

Truth recovery: an interview with Lance Olsen

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INTERVIEW



5 Truth recovery: an interview with Lance Olsen

Rupert Loydell

School of Writing and Journalism, University of Falmouth, Falmouth, United Kingdom

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15 Lance Olsen is author of more than 30 books of and about innovative writing, including, most recently, the novels *Skin Elegies* (Olsen 2021) and *Always Crashing in the Same Car* (Olsen 2023). His short stories, essays, and reviews have appeared in hundreds of journals and anthologies. A Guggenheim, Berlin Prize, D.A.A.D. Artist-in-Berlin Residency, Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, two-time N.E.A. Fellowship, and Pushcart Prize recipient, as well as a Fulbright Scholar, he teaches experimental narrative theory and practice at the University of Utah.

20 This interview is a dialogue about the blurring of fiction and non-fiction, creative writing's place and role in the **twenty-first** Century, and Olsen's commitment to experimental writing and his use of processes, concepts and ideas to subvert what many regard as traditional writing and storytelling. It also considers how narrative can be deconstructed, reconfigured, re-constructed and re-invigorated; the possibilities and ethics of remix and appropriation; the failures of mainstream publishing; and how we can or might represent our complex and confusing lives on the page. Olsen's use of (at times oppositional and contradictory) multiple or polyphonic voices, changing points of view, stylistic mutation and contrasting forms, along with a frequent blurring of story, script, prose poetry and stream-of-consciousness writing facilitate and encourage the reader to assemble their own narratives, without this ever being anything other than enjoyable.

30 It is to be hoped that the interview will encourage and assist others to rethink creative-writing pedagogy, or at least consider the theoretical assumptions behind normative teaching and writing.

35 As noted in this interview, I have been using Lance Olsen's two 'anti-textbooks' *Rebel Yell* (Olsen 1998) and *Architectures of Possibility* (2012) to teach undergraduate creative writing for many years now. Both are full of wide-ranging discussion, how-to advice, examples and interviews, both overflow with an informed enthusiasm and sense of playful subversion. Only recently did I come across examples of Olsen's fiction, including advance notification of *Always Crashing In The Same Car: A Novel After David Bowie* (Olsen 2023), which prompted me to contact the author regarding an interview, purchase some of his other works, and request a review copy of the new novel. Having read and reviewed (Loydell 2023) *Always Crashing In The Same Car* as well as reading *Time Famine* (Olsen 1996) and dipping into *Dreaming of Debris* (Olsen 2017) and *My Red Heaven* (Olsen

45 **CONTACT** Rupert Loydell ✉ rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk

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2019) I decided I was ready to discuss this intriguing author's writing processes, ideas and texts.

Rupert Loydell: So tell me about your recent book *Always Crashing In The Same Car* (Olsen 2023).

Lance Olsen: It makes me tremendously happy that *Always Crashing* appeared on Valentine's Day this year, because it's both a conflicted love song to Bowie, and an unswerving one to the idea of not-knowing. That's flagged by the use of that 'after' in the title. It's a book that comes *after* Bowie left the building, of course, but, perhaps more important, it's a book *after* – in the sense of *searching for* – Bowie, that black-box being. In other words, it's about how we read others and how reading is always-already an existential problem.

RL: Is it the person, personas, or the music you respond to?

LO: All of the above. When I launched into the initial research, dived into the biographies, I quickly realized each bit of information described a different Bowie, and, in an illuminating sense, the biographies were spiritual autobiographies about their authors rather than about their purported subject. The Bowie we all think we may know was persona all the way down.

My own spiritual autobiography with respect to him goes back to my teens, when I first met his music through *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* (Bowie 1972) and *Diamond Dogs* (Bowie 1974). I was taken with the music itself, with Bowie's relentless reinvention of it and himself, but also with his lyrics (often based on Burroughs/Gysin's cutup technique [cf. Burroughs 1960]), which were frequently about some version of Major Tom in particular, and space in general. Those have been his signature metaphors – not for freedom and possibility, as one might guess, but rather for existential estrangement, loneliness, contingency, the bottomless dread of drift, from 'Space Oddity' (Bowie 1969) to 'Ashes to Ashes' (Bowie 1980), 'Moonage Daydream' (on Bowie 1972), 'Starman' (on Bowie 1972), 'Life on Mars?' (Bowie 1973), 'Dancing Out in Space' (on Bowie 2013), 'Born in a UFO' (on Bowie 2013), 'Lazarus' (on Bowie 2016), '★ (Blackstar)' (on Bowie 2016), and so forth.

