

The Art of Precarity

Review of *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* by Nonia Williams
Edinburgh University Press, 2023

Interspersed between the chapters of literary criticism in Nonia Williams's monograph *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* (2023) are brief 'biographical vignettes' that centre on distinct components of the life of British experimental writer Ann Quin (1936–1973).¹ One of these vignettes, entitled 'A bedsit room of her own', details Quin's meagre education, poorly paid secretarial jobs and confined living spaces. Expanding on the Virginia Woolf reference in its title, 'A bedsit room of her own' contrasts Woolf's 1920s feminist hope with Quin's 1960s reality:

Unlike Woolf's hope at the end of *A Room of One's Own*, that women writers of the future would have 'five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own', Quin's precarious experiences as a working woman, with much time spent trying to earn an income, fretting about money and living in poverty at the same time as trying to write, were closer to those generations of women Woolf imagines at the start, when she thinks of the 'poverty and insecurity' which prevented them from writing and wonders 'what effect poverty has on the mind'. (p. 23)

This passage invites us to reflect on the relationship between material precarity and literary creativity. Williams acknowledges Woolf's belief that the two are inversely related—in other words, that material deprivation precludes creativity—while hinting that, in Quin's case, the situation might be more complex.

In its Introduction, Williams's monograph testifies to how Quin's experimental novels resist the realist mode deemed acceptable for working-class writers in her time (p. 7). Williams quotes the novelist Claire-Louise Bennett's intriguing claim that 'growing up in a working-class environment may well engender an aesthetic sensibility that quite naturally produces work that is idiosyncratic, polyvocal, and apparently experimental'.² By claiming that Quin's 'living conditions [...] were profoundly and inextricably bound up with and in the specific

experimental forms of [her] writing' (pp. 7–8), Williams likewise entertains the possibility that it was precisely Quin's impoverished conditions that stimulated her literary experimentalism. This connection offers a compelling premise for Williams's study of Quin.

The monograph's emphasis on the adjective 'precarious', which features in its title, further ties together a material experience and a literary aesthetic. Williams states that this key word 'intentionally refers to [...] both Quin's lived experience—such as her volatile material conditions, sexual and emotional life, mental states and more—and the experimentalism of the writing' (p. 6). In her focus on the concept of precarity, Williams is tapping into a salient cultural issue. In 2012, Noam Chomsky referred to the rise of the 'precariat': a new social demographic, composed of 'people who live a precarious existence', which he saw as 'becoming a very substantial part of society in the United States and indeed elsewhere'.³ *The Guardian* similarly reported, in 2019, that 'a new "precariat" is forming across Europe: millions of people who have jobs but still can't quite make ends meet'.⁴ By centring her analysis on the term 'precarious', Williams reminds us that Quin—a writer who spent most of her literary career living from one pay cheque to the next, with occasional financial relief in the form of grants and fellowships⁵—is well placed to speak to our contemporary condition.

This cultural relevance is perhaps one factor behind the recent 'substantial renaissance' of interest in Quin.⁶ Between 2018 and 2022, the independent press *And Other Stories* republished each of Quin's novels, making them newly accessible for a 21st-century audience. The same years have seen a surge of critical attention to Quin, of which Williams's research has been at the forefront. Chapters on Quin's work have appeared in numerous academic books on British and/or women's experimental fiction, including Williams's own co-edited collection *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (2019).⁷ When the journal *Women: A Cultural Review* published a special issue entitled '(Re)turning to Quin' in 2022, Williams composed its introduction. Building on these previous works, Williams's *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* stakes its claim as 'the first full scholarly book on Quin' (p. 8). It devotes a chapter to each of Quin's four published novels—*Berg* (1964), *Three* (1966), *Passages* (1969), and *Tripticks* (1972)—with a final chapter addressing her unfinished novel published posthumously in *The Unmapped Country: Stories and Fragments* (2018).

