Editing Laura

Helen Small

The last email I received from Laura was sent late in the day, ‘Sunday 15/08/2021 22.19’.

Dearest Helen

Here are chapters - not in the right order, but the 'rhythm contents' should clarify things. As you'll see, there is no introduction as yet. I'll forward the encyclopaedia article in a moment.

A thousand thanks.

Laura xx

Some hours earlier, I had driven the 13 miles between our Oxfordshire homes to talk with her in the high-walled sunny garden of her Bampton home. No ordinary weekend visit. We circled for twenty minutes or so around the reason for my coming, before she mustered the emotional energy to tell me the diagnosis. Pancreatic cancer. Medical research had made little progress with treatment over the past 25 years, the consultant had told her. “What have you been doing?!’, she had wanted to ask, mock-scandalized … With little time left, and debilitating treatment the only chance of extending that time, the incomplete state of *Rhythmical Subjects* was weighing on her mind. Back in May, we had had lunch in King Edward St, Oxford. Rangy, happy talk, exchanging news, ideas, reports on trips abroad, conferences attended, things recently read, She had broken the flow, abruptly, to get something off her mind. Commitments to graduate teaching, OUP delegacy, college and Faculty seminars and committees, journal editing, lecture and conference paper writing and the curtailing of research leave in Paris by the pandemic had combined to leave her, apologetically, behind schedule. To be the recipient of her frustration was not just a sign of friendship. She was explicitly addressing me, in that moment, as the English Faculty’s Director of Research. My response was heartfelt: the level of her commitments in and beyond the university put all her colleagues in her debt. Only after her death did any of us learn quite how extensive our debt was.

It has never been clear to me whether the request, in August, to help get *Rhythmical Subjects* to press was an extension of the same conversation, or, as I prefer to think, emanated from a different place: more personal. ‘Dear Helen’ would have been normal. ‘Dearest’ was a change of voice—disinhibited by illness. The precise parameters of what Laura was asking weren’t quite explicit. Initially, I undertook to bring the existing portion of the book into publishable shape while she worked on the missing elements: the Katherine Mansfield section for the *Rhythm* magazine chapter; more discussion of Nietzsche perhaps (but not clear where it might go); an Introduction. A chapter on ‘Syncopations and polyrhythmia in writing, including prose rhythm, and in early 20th century music, … jazz … Stravinsky, Scriabin, Honegger’ had to be abandoned. A quick word count on the collated chapters indicated that the book was already ample. (In its final form it stretches to 416

pages, a fraction shy of 179,000 words.) I would find a Research Assistant, and monies to employ him. Nick de Somogyi came to mind immediately: ideally exacting, with a long copy-editorial backlist including Tom Stoppard's dramatic adaptation of *Parade's End* (it gave Laura pleasure to contemplate the association). Anything needing authorial decision would of course be referred to her. But the cancer moved quickly. By the time eloquently admiring readers' reports from OUP came through, just 5 days later, she was in hospital and it was plain that little, if any, new writing could happen.

From that point on, ushering the book through the commissioning process and bringing it to completion was a collective effort. William [Outhwaite] was the conduit for messages to and from Laura; Jacqueline Norton led for the press; and John Watts (a close ally in the History Faculty) took a particular interest on behalf of the OUP delegates—excited by the impetus and expansion of the field that *Rhythmical Subjects* provides to 'some of most innovative work being done in History in this period – on ideas of time, on touch, movement and sensation'. Together we agreed that the editorial work ahead should respect as far as possible the broad sweep of Laura's chapters, resisting any thought of dividing or splitting where she had constructed great connective arcs of thought. 'One of the exciting features of the text', Watts noted, 'lies in the juxtapositions of contemporary figures, and the way these expose a common basis in thinking about rhythm, or in rhythmic practices.'[1] Nothing should be attempted *in her voice*; rather, the few additions needed would be marked out as editorial. With these broad lines of intention settled, the delegates were able to make a swift decision—in time for Laura to know that a contract was on its way.