Bowie spoke, in other words, to the apocalyptic outsider in so many of us, that dislocation so many of us feel as we tumble into our teens.

More recently – since maybe the late nineties – I became intrigued as well with Bowie's explorations of what it feels like being the opposite of young and yet still committed to volatile Heraclitean experimentation.

RL: What does writing a novel in the form of fictional biography achieve?

LO: Maybe this is the richest terrain I wanted to think about: how (if at all) we can tell the past with something even close to accuracy – how biography teaches us less about individuals, and more, at the end of the day, about how difficult, if not impossible, truth recovery is.

What is our relationship to yesterday?

In what ways can we hope to tell it 'accurately'?

Why is it so complicated to try?

I suppose the best label for the genre I'm working in here, at least in my mind, is historiographic metafiction – Linda Hutcheon's term for narratives about history that understand

that they are always only narratives about 'history', which can never manifest history, but rather only the problematization of the notion of pastness (cf. Hutcheon 1988).

95 RL: At various points in *Always Crashing in the Same Car* (Olsen 2023) we get different versions of the same events or conversations. I'm particularly thinking of an episode where we get two versions of Iman (Bowie's wife) speaking and/or thinking about her relationship to Bowie. Is this two sides of the coin, or a way to present split between public and private?

100 LO: I like the way you tend to refer to *Always Crashing* as a book rather than novel. I'm sure we'll get into this later on, but I want to underscore now that I don't conceptualize what I'm doing in terms of what we used to call 'fiction', or 'nonfiction', or 'poetry', or whatever, but instead simply as writing practices in the term's broadest sense.

105 To your question: It's both of those things, for sure, but also at root it's exactly about that impossibility of truth recovery when it comes either to cultural or personal memory. At a certain point, we can only know the past through the documents it has left behind – texts that are nothing if not profoundly troubling and troubled versions of the 'past'. And what happens, as in the case you mention, when we have no access to any documents whatsoever – the private moments, for instance, between Bowie and Iman? What do we do with that fruitful non-space?

110 That's part of the reason I was drawn formally to collage here. *Always Crashing* is a prismatic exploration of Bowie through multiple and incommensurate voices, manifold viewpoints – the chameleonic musician himself, an academic trying to compose a critical monograph about him, friends, lovers, musicologists, and so on – that underscore the Nietzschean notion of perspectivism: that so much, if not everything, comes down to one's position with respect to a subject.

115 RL: Is there any difference between appropriating from a real person, rather than text from a book?

120 LO: You know, I'm not sure. In some unsettling way, people are biological texts we read just like we read print and digital ones, an idea that puts me in mind of Bakhtin's thoughts about what he calls unfinalizability (cf. Bakhtin 1984). Our instinct when meeting a new text or person, he says, is to attempt to categorize them, pin them down through various interpretive strategies, which is to say finalize them. But in fact, he goes on, that attempt is ever doomed to failure. The more we read a person, the more we read any text, the more complex, contradictory, richer said text becomes.

125 RL: I share with you an interest in and use of processes and concepts, particularly collage and mash-up, to sidestep traditional narrative forms. You've championed these not only throughout your own fiction but also in books which theorize and contextualise creative writing, such as *Architectures of Possibility* (Olsen 2012) and the earlier *Rebel Yell* (Olsen 1998), both of which I've used in my university teaching. We're a century on from Modernism, surrounded by new technologies and creative possibilities, yet the general public still mostly demand printed novels that adhere to an eighteenth Century way of presenting real life. Do you despair? Are things going to change?

135 LO: Oh, I despair all the time. And never. I continuously urge my students to ask themselves: How can I tell the contemporary without wholly embracing or wholly abandoning

the past: Most, alas, continue to hand in stories that want to be films or video games about dragons, zombies, and slashers when they grow up. But some hear me, feel my question a constructive challenge, and strike out in search of their own answers, a journey which invariably changes how they write and why.

140 This reminds me that innovation has always been a minority report about a minority sport, the research and development wing of culture, because its base assumption – that there are always other ways to write the text of the text, the text of our lives, and therefore the text of the world – is unnerving. It demands a choreography of perpetual interrogation and disorientation.