Williams is more concerned with recovery than coverage. She describes *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* as a work of feminist recuperative criticism (p. 14)—that is, scholarship that purposefully directs critical attention towards a historically-neglected woman writer. Having

explicitly rejected ‘coverage’ as her ‘aim’ (p. 15), Williams uses her Afterword to assess her book’s limitations and offer suggestions for the future of Quin studies. As Williams acknowledges, her study pays acute attention to Quin’s novels at the expense of the short stories, the latter of which she proposes as ‘a clear area for future development in Quin scholarship’ (p. 175). Being the first book to focus solely on Quin, Williams’s monograph naturally offers more of a conversation starter than a last word. As the broader critical re-examination of mid-century British literature continues,⁸ there is surely more work on Quin to come.

Despite pursuing a recuperative approach, Williams remains acutely aware of the common pitfalls of this critical tradition. Citing fellow critic Carole Sweeney, Williams acknowledges ‘the potentially problematic role of women writers’ lives in recuperative scholarly work’, which often uses biographical material as a ‘precursor’ to or a ‘primary lens’ for critical analysis (pp. 5–6). Quin’s life—replete with mental breakdowns, sexual liaisons with married couples and an untimely death at age 37—naturally inspires intrigue and even sensationalism. Although Williams briefly acknowledges the ‘auto-fictional nature’ (p. 6) of Quin’s work, she is alert to the dangers of an overreliance on Quin’s biographical details and archival materials in the interpretation of her literary texts, which could ‘add to a problematic critical tendency of reducing a woman writer’s work to her life’.⁹ While biography does play a part in Quin’s wider revival—indeed, a biography of Quin by Jennifer Hodgson is forthcoming¹⁰—Williams’s own nods towards Quin’s lived experiences are consciously restrained. This wariness is ethically justified, yet it does mean that the monograph ends up falling somewhat short of its initial gestures towards a distinctively working-class strain of literary experimentalism.

On the issue of biography in criticism, Williams’s book can be productively contrasted with Carole Sweeney’s *Vagabond Fictions: Gender and Experiment in British Women’s Writing, 1945–1970* (2022). This pair of critical monographs makes for a close comparison because, as well as overlapping in subject matter, they were published by Edinburgh University Press in consecutive years, and Williams even reviewed Sweeney’s text.¹¹ Although Williams cites Sweeney’s theoretical arguments when considering ‘the highly vexed question of biography, especially for women writers’, the two critics ultimately adopt different approaches in practice.¹² Sweeney draws on the details of Quin’s life in a measured way, suggesting that it is ‘likely that Quin wrote into her novels some versions of her own unrealised fantasies and Oedipal struggles and then, later, her experiences with drug-taking, bisexuality and *ménages à trois*, but as important is the poetic form which these assume

in her writing'.¹³ Viewing the life and the work as equally 'important', Sweeney seeks to identify a 'refractive' rather than 'overly reflective' relationship between the two.¹⁴ Williams's Introduction appears to set the scene for a similarly 'refractive' approach, as she declares that her study 'reads writing and life alongside each other' in order to 'reveal multidirectional resonances between the two' (p. 6). However, this approach is not borne out in the rest of Williams's monograph.

Reticent to draw too many links between the art and the life, Williams largely confines Quin's biographical details to the vignettes between chapters. These 'interchapters' (p. 18) offer enticing glimpses into Quin's experiences of poverty, her attachment to the sea, her sexual liaisons, her restless travelling and her psychological breakdowns. In terms of placement, the vignettes often fall immediately after the chapter of literary analysis to which they are most relevant (for instance, the critical chapter on the sexually-adventurous novel *Three* is followed by a biographical vignette on Quin's own unconventional sexual behaviour). The vignettes therefore shed some light on Quin's work in retrospect, yet resist serving as a straightforward interpretative lens. Williams gives the reader even more interpretative free rein by suggesting that they may wish to 'improvise an oblique reading approach', which could involve reading 'all of the interchapters in sequence, either before or after the literary critical chapters, rather than reading the book in the order it appears' (pp. 17–18). By inviting the reader to consume her book as they see fit, Williams herself shies away from identifying connections between Quin's work and her life, leaving this task in the reader's hands instead.