Copy-editing of the chapters started while she was alive. After her death on 22 September all textual edits had William's eyes on them. On innumerable occasions I have been startled by, and grateful for, the extent to which Laura's intellectual life was shared with her husband. Without his proximity to what she had read, owned, annotated, discovered in the archives—and his command of German—getting *Rhythmical Subjects* to press would have taken unimaginably longer. As hoped, Isobel Armstrong and Jo McDonagh accepted responsibility for the Introduction, helped by the discovery among Laura's computer files of her Fellowship application to the *Institut d'études avancées*, Paris, outlining the plan of the book and detailing her intentions for its completion. Steve Connor agreed to write an Afterword once the rest was in place, responding to the typescript and to the 20th-century theoretical debates Laura discusses in the published encyclopaedia entry (not in fact sent in August, but easily located). That entry was the closest thing available to a scoping-document for the Introduction, though its form—a critical survey of the existing field, rather than an account of Laura's intervention in it—led to its placement as an Appendix rather than a route in. Nick de Somogyi was indispensable, producing serial versions of chapters, each cleaner than the last, with lists of information still needed; identifying continuity glitches and proffering solutions. Some additional hours of graduate research assistance from a current graduate, Emma Slater, helped to get Woolf and Lawrence manuscript and book citations sorted. I took the local decisions needed for copy-editing, re-disposing some otherwise homeless few paragraphs (primarily on Lawrence) and introducing sub-sections where they were lacking to bring chapters into formal alignment and make some strands of exploration more distinct. Stub footnotes had to be filled out, missing references and paginations tracked down, and sense made of the challenging proliferation of textual variants across multiple editions of

[1] Email to Jacqueline Norton, forwarded to HS, 6 September 2021 10:05.

certain works cited (Spencer and Dalcroze were among the thornier proliferators of self-revision). William and I handled OUP copy-editor's queries; then parallel-read (in the last instance spot-checked) three sets of proofs, with Lynda Nead keeping a careful eye on the placement and attribution of the many illustrations—their selection worked out between her and Laura in August. The index was adopted by William, on a template by Nick.

This collective editorial effort was thus quite unlike the task undertaken by John Durham Peters, whose 'co-authored' monograph *Promiscuous Knowledge: Information, Image, and Other Truth Games in History* appeared in 2020.[2] Publication came 14 years after the death of his friend and colleague Kenneth Cmiel who originated the project but left it so far from finished that editing was, in truth, surrogate authoring. A postscript to that book takes the form of a long meditation on the experience of editing a friend's work after their death. It is part elegy for Cmiel, part character sketch, part reflection on the tendency to undervalue service as a motive for human behaviour (Cmiel's service to the profession, in the first instance). It is also an extended critical reflection on the ephemerality of so much of the knowledge, the thinking, the judgement, the experience—in the broadest sense, the 'information'—that goes into, or is extracted from, or in various ways subsequently attaches to books. Bequeathed not only Cmiel's draft work-in-progress but his entire academic archive and library, Peters soon realized that assuming responsibility for getting *Promiscuous Knowledge* to press entailed taking on (largely, literally taking *in*) the material remainders of another person's intellectual life. Cmiel, we learn, was an inveterate hoarder of the documentation that accrues in the course of a normal day: books, yes, but also their marginalia, and a plethora of inserts: notes, letters, receipts, tickets, … bitty records of an everyday reading and writing life tucked between print pages.

If Laura's archive was not so daunting, and her voice never so intrusive as Cmiel's occasionally was for Peters, and Hannah Arendt's, earlier, for Mary McCarthy (benign but taxing ghosts at the editor's elbow[3]), the difference is partly attributable to a shift, over the intervening 15 and more years, towards digital as the medium and repository of much textual labour behind a book. In Laura's case, the digital record came to our aid, but its role was limited in advance by her selection of the file versions wanted. She is a contained example, then, of the need today to treat analogue and digital as overlapping technologies, differently entangled through our daily lives, our own work preferences weighing heavily in in the balancing of things. It was a subject that interested Laura. One of the last edited volumes she helped to usher through the commissioning stages for OUP's 21st-Century Approaches to Literature series was a collection of essays meditating on how digitisation has accelerated archival transformations that started long before computerisation, as technological capacity developed for storing sound, film and photography. Having spent so much time with film and photography collections, she was well aware that changes in technology 'fracture and blur conventional understanding of the archive'.[4] Her own working preference, nevertheless, was for pen and paper as the medium in which first thoughts were shaped. Anyone who sat near her in a seminar will recall the small notebooks, pressed open

[2] University of Chicago Press.