145 RL: How do you balance instructions about the basics of writing – plot, narrative, dynamics, voice – with your own preferences for experiment and play, and theoretical discussions about how text works or might work? There are plenty of experimental authors around now to consider (my list would include William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Richard Brautigan, 150 William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Philip K Dick, David Markson, Ann Quin, Alan Burns and many others, along with lots of poets) and plenty of theoretical writing by the likes of Mark Amerika (2011), Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) and David Shields (2010) that discuss it, but I find myself battling against a seemingly conservative majority who want blockbuster films, simplistic novels and yes/no answers. Are you old and cynical too?

155 LO: I use those basics of writing both to teach my students how to read (most don't know how to do that in any nuanced way; instead, they know how to *watch*), and point out how those basics come to us already theorized. One can't tell without first conceptualizing how and why one is telling. Usually this is done unconsciously, as a mode of cultural indoctrination, but my job, as I see it, is to make students conscious of the implications 160 of what they're doing and to what purpose.

No doubt: most 'readers' are in search, not of complication, but spectacle, entertainment, comfort, pathways into not thinking, into reinforcing what they believe without reflection. Needless to say, this makes conservatives and late-stage capitalism very, very happy.

165 RL: This is an old question but I am going to ask it anyway. Are new publishing possibilities just changing the codex, the delivery system, for a text, or genuinely offering new ways of telling stories? If the latter, why are you still publishing books?

170 LO: Those writers you name above suggest radical narration still has a vital role to play in helping us discover vibrant modes of telling (and thereby changing) our current realities.

Hybrid narratives in particular, I would argue, are still the best delivery systems to delve into consciousness and language for extended periods of time.

175 Speaking of time, if in a different key, I just taught *The Sound and the Fury* (Faulkner 1929) last semester for the first time in, I want to say, thirty years, and the results were explosive. My students had simply never seen temporality undone, unlearned, as it is Benjy's section. That led to a cornucopia of intellectual and creative possibilities in the classroom, in their own writing, and in their thinking about how we have been taught to think about time inside narration and inside our lives.

180 But the big publishers in America haven't been interested in challenging writing practices for decades. That's the land for a handful of small, independent presses. Thank goodness they're still at it. How long they'll be able to last in our hyperconsumer prison house is

another question. You know as well as I that capitalism is omniphagic: it seems designed to absorb and neutralize the radical. I suspect it will get worse before it gets worse.

And that's to say nothing of the Anthropocene, Pandemicene, and accompanying geopolitical upheavals.

185 RL: Your earlier book *Time Famine* (Olsen 1996) seems rooted in what we might call slipstream, on the fringes of science fiction or alternate realities. It starts with the appalling idea of a BelsenLand theme park, dives into a possibly gratuitous sex scene and then introduces us to 'Mr Death Himself', and that's just Chapter 1. In the next 300 pages it
190 sprawls across myriad scenarios, conspiracy theories, dysfunctional political and social dystopias, and is at times reminiscent (in a good way!) of both Don DeLillo's and Thomas Pynchon's narratives. Why do so many experimental fictions try to deconstruct the world only to find themselves as enmeshed as their subjects?

195 LO: I can't answer for others committed to experimental writing practices, but the me who wrote *Time Famine* felt the need to be enmeshed in the atrocity exhibition of the present in order better to examine it, hyperbolize and satirize it, offer my own enmeshment up to readers through, as the SF theorist Darko Suvin has it, a process of estrangement and metaphorization so that we might be able to understand no one's going to get out of this one alive, that we're all complicit in our carnage carnival. (Suvin 2014)

200 RL: Is that what is at the heart the current, or at least your, aesthetics of experimentation? Can the 'carnage carnival' not be critiqued in other ways? Don't hyperbolism, satire, estrangement and metaphorization work against understanding, and inclusivity within a diverse and inclusive culture?

205 LO: I guess I'm less interested in inclusivity (that's one of those buzzwords I honestly don't understand the meaning of) than I am in an examined life and disruption – for those short flashes in which we can embrace such ideas in what Elizabeth Wurtzel called our Prozac Nation back in 1994.

