

## Seán M. Williams (The University of Sheffield): Public Modern Languages as 'Actual Work'

On 29 October 2017, I presented part of Radio 3's *Sunday Feature*. The weekly 45-minute 'in-depth documentary' slot was this time split into two, for two of the 2016 AHRC and BBC New Generation Thinkers. 'My' half concerned German *Lieder* and culture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09bx511>). Broadly speaking, it was based on my research, and three of my academic articles on everyday life in particular — although these were not explicitly mentioned in the programme, of course. And the programme's angle (the *Lieder* tradition) was certainly not the topic that anchored my research; it was rather a title aimed at an existing set of listeners familiar with, and interested in, classical songs. Since becoming an AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinker in 2016, media work has been an integral part of my research activity, which concerns cultural legacies of the division of labour since the eighteenth century and related subjects (everyday life, consumerism, and so on; the history of the hairdresser is my main case in point). I and my research have appeared on television (BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Arts), and more substantially on radio: locally (BBC Shropshire and BBC Sheffield), nationally (BBC Radio 3 - *Freethinking*, *The Essay*, *The Sunday Feature*, *Jazz Record Requests* - and independent online programming), and internationally: the BBC World Service and Swiss national radio (SRF2 Kultur). Whenever I conceive a new research article, I now imagine from the outset its relevance to public discourse via the media, in addition to its original contribution to scholarship. This is not only or primarily because of "impact" considerations, but an essential part of my academic practice that motivates me, and is in keeping with the scholarly method I have come to adopt.

An otherwise supportive and congenial colleague wrote to me having found the aforementioned *Sunday Feature* entertaining, but asked whether I had done any 'actual' work of late. Others have asked if I really have time for this 'extra' work, with the implication that I should not *make* time for it. As fun as it was, the programme had in fact entailed effort that I, the BBC and fortunately my University considered work: writing the script and discussing the topic at length with the producer, deciding on interviewees (as befits a feature rather than a lecture format), travelling to London and Birmingham to interview my guests — not to mention driving in circles in a car park for a cameo of my car, while I attempted to pull the programme together in as casual and 'listenerly' a way as possible. (Only for most of the car cameo to be cut in the final edit...) Within the context of the modern, British university, I consider such activities not only work, but fundamentally also part of my identity as a working 'researcher'. What my colleagues meant by work, though, was a particular and supposedly higher kind of intellectual and institutionalized effort: the peer-reviewed publication.

Scholarship can and should be historicized. And within the history of scholarship, a professionalization of the academic that privileges the peer-reviewed publication at the expense of other forms of dissemination is a recent and, by now, short-lived phenomenon -

thanks in part to the revised structure of the UK's Research Excellence Framework for 2021. Many of the critics we cite in so many of our peer-reviewer reports were or are themselves public intellectuals, or academics as well known for being an entertaining 'talking head' as they were or are for writing insightful and substantial prose. I do not only mean those who have become celebrities: where would Cultural Studies or public discourse be without Adorno - who spoke on TV about the uncritical potential of pop songs about the Vietnam war - or Slavoj Žižek? I also mean those lesser-known but award-winning presenters, who at the same time remain active and respected academics: notably, Amanda Vickery. Publishing for peers is crucial if our discipline is to advance intellectually; but writing and speaking for a broader public is as important, not least for a vulnerable discipline's survival. Would Classics in UK universities have survived as well without a Mary Beard? Personally, I doubt it.

What is more, in subjects such as ours, the greatest intellectual paradigm shifts have been prompted, consciously or not, in the cultural, lived experience of academics — and the everyday conversations of which those academics were a part. The worldwide 1968 movement, fifty years ago, caused such a radical re-thinking of academic work: the topics studied, the methods and style adopted, in short a new British Cultural Studies and renewed interest in the everyday and material culture came about that is now so canonical. Indeed, in a purely academic mode of REFable outputs, articles and books in Cultural Studies risk becoming ossified, too removed from the liveliness and controversy with which a critical academic endeavor must begin. German Cultural Studies, or *Kulturwissenschaft*, has a much a longer history than its British counterpart (and to its credit a more politically heterogeneous approach), but again emerged from thinkers' rootedness in what is popularly, oppressively called the 'real world'. Such a genesis of critical thought has a very long, even 'enlightened' tradition. Schiller announces his journal *Die Horen* in 1794 with the following aim: 'So weit es tunlich ist, wird man die Resultate der Wissenschaft von ihrer scholastischen Form zu befreien und in einer reizenden, wenigstens einfachen, Hülle dem Gemeinsinn verständlich zu machen suchen' ['Insofar as it is possible, we shall seek to free the results of academic thought from all their scholastic form, and to make them comprehensible to common sense in an appealing, or at least a simple way'].<sup>1</sup> The journal contained some of Schiller's most profound essays. However, Schiller's aim was not the democratisation or enfranchisement of knowledge through what we would now call 'public engagement'; indeed, in his invitation earlier that year, he explicitly bans topics that merely 'interest' the learned reader or 'satisfy' the non-learned one (as well as, more famously, religious and political matters). No, the point of the publication — and the purpose of Schiller writing and publishing for the public — is instruction, education, and, for the scholarly world, a *freer* means of research and a *fruitful* exchange of ideas.<sup>2</sup> In other words, opening oneself up to the world enriches one's own thinking, even

