Laura Marcus:

Rhythm. Cinema. Modernism. Psychoanalysis. Autobiography.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Unoccupied Air

Peter Boxall

Abstract:
This introduction sets the essays in the special issue into context, and reflects on Laura Marcus's contribution both to the development of literary criticism over the last three decades, and to the institutional history of the discipline.

Keywords:
Laura Marcus; Virginia Woolf; rhythm; cinema; modernism; psychoanalysis; autobiography.

On August 5, 2021, Laura Marcus wrote to me. Hers was one of those names that you liked to see in your inbox – a bright point in the list of emails to be answered. 'Peter', it read, 'I have been meaning to write to let you know that, after some weeks of feeling seriously unwell, I have had a devastating medical diagnosis – really the shortest straw'.[1]

Shortly after I received this email, Laura died of pancreatic cancer, on 22 September 2021.

She left behind a husband, William, a son, Daniel, and a host of friends, colleagues, students and loved ones who had come to rely on her warmth, her humour, and her intelligence. It was a refrain among her friends, in the months after her death, that none of us knew anyone who had given more support to more people. Those months were, for many of us, a gradual discovery of how generous Laura was with her friendship – a gradual realisation that she brightened the lives of many others, just as she brightened our own.

She left behind, also, a major body of work. This included the monographs *Auto/biographical Discourses* (1998), *Virginia Woolf: Writers and their Work* (1997; 2004), *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2007), *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (2014), and *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (2018). It included her edited collections, *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, with Lynda Nead (1993), *Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, with Bryan Cheyette (1998), *Sigmund Freud's* Interpretation of Dreams*: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (1999), *Freud: Dreaming, Creativity and Therapy*, with Edward Timms (2001), *Mass Observation as Poetics and Science* (2001), *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature and Culture*, with Ankhi Mukherjee (2014), *Moving Modernisms*, with David Bradshaw and Rebecca Roach (2016), *Late*

Victorian into Modern: Literature 1880-1920, with Michèle Mendelssohn and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (2016), and *Transcendence, Idealism and Modernity* (2018). It included her scores of essays, from 'Enough About you, Let's Talk About Me: Recent Autobiographical Writing' (1987), to '"The Last Witnesses": Autobiography and history in the 1930s' (2021). It included, too, the manuscript of an unfinished monograph, as ambitious as anything she had written, on the cultural, philosophical and literary history of rhythm. A group of friends and colleagues, including William Outhwaite (Laura's husband), Jo McDonagh, Isobel Armstrong, Helen Small, Lynda Nead and Jacqueline Norton worked tirelessly to bring the book to press, and it was published late in 2023, by OUP, as *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern*.

This special issue is, in part, a response to that publication. We republish here the introduction to the book, by Jo McDonagh and Isobel Armstrong, so that this issue might serve as a gateway to the work, another route in. We publish the book's first extended review, in the form of Rebecca Beasley's probing essay, 'Laura Marcus: Rhythmical Subject'. We publish, too, Helen Small's account of the process by which the book came to press ('Editing Laura') – an essay which is at once a testimony to the commitment of a group of colleagues to a shared intellectual project, and a wider reflection on the relation between life and writing.

The essays which are dedicated to *Rhythmical Subjects*, though, are supported by a number of other pieces, which range over the wider terrain of Laura's work. As the title of the special issue indicates, this is a terrain which is given shape by the coming together of a range of intellectual and disciplinary concerns – a shifting of the literary-critical landscape that has widespread consequences, and that Laura's work itself was instrumental in bringing about. Her late interest in rhythm – the first keyword in our title – is bound tightly to her foundational interest in autobiography, declared in that first published essay, 'Enough About You, Let's Talk About Me'. The writing of a life – the life of another, or one's own life – is fundamentally a question of rhythm, of the aesthetic shape and beat of narrative. And between these poles – rhythm and autobiography – the range of her other concerns grows, and cross-pollinates. Laura is the first thinker to demonstrate the full extent to which the rhythms of literary narrative are bound up, in the twentieth century, with the deep shifts in our forms of measuring and representing occasioned by the evolution of cinema. This is an evolution which goes hand in hand, Laura shows, both with the inventions of modernist writing, and with the discoveries of psychoanalysis. Laura's work invents a set of connections between these terms – rhythm, cinema, modernism, psychoanalysis, autobiography – which is also the very intellectual ground from which the forms and representations of life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries emerge.