210 This morning I came across this paragraph by Ottessa Moshfegh in *Bookforum* that speaks to this fiercely, at least in my mind:

I wish that future novelists would reject the pressure to write for the betterment of society. Art is not media. A novel is not an 'afternoon special' or fodder for the Twittersphere or material for journalists to make neat generalizations about culture. A novel is not BuzzFeed or NPR or Instagram or even Hollywood. Let's get clear about that. A novel is a literary work of art meant to expand consciousness. We need novels that live in an amoral universe, past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason. Novels like *American Psycho* and *Lolita* did not poison culture. Murderous corporations and exploitive industries did. We need characters in novels to be free to range into the dark and wrong. How else will we understand ourselves? (Moshfegh 2021)

220 I confess I get immediate crushes on imaginations like that.

RL: B.S. Johnson said that 'telling stories is telling lies' (Johnson 1964, 167), although this was really about how fiction (lying) might inform and present truth. We live in a time where many people are suspicious of the idea of truth, or certainly Truth, and more inclined towards the possibilities of truths plural. Can fiction help us understand this?
225 Or are you more interested in how language works than its content?

LO: I just have to take a moment before answering your question to tell you how much I adore B. S. Johnson's work. I taught *The Unfortunates* (Johnson 1969) last fall in my graduate Experimental Forms seminar, and it was such an intense joy getting to rediscover him with my students. That novel in a box about the slow death by cancer of the narrator's friend, Tony, wherein chapters can be shuffled, read in any order, proves a dismantling and revitalization of the tired trauma narrative, which usually works in an arc through a trauma to recuperation, healing, resolution – a Christian trajectory.

What's so powerful about Johnson's narrative is its suggestion through language, form, and content that loss and pain are everywhere, all the time; that we can't escape it, nor are we always lost in it – yet it's both, simultaneously. The sentences themselves are broken by white space, as you know, lack final punctuation, repeat phrasings obsessively, trail off in mid-thought, which is to say the text is about disease that enacts dis-ease, an autobiography that puts me in mind of works like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (Nelson 2015) and Carmen Machado's *In the Dream House* (Machado 2019) that write against the innocences of the contemporary memoir, which has ingrained into it a tranquilizing form, which, naturally, speaks to its current popularity.

In my own work, I can't distinguish between language, form, and content. The latter determines the former even as the former determines the latter. I simply lack the capacity to separate them in my head. I suppose that's one of the touch points I sense between my work and Johnson's, not to mention so many others who take innovation seriously, passionately, feverishly.

RL: How much information, be that location, character or action, do you think a reader requires before they can assemble story for themselves? What right does an author have to demand that their readers do the heavy lifting?

LO: Well, I should begin by saying it really depends on the reader. It depends on how much a person has already read, already thought and felt, the shape of that person's education, socio-economic status, age, curiosity capacity, ability to be fully present in a demanding text, and so on.

The problem in my mind isn't simply that people are reading less. It is also that they are reading easier, more naively. I'm talking about the nature of the narratives people experience daily – both inside and outside books. In *The Middle Mind*, Curtis White (White 2005) contends that the stories generated and sustained by the American political system, entertainment industry, and academic trade have helped teach us over the last half century or so by their insidious simplicity, plainness, and ubiquity how not to think for ourselves. Given the current global economic and political disasters, I doubt much needs to be said about how the political narratives have led to the 'starkest and most deadly' poverty of imagination, nor about how, 'on the whole, our entertainment ... is a testament to our ability and willingness to endure boredom ... and pay for it.' (White 2005, 5)

A little probably should be said, though, about White's take on the consequences of this dissemination of corporate consciousness throughout academia. For him, the contemporary university 'shares with the entertainment industry its simple institutional inertia'; 'so-called dominant "critical paradigms" tend to stabilize in much the same way that assumptions about "consumer demand" make television programming predictable.'

(White 2005, 14) If, in other words, our student-shoppers want to talk about video games, fan fiction, and *Sword & Sorcery* in the classroom, well, that's just what they're going to get to talk about, since that's how English departments fill seats, and filling seats is how they make money, and making money is what it's all about ... isn't it?

275 Unfortunately, the result – particularly in the wake of Cultural Studies – has been the impulse to eschew close, meticulous engagement with the page; to search texts 'for symptoms supporting the socio-political or theoretical template of the critic'; to flatten out distinctions between, say, the value of studying Ezra Pound, Lydia Davis, and Anne Carson, on the one hand, and Taylor Swift's oeuvre, YA novels, or *Minecraft*, on the other – and therefore unknowingly to embrace and maintain the very globalized corporate culture that Cultural Studies claims to critique.