Williams's own literary analysis is radically formalist, instead of biographical. Agreeing with novelist Deborah Levy's claim that critics have not yet given Quin 'the respect of close reading',¹⁵ Williams commits to 'a continual return to the detail of [Quin's] prose' (p. 8). The central question posed by her Introduction pertains to form: 'What is [...] precarious writing like?' (p. 8). Looking at the totality of Williams's analysis, it appears that 'precarious writing' can refer to a diverse range of textual phenomena. To take one example, Williams offers a convincing reading of Quin's *Berg* that connects the novel's working-class setting with its literary techniques. The text's accrual of 'rumped, broken, chipped and dirty details' (p. 33) signifies material precarity, while its references to blurred windows draw attention to an unstable relationship between language and reality (pp. 29–31). In this chapter, Williams cleverly uses the word 'precarious' to 'indicate both the instability of the book's narrative perspective and phenomenological world [...] and [the protagonist's] impoverished surroundings' (p. 34). This reading provides persuasive

evidence for the book's claim regarding Quin's idiosyncratic creation of anti-realist working-class literature.

Other chapters, however, employ the term 'precarious' in looser ways, such that it begins to lose touch with its materialist meaning. In her chapter on Quin's *Three*, Williams's focus is on the novel's 'collage form' (p. 63) and its disruption of conventional relationship norms, representing 'the irreducible complexity, messiness and *precariousness* of interpersonal experiences' (pp. 78–79, my emphasis). Later, Williams's reading of *Passages* describes Quin's 'shifting and *precarious* forms of writing' (p. 109, my emphasis) in terms of resistance to cultural binaries and to narrative closure. Changing tack again, Williams's analysis of *Tripticks* notes 'the *precarious* allegiance to both depth and surface' (p. 141, my emphasis) within the text. Williams defends her 'capacious, flexible' (p. 8) use of the term 'precarious', yet the diversity of its applications results in a scattered approach that somewhat dilutes the power and focus of her argument. Once detached from material conditions, 'precarious' seems to be little more than a synonym for 'experimental'.

Williams's engagement with Quin's archive displays the same formalist leanings as the rest of her study. Considering that the overuse of archival material tends to be another fraught issue in feminist recuperative criticism,¹⁶ Williams's ample use of Quin's unpublished work is perhaps surprising. Williams states that she consciously uses 'the same methods for reading unpublished and published writing' in order to 'resist [...] hierarchies that reify published works over and above archival materials' (p. 13). Demonstrating her commitment to this stance, she takes a substantial detour in the middle of her Introduction in order to analyse a single phrase ('the rain walk designing its own shadow') that Quin uses in a letter to her then-lover Robert Sward, and then later reuses (in slightly altered forms) in numerous other letters, an unpublished poem, a published short story and the novel *Passages* (pp. 9–13). This moment of cross-textual analysis, drawing together works considered 'life-writing' with those considered 'fiction', could have been an opportunity to uncover resonances between life and art. Yet Williams continues to hew closely to formalism, analysing the phrase in question in terms of techniques of 'reiteration' and 'stuttering' (p. 13), which seem only faintly connected to her focus on precarity.