[3] *Promiscuous Knowledge*, pp. 271-272.

[4] Andrew Prescott and Alison Wiggins, unpublished proposal for *Archives: Power, Truth and Fiction* (forthcoming, OUP).

on her knee, in which she jotted down ink or pencil reminders and prompts for further thinking: critical points of interest; references to pursue; above all quotations—selectively underlined, often hovering suggestively on the page (much unused space), some accented with circles or multiple brackets, visually linked by long curving conjunctive lines, arrows, and the occasional re-directive 'BUT'. Her dedicated notebook on Katherine Mansfield is the only indication of how her thoughts about 'KM' were taking shape as she prepared to write the missing element of her chapter on *Rhythm*. Her notes and the quotations she selected were enough for me to summarize, in a long 'Editorial Note', the sharp 'outsider' perspective on British and European modernism that caught Laura's eye as she read Mansfield. Tantalisingly, the notes don't reveal how she saw Mansfield's stories and poems innovating with rhythm—registering (one assumes) the imprint of that cultural difference from the rest of Bloomsbury, that suspicion of 'the self-vaunted new', and that deep need for people—in person and on the page—to be 'rooted in life'.[5] My editorial patchwork is, accordingly, less an attempt to guess at 'what Laura might have said' than an invitation to others to take her prompting further.

James Donald's obituary for *Screen* captures beautifully Laura's distinctive reliance on quotation in shaping not just preliminary ideas but her accomplished 'authorial persona':

> she comes across as simultaneously archaeologist, archivist, curator, and guide. These occasionally unwieldy citations are historical specimens that she has excavated in the course of her exhaustive research. Having collected, sorted, and assessed them, she then organises them as exhibits in a display that shapes the experience of the reader. They are not quite the textual footpads that Walter Benjamin took his quotations to be, waiting to mug the reader and strip them of their presuppositions, although there is undeniably something confrontational about them.[6]

It is a description that fits *Rhythmical Subjects* perfectly. The simplest confrontation the book will present for almost everyone who reads it (can there be any exception?) is its startling demonstration out limited apprehension, till now, of the fields of enquiry pertinent to understanding nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectual and artistic culture. 'Late Victorian into Modern' was the periodisation-challenging title of her co-edited Oxford 21st-Century Approaches volume; *Rhythmical Subjects* is bolder—mid-nineteenth-century in its starting points, reaching well beyond modernism in its later philosophical concerns and ranging geographically far beyond Britain. The task Laura set herself was nothing less than an exhibition of a vast interconnected endeavour to understand rhythm as the fundamental patterning and form inherent in, but also imposed upon, life, mind, and art. This extrapolated 'modern' interest in rhythm shows us sinews of connection between writers and artists that make it meaningful to talk of a shared persistent cultural preoccupation and intellectual ambition, amid so much deep and sometimes problematic linguistic, social, and political diversity. The attempt to understand and mobilise rhythm generated literary and philosophical terms of art that are still with us today, under-recognised because they are (as she shows) integral to the experience and the recognition of form.

---

[5] Laura Marcus, *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 'Editorial Note', pp. 160-62 (quotations from Laura's notebook, p. 161).

[6] 'Close Up: Laura', *Screen* 64/3 (2023), 332-41, citing Walter Benjamin, One-Way Street and Other Writings: 'Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out armed and relieve the stroller of his convictions.' Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 95.

Arguably all good books with a historical as well as close-critical purpose to them ‘confront’ us with the limits of what we thought we knew, but it is hard to think of many works produced in recent years, that so startle the reader with the revealed extent of earlier cultural connections, patternings, abrasions, and sheer energised creativity. One of the most powerful claims *Rhythmical Subjects* makes for the significance of its topic is that the descriptive and analytic language generated by attention to ‘rhythm’ over the last (almost) two centuries met a deep and continuing human desire for a holistic outlook on life. Enabling that holism, as Laura presents it, was a practice of the humanities (largely *avant la lettre*) as a set of intellectual and creative practices profoundly engaged with other disciplinary practices, scientific and social-scientific—joined in pursuit of understanding what it means to be ‘rooted in life’.