280 What we are left with is the death of what I think of as the Difficult Imagination – that textured mode of discourse that often comes coupled with charges of exclusiveness, snobbery and elitism levelled by frustrated, faintly anxious readers at disruptive, transgressive, nuanced, intricate texts dedicated in myriad heterodox ways to confronting, complicating, interrogating, and even perhaps for moments short-circuiting the user-friendly narratives produced by hyperconsumerism that would like to see such narratives told and retold until they begin to pass for something like verities about aesthetics and the human condition.

285 I want texts to be less accessible, not more, demand greater labor on the part of readers, even a good degree of uneasiness, rather than effortlessness.

290 Why? Because I want to suggest that texts that make us work, make us think and feel in unusual ways, attempt to wake us in the midst of our dreaming, are more valuable epistemologically, ontologically, and socio-politically than texts that make us feel warm, fuzzy, and forgetful.

295 The interzone of impeded accessibility is an essential one for human freedom. In it, everything can and should be considered, attempted, and troubled. What is important about its products is not whether they ultimately 'succeed' (whatever we may mean when we say that word) or 'fail' (ditto – although, I do possess a special fondness for Beckett's Icarian dictum: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' [Beckett 1983, 7]). What is important is that they come into being often and widely, because in them we discover the perpetual manifestation of Nietzsche's notion of the unconditional, Derrida's of a privileged instability, Viktor Shklovsky's ambition for art and Martin Heidegger's for philosophy: the return, through entanglement and provocation (not predictability and ease) to perception and contemplation.

300 RL: How does failure assist in the writer ultimately succeeding? How has your commitment to experiment denied you a certain readership or reshaped your notions of failure and success, or indeed that commitment? Aren't you just recycling Modernist aesthetics? Why is the author entitled to demand anything of a reader?

310 LO: What great questions. I'm using 'failure' and 'success' metaphorically, as it were. That is, I used to know what those words mean, but, thankfully, I've gradually forgotten. What I mean to say is simply this: repeating what has already been done, trying to mimic, say, the latest *Sword & Sorcery* tropes, won't take a writer anywhere new, will let their work sink into cliché, which is to say will allow others to think through the writer, thereby producing yet another docile mind, which is to say another docile body.

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That puts me in mind of something Bowie said to Charlie Rose: 'It's only when you start to move slightly out of your depth, and you feel you're a little bit lost . . . that's when you're going to get something exciting going.' (Rose 1996) Risk yourself. Risk your art. Get yourself lost. Put yourself in a position where you constantly feel back on your heels. I've always found that's where docility ends.

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One can construct literary history in two ways: as a series of disruptions, or as a series of continuities. What actually seems to be the case is both at once, at least by my lights. So there's no contemporary experimental author I can think of who isn't simultaneously thinking through modernist aesthetics and moving beyond them. As Derrida often reminds us: the trace is always present.

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To your last point: I deeply believe, for the reasons I've outlined above, that we should learn to demand more of the reader, not less. As Nietzsche said, 'Blessed are the sleepy ones, for they shall soon drop off.' (Nietzsche 1883; 2005) Innovative writers want to wake people up in the midst of their dreaming.

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RL: How do you feel about David Shields' statement that he is 'interested in collage as an evolution beyond narrative' or his declaration that 'Everything I write [...] is to some extent collage'. (Shields 2010, 115) Is it, or is that just provocation?

LO: Shields is echoing earlier artists and writers like Robert Motherwell, who commented that 'Collage is the twentieth-century's greatest innovation' (Motherwell 1983, 271), and Donald Barthelme, who wrote that 'The principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century.' (in Harzinger 1997, 58)

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Perhaps it would be productive to point out the collage form actually goes back to at least to tenth-century Japan. So, at least from one angle, Shields's statement is a little late to the party, carries the look of provocation and insight without housing much of either.

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That said, as I mention above, collage in innovative writing practices (much less so, say, in art or in its filmic equivalent of montage) still can arrive as a productive shock that allows rich juxtaposition, contradiction, and an embrace of the multiple in all its potential on the page.