The essays collected here follow the contours of these thought-forms, as they collide with and merge into one another. Between opening and closing pieces devoted to *Rhythmical Subjects*, the essays are organised in pairs or clusters which correspond with the keywords in our title.

A first group of essays addresses Laura's interest in literary modernism, and particularly in Woolf's version of modernist imagining. David James reads Laura's reading of Woolf, in order to tease out the lyricality of her own mode of attentive criticism. Elleke Boehmer reflects on Laura's reading of Woolf and of Katherine Mansfield, and in doing so suggests too how deeply Laura's concern with Woolfian modernism is woven into the passion for rhythm that animates her last work. Isobel Armstrong's essay also focuses on Laura's reading of Woolf, tracing her insistent re-emergence in Laura's criticism from the beginning to the end of her writing life. But where Boehmer suggests the links between Woolf and the rhythmical subject in Laura's thinking, Armstrong's essay shows how Woolf acts as the figure who orchestrates the relations in Laura's thinking between cinema, modernism and psychoanalysis.

Armstrong's essay acts as a bridge to a group of essays which focus more specifically on cinema. Lara Feigel's essay demonstrates the importance to Laura of silent cinema, and of the consequences, in the history of cinema, of the introduction of sound, as this modulates our understanding of the relation between voice and silence. Ankhi Mukherjee's piece theorises the cinematic in relation both to modernism and to psychoanalysis, in a reading of the relation between Freud and H.D., as H.D. records it in her 1956 memoir *Tribute to Freud*. Mukherjee quotes from Laura's *Tenth Muse*, to argue that H.D.'s account of her analysis with Freud depicts psychoanalysis as a 'cinematographic arena', in which the relation between analyst and analysand involves the 'projection and play of sign, image, and scene upon a screen'.[2] Maud Ellmann also draws on Laura's thinking about cinema and psychoanalysis, focussing on psychoanalysis as it relates both to 'screen memories' and to rail travel – one of Laura's abiding concerns. In what amounts to a work of co-thinking, Ellmann extends Laura's compelling analysis of Freud's obsession with the railway in her essay 'Oedipus Express', to include a reflection on Freud's 'Rat Man'. Despite Ellmann's suggestions in a reader's report that the Rat Man would enrich any discussion of Freud and the railway, Laura neglects the 'Rat Man' in 'Oedipus Express' (did you ever follow that suggestion up?, Ellmann asks Laura; '"Nope, no Rat Man," she chuckled slyly'). In welcoming the Rat Man into Laura's reflection on psychoanalysis and the railway, Ellmann's essay opens onto the other conjunctions in Laura's work that this issue traces, between psychoanalysis, modernism and rhythm.

This matrix of concerns in Ellmann's essay includes, too, a reflection on life writing, and in doing so it opens onto a final cluster of pieces on autobiography. Bryan Cheyette's essay touches on the subject of one of Laura's last essays – on autobiography and the witness – to tease out the shifting relations between autobiography and testimony, as these have their roots in Laura's ground-breaking early work. Peter Middleton adapts Laura's thinking of autobiography to a reading of what he theorises as the 'elsewhere' in experimental works by John Berger and Lisa Robertson – the process by which life writing situates us not only in our own lives, but in the lives of others. And Robert Young's essay offers an extended reflection on the contradictions that characterise our understanding of autobiography, as Laura theorised it. Autobiography, Young's essay suggests, brings together 'life' and 'writing', but this is an unstable compound, one which necessarily bends the fleeting and unnarratable experience of 'life' into the form demanded of 'writing'. To think about autobiography is to ask not only how we might capture life in narrative, but also how narrative can bear witness to a kind of life that does not come in writerly shape.