Retrieving a lost woman writer from history is certainly a 'precarious' task. Williams takes an inventive and risky approach: she leans heavily towards formalism, deliberately challenging the conventions of recuperative scholarship. Her stance is an honourable reaction against sexist uses of biographical criticism and has the benefit of introducing us to Quin as a serious avant-garde writer, whose texts are worthy of study

regardless of her sensational life. However, by her reliance on the term ‘precarious’, Williams sets up expectations of a timely materialist analysis of Quin’s writing career—expectations that she cannot fully meet while refraining from biographical criticism. Williams may claim that Quin’s ‘living conditions [...] were profoundly and inextricably bound up with and in the specific experimental forms of [her] writing’ (pp. 7–8), yet she structures her study as if attempting to extricate one from the other. Quin’s oeuvre—being simultaneously auto-fictional and formally experimental—might be better suited to a manner of reading that unites both formal and biographical details. As it is, Williams offers us a powerful but partial glimpse of what makes Quin compelling to a contemporary audience weathering our own age of precarity.

Further Reading

- Bennett, Claire-Louise. Introduction to *Passages*, by Ann Quin, v–ix. Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2021.
- Jordan, Julia. *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Mitchell, Kaye, and Nonia Williams, eds. *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.
- Radford, Andrew, and Hannah Van Hove, eds. *British Experimental Women’s Fiction, 1945–1975: Slipping Through the Labels*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.
- Sweeney, Carole. *Vagabond Fictions: Gender and Experiment in British Women’s Writing, 1945–1970*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.
- Williams, Nonia. ‘(Re)turning to Quin: An Introduction’. *Women: A Cultural Review* 33, no. 1 (2022): 2–17.

Notes

- 1 Nonia Williams, *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 17. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 2 Claire-Louise Bennett, Introduction to *Passages*, by Ann Quin (Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2021), v.
- 3 Noam Chomsky, ‘Plutonomy and the Precariat’, *The Huffington Post*, May 8, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/plutonomy-and-the-precari_b_1499246.
- 4 Mark Rice-Oxley and Patrick Butler, ‘Cash, credits and crisis: life in the new European “precariat”’, *The Guardian*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/15/cash-credits-and-crisis-life-in-the-new-european-precariat>.
- 5 Carole Sweeney, *Vagabond Fictions: Gender and Experiment in British Women’s Writing, 1945–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 207.

- 6 Nonia Williams, '(Re)turning to Quin: An Introduction', *Women: A Cultural Review* 33, no. 1 (2022): 4.
- 7 Chapters on Quin in recent academic books include: Carole Sweeney, 'Ann Quin: Forms Forming Themselves', in *Vagabond Fictions: Gender and Experiment in British Women's Writing, 1945–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 205–45; Nonia Williams, "'Designing Its Own Shadow": Ann Quin's Reiterative Experimental Processes', in *British Experimental Women's Fiction, 1945–1975: Slipping Through the Labels* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 195–213; Julia Jordan, 'Accidental Subjects, or Ann Quin's Literature of Possibility', in *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 140–165; Nonia Williams, 'Ann Quin: "infuriating" Experiments?', in *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s*, eds. Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 143–159.
- 8 For a touchstone text within the academic revival of mid-century British literature, see Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 9 Williams, '(Re)turning', 15.
- 10 Williams, '(Re)turning', 4.
- 11 Nonia Williams, 'Gendered Experiments: Beyond the Realist/Experimental Divide', review of *Vagabond Fictions: Gender and Experiment in British Women's Writing, 1945–1970*, by Carole Sweeney, *Women: A Cultural Review* 33, no. 1 (2022): 149–152.
- 12 Sweeney, *Vagabond Fictions*, 33.
- 13 Sweeney, *Vagabond Fictions*, 217.
- 14 Sweeney, *Vagabond Fictions*, 217.
- 15 Deborah Levy, 'Ann Quin and Me', *Music & Literature* No. 7 (Houston, TX: Taylor Davis-Van Atta, 2016), 119.
- 16 In her introduction to the special issue of *Women: A Cultural Review*, Williams includes the reassurance that the issue's contributors are 'cautious and self-conscious about their engagement with Quin's archive materials', which are used in a supplementary way to 'extend and enrich readings of her published texts'. See Williams, '(Re)turning', 15.

Author Biography

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