perspective, we might suggest at the very least a foregrounding of Berg and Seeber's ideal that we begin to see scholarship not as a competition but as a community. With this perspective we might seek out collaborative opportunities both to mentor and to learn from our younger or more precarious colleagues. We might strive for our own brand of creativity and at the same time champion the diverse efforts of others who are challenging the given orthodoxies of academic research (Anne Pirrie, for one, has suggested that 'we need to break into new territory and vault over academic practice altogether in order to queer the academic essay, change the co-ordinates of academic writing and put some steam back into critique': Pirrie, as usual, is on to something very important). Perhaps, most importantly of all, we might forgive ourselves and those around us for all those lost or 'unproductive' hours (or days or weeks or even months) that constitute a significant part of anyone's academic life.

Such practices of the aversive or the non-conformist are worth sitting with in all their complexity. These practices are less about closing ourselves off from the messy contemporary in order to enjoy the privileged other-worldliness of the ivory tower and more about opening ourselves up to the world in all its beauty and all its disjunction. On this understanding, slowness and silence are non-conformist exercises in meditative gathering, in concourse and in cooperation – in forms of 'letting-be' that gain their significance not in the number of articles we produce but in how we produce those articles, and why. Stanley Fish has argued that the particular pressures of academic life lead inevitably to the proliferation of published work 'that has no justification in anything but the artificial demands of an empty and self-serving careerism' (Fish as cited in Waters, 2004, p. 73). But we would propose, contra Fish, that the thoughtful practices articulated here might stand as valuable lines of defence in our ongoing work to overcome individualism, careerism and all the other '-isms' of an 'unhandsome condition'. Such thoughtful practices might be undertaken on our own or in concert with others. Following the vision of Emerson as well as Cavell, they might embody a transformative ethic for the scholar and her academy.

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