Taken together, these essays suggest how profoundly Laura's work has influenced the passage of literary criticism over the last decades, and how central it has been to the growth of the mutual relations between cinema, psychoanalysis and modernism. They trace the passage of a career, as it is interwoven with the recent history of criticism – and in doing so, they act themselves as a kind of life writing, a kind of cultural, intellectual and personal biography. I was struck, when editing these essays, by how finely entwined the passage of Laura's work is with the history of the discipline, and of the UK institutions that have had a determining influence on it. The essays give us glimpses of her early career, working at Southampton alongside Isobel Armstrong, Robert Young, Peter Middleton and Maud Ellmann. They recall her time at Birkbeck with Steven Connor, Jo McDonagh and Lynda Nead, and her move to Sussex where she worked with Peter Nicholls, Nicholas Royle and Lindsay Smith, where she taught Lara Feigel and David James, and where Laura and I worked closely together from 1999 to 2007. Contributions here by Hannah Sullivan, Rebecca Beasley, Ankhi Mukherjee, Helen Small, and Elleke Boehmer evoke her time at Oxford, where she served on the advisory committee of the Oxford Centre for Life Writing. In doing so, they demonstrate that Laura has been part of some of the movements and moments which have transformed our understanding not only of modernism and psychoanalysis, but of the nature and function of criticism. To trace her career is to brush against and reanimate the cultural and institutional history of literary studies. It is also, inevitably, to brush against, to reanimate, her life itself, the person who Laura was, and who moves in these pages in every turn of phrase and thought. It is difficult to distinguish here between the public figure and the private person, between an acknowledgement of Laura's contribution to critical thinking, and a memorial to her singular personhood. Each contributor in this issue has had to choose when

and whether to talk of ‘Laura’, as I have in this introduction, and when to refer instead to ‘Marcus’, the public figure, the professional critic and writer. In moving between these forms of naming, the issue sits at the junction between writing and living, that difficult bridge between historic acts and a hidden life. The particular signature of her professional thinking is preserved here, as are her mannerisms, her sense of humour, her figures of speech. Ankhi Mukherjee remembers meeting Laura in the entrance of the British Library, ‘Laura coming in from the sun in her jaunty shades’. Peter Middleton remembers a young Laura when she first arrived at Southampton, dressed stylishly with her jacket sleeves rolled up. Maud Ellmann remembers the timbre of her chuckle. Elleke Boehmer remembers her voice, her tendency to say, when admiring a book, or a flower, ‘yes, really’. I like that, ‘yes, really’.

These essays live out some of the contradictions that are native to the relation between life and writing, and that Laura’s work has done so much to unearth and to explain. Narrative and critical forms, as Robert Young argues in his essay here, serve not only to capture life, to preserve it and make it thinkable, but also to signal its elusiveness, to witness not its presence but its absence. Life is not what yields itself up to be written, recorded and preserved, or not only so. It is also what eludes expression, what does not consent to the narrative protocols of sequence. Life is not the opposite of non-life, but is rather composed of it, as all forms of rhythm are conjured not only from sound, beat, movement, but from the pause, the suspension, the silence of which both music and life are made.