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RL: Could you unpick your statement which Shields quotes, where you say 'In collage, writing is stripped of the pretense of originality and appears as a practice of mediation, of selection and contextualization, a practice, almost of reading.' (Olsen in Shields 2010, 120) Are we all simply editors now? Does selection mean a pick'n'mix approach to everything? An inability to concentrate on anything other than the immediate and momentary? Is it just a foregrounding of how we have always read?

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LO: So I believe we need to separate out two modes of collage among others here.

First, there is the collage Shields is talking about, and which I address in the quote you and he cite. This is the sort that deals with isolating quotes or semi-quotes from other texts and creating one's own text out of them. That's the mode that had the most in common with, say, Braque's or Picasso's work. And that's the mode that takes extraordinarily little effort beyond the initial hunting, cutting up, placement, and rhythm. It's fun to do, and surprising to both reader and (to a lesser extent) author because it generates a semblance of the aleatoric, even as it is, as a rule, tightly controlled.

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The second mode – the one I’ve been exploring lately – is something else altogether. Or, more to the point, it’s related to the first in the way distant cousins are related. I’m trying to create fully imagined voices, characters, deep consciousnesses, ways of perceiving, points of view, styles, and forms, then letting them and their implied visions clash in larger texts to produce an aggregate about the impossibilities of aggregates, about the impossibility of full comprehension.

We’re therefore talking about the difference, say, between a collaged work by Hannah Höch and the extended radically different modes of consciousness and aesthetics embodied by Stephen, Bloom, and Molly in *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922), or, more recently, *Blood and Guts in High School* (Acker 1984), *Infinite Jest* (Wallace 1996), *House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000) and *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell 2004). That second mode does significantly more work, both aesthetically and philosophically, and on a significantly larger word-canvas.

RL: One of the things I am particularly interested in, and both *Reality Hunger* (Shields 2010) and your Bowie book (Olsen 2023) discuss and evidence this, is the way fiction has become less and less distinct as a genre. It’s unclear, for instance, whether books by Barry Lopez (e.g. Lopez 1979, 1998) or Annie Dillard (eg Dillard 1999) are nature writing, autobiography, science or stories, however the author or publisher choose to categorise them. Is this literary blurring going to continue? Is it symptomatic of our chaotic twenty-first Century or a welcome move?

LO: Over the last fifty or sixty years, I’d offer, we’ve been witnessing at the creative peripheries of our culture the proliferation of a postgenre composition that questions the need for discussing such apparently singular species as science fiction and what we once dubbed the postmodern, but now simply call our lives. We’ve also been witnessing the proliferation of a postcritical writing that questions the need for discriminating between such apparently singular species as theory and fiction, or the materiality of the text and nonfiction, or whatever. We’ve been witnessing, to put it somewhat differently, what Steven Connor addresses as the slow ‘collapse of criticism into its object’ (Connor 1997, 227) – witnessing, that is, the advent of performative critifictions (a term coined by Raymond Federman [cf. Federman 1993]) dedicated to effacing, or at least deeply and richly complicating, the accepted boundaries between privileged and subordinate discourses, between genres themselves.

Another way of saying this – and this takes us back to something we talked about earlier – my writing is dedicated to figuring out how to narrativize the contemporary without abandoning or perpetuating yesterday.

RL: Where is fiction going? Or if that’s too unfair a question, where is your writing going next?

LO: What’s wonderful to me is that I have absolutely no idea. That’s why I’ll pick up the next book I’ll pick up with both excitement and trepidation, why I’ll sit down to write tomorrow morning with that delicious feeling of not having a clue about what I’m doing, adrift in a space of unknowing. If it’s not that, I’m seriously not sure why any of us are doing what we’re doing.

RL: Thank you for the books and your time answering these questions.

LO: Thank you, Rupert. What a pleasure your sharp questions have been to think about.

Notes on contributor

Rupert Loydell is Senior Lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride*, a contributing editor to *International Times* and a widely published poet. His critical writing has appeared in *Punk & Post-Punk* (which he is on the editorial board of), *New Writing*, *Revenant*, *The Journal of Visual Art Practice*, *Text*, *Axon*, *Musicology Research*, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, and he has contributed chapters to *Brian Eno. Oblique Music* (Bloomsbury, 2016), *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), *Music in Twin Peaks: Listen to the Sounds* (Routledge, 2021) and *Bodies, Noise and Power in Industrial Music* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

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