It is perhaps for this reason that the most insistently recurring figure in these essays is that of a world without us in it, the imagining of what Hannah Sullivan calls, in her poem published here, the ‘bright unoccupied air’. For Laura herself, it is one of the peculiar properties of Woolf’s writing that it is able to give form to this empty space, or, in Beckett’s phrase, to ‘weigh absence in a scale’.[3] We might think of the preservation, in Woolf’s last novel *Between the Acts*, of what Woolf’s narrator calls the ‘unacted part’, the empty version of self that accompanies all those roles that we actually perform.[4] Or we might think of the vacant space, the unoccupied room that is eloquent of absence in her 1922 novel *Jacob’s Room*. Or, most of all, we might think of the interlude in Woolf’s 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, ‘Time Passes’ – the short middle passage of the novel in which we are given a peculiarly magical access to a world without us there to see it. In showing us the remote house in which the novel is set as it is left abandoned for years, during which it slowly decays, returning to a state of nature untouched by human hand, the prose seems to reach towards some nonhuman principle, some erasing of the shapes that human dwelling gives to the occupied world. But it is the strange discovery of ‘Time Passes’, and of Woolf’s writing more generally, that an approach to the failure of form, to those moments when the terms in which we make life narratable and conceivable give way or expire, leads not only to muteness and non-being, but

also to some secret principle of unnarrated life. To imagine our way into an empty house, a dwelling place in which no person dwells, is not to encounter the simple absence of the human figure; rather it is to see 'a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed'.[5] It is when we approach a 'form from which life had parted', Woolf's narrator writes, that we can see the 'shape of loveliness itself', the formal principle of aesthetically represented life.[6] This is why it is to 'Time Passes', and to Laura's various readings of it, that so many of the contributors to this issue have turned (and that is the focus too of Santanu Das and George Potts's moving tribute to Laura in a recent issue of *Critical Quarterly*).[7] Elleke Boehmer remembers Laura reading the passage in a recording that was played at her online memorial. David James gives a close analysis of that same reading, as a means of imagining, in a phrase drawn from Woolf's *The Waves*, a 'world seen without a self' ('There are no words', Bernard says. 'Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through').[8] Lara Feigel refers to the same passage, suggesting that Laura saw in 'the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*' a 'pristine cinematic world without human presence'. Isobel Armstrong suggests that Laura finds the 'virtuosity' of Woolf's novel in its capacity 'to think of the world without the organising presence of the human subject'. Woolf, in Laura's reading, allows us, Armstrong writes, to 'theorise absence', as it is the coming together of Woolf and the cinematic that allows us to glimpse a nonhuman way of seeing and thinking. 'Woolf produces a form of experimental cineplay', Laura writes, in Armstrong's quotation, 'using visual images to express emotions and animating objects into non-human life'.[9] In doing so, both Laura and Woolf show us, Armstrong writes, that 'the arena of the nonhuman' is 'the arena of cinema'.

It is the 'bright unoccupied air', in Woolf, and in Laura's reading of Woolf, that contains a latent theory of occupation. This, I think, is what Hannah Sullivan's poem suggests. The emptiness that inhabits all forms of presence, the nonhuman underside to all acts of human being, this is not simply inarticulacy, or muteness, but a kind of possibility, the promise of a living form from which human life has parted. The cinematic, in Sullivan's poem, is at once a stilling of life, and a means of animating it. It is how 'moments' are 'frozen into mobility'. This is not to say that we can convert absence – the absence of anyone or anything – into presence. It is not to find in literary or cinematic form a compensation for loss, or for the drawing of the shortest straw. It is, though, to recognise that the unoccupied air – the bright stretch of nonbeing we find in every rhythmic turn and bend of being – is the prerequisite for any new thought we might ever have, and for any address we might ever make to the future. It is this unoccupied air, this opening of an unchartered space for thought, emerging from the conjunctions that Laura's work makes between cinema, modernism, and psychoanalysis, that is one of her legacies. A writing life, frozen into mobility.

[1]NOTES

Laura Marcus, personal correspondence with the author, August 5, 2021.

[2] Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 367.

[3] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1976), p. 247.

[4] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 137.

[5] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 106.

[6] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 106.

[7] Santanu Das and George Potts, 'Laura Marcus (7 March 1956 – 22 September 2021)', in *Critical Quarterly*, vol 64, no 1 (2022), pp. 3-26.

[8] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 171.

[9] Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), second edition, p. 103.