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Vermischte Schriften*, ed. by Herbert Meyer, Weimar 1958 (*Nationalausgabe*, vol. 22), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

if this is presented in an accessible form. If we turn to writers in late eighteenth-century England, meanwhile, Samuel Johnson's character Imlac in *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759) says: 'To talk in publick, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire, and answer inquiries, is the business of the scholar'.<sup>3</sup> Of course, time has moved on, and today we have celebrity academics such as Simon Schama or David Starkey. Hence Imlac's next sentence is not so relevant: the scholar 'wanders about the world without pomp or terror, and is neither known nor valued but by men like himself'. Nevertheless, in my view as in Johnson's or Schiller's, it is not the role of academics of the humanities in the media merely to pass on information in a comprehensible way, embodying expertise. Rather, we can today, as in the eighteenth century, think out loud, listen, and argue — much as many of us like to do with our students in seminars, or at conferences. In this way, contemporary media engagement is merely a reflection and extension of everyday interactions, in a non-academic sphere. Good programming, producers like to remind us, is *conversational*. Precisely for this reason I welcome the title of the AHRC and BBC scheme for media engagement as New Generation *Thinkers* rather than 'experts'. The latter formulation would suggest a one-way street, whereby the academic presents their findings to the world - without the public debate on which the humanities thrive, and have thrived throughout history. As the now notorious saying here in Britain goes, this country "has had enough of experts". It needs more thinkers.

My own research began with, and still chiefly concerns, the Enlightenment, but I would also add that it is not only the spirit of this historical age - and the birthplace of the modern university academic, by the way - which has led to my enthusiasm for media engagement. My scholarly method, too, lends itself well to public debate. I am sometimes asked (and I have often asked myself) whether the topics I explore fall within history, literary or cultural studies. In the Enlightenment, these subjects were one and the same; and I consider myself, following in the German tradition, simply a historicist. But I realise now that an aborted PhD programme at the University of California, Berkeley, influenced me critically more than I could imagine at the time. Despite the flaws of "New Historicism", which is nowadays neither new nor as anti-formalist as it was at its conception, it is a literary, cultural attitude that I still try to bring to bear on texts. I am a literary scholar not because I think that all culture is text (which would then entail that literature is the prime self-reflexive form - and sum - of culture), but rather because the subjects I am intrigued by - take consumerism as a case in point - did not come about by radical increases in wages or decreases in prices, for example. The rise in modern consumption was due instead to new structures (such as the family as an economic unit) and, above all, in changing attitudes and beliefs. These are all best represented, explored critically, and re-imagined creatively in literature. So I am a literature student, historian and cultural critic - a not-so-new historicist. And for New Historicists especially, the *anecdote* is as important as the literary quotation or empirical fact: a way of

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, ed. by J P Hardy, Oxford (1988) p. 18.

researching that makes for a good story in radio and television programming. A producer will often ask: “do you have an anecdote you can open with?” So in a way, I might call my method of working “public historicism”, or a German historicist-inflected “public modern languages” — though this is a subjective, pragmatic and slightly self-satirising point derived from my (limited) practice, rather than a properly theoretical claim. “Public History”, like “Public Humanities”, has itself become an academic discipline, which tends to debate questions surrounding the democratization or enfranchisement that can emerge from media history or media humanities, and has given rise to modules, textbooks and — in Sheffield — an MA programme for a while.<sup>4</sup> Practices and conceptions of “Public Modern Languages” would seem ripe for similar, sustained academic discussion.

To return to practicalities, within the modern, bureaucratic university it is welcome that the latest incarnation of the impact agenda promotes professional recognition for such activities that were once, and are again, part of what it could mean to be a scholar. Critics — and cynics — may well respond that when an activity becomes professionally recognised, it quickly becomes subject to institutional audit. And that is true: I am asked by Impact Consultants for the listener figures for a programme (about 100,000 for the average *Sunday Feature*), or I am supposed to document whenever a continuity presenter introduces a Haydn song by reference to a fact concerning the composer’s cultural context that was mentioned in my programme, which in turn should link back to a publication. The diligence that is required can be mildly irritating, but it is not invidious. Metrics mean cash in the impact game (and thus our institutional survival as Germanists), but they do not have to be the real reason we play it. And whatever our motivations, they do not have any influence on what we can or cannot say when researching or making a programme. Institutions can impinge on our critical and creative thinking, to be sure - I have long been interested in them, and such was the subject of my first edited volume - but they also value, and pay us for, our research activity that is our vocation. Admittedly, there also exists the threat of more institutional management and interference as a result of the increased significance of impact in REF2021 - attempts at which I have experienced myself. But it remains the responsibility of the academic to make clear that impactful activity such as media work is an integral part of one’s own research, the success of which depends on the academic’s own relationship with the sector and public, and which in REF2021 will still be assessed in terms of a star rating by *disciplinary* peers. Media work is not, and should not be conceived as, (mere) promotion of a completed or ongoing project.

Whenever I make an argument along these lines among sceptical colleagues, they usually reply that while I may be free to say whatever I like, I am restrained in how I say it. Put another way, I am confined by what the Frankfurt School would call the 'culture industry' and its capitalist straightjacket, or its concern about listener figures — both of which are said

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<sup>4</sup> For reflections by esteemed and prominent figures, see *History and the Media*, ed. by David Cannadine, London 2004.

to water-down the points I might wish to make into curiously sellable factoids or amusing anecdotes. TV and radio becomes suspect: hardly the cradle of critical thought. (Why then, did Adorno utilize it?) I wonder whether my colleagues have actually listened to the style of the apparently most respected and canonical “media academics” such as Isaiah Berlin on the radio, or the sentences of Kenneth Clark — whose TV series *Civilisation* has oddly been held up in many a conversation I’ve had as the height of academic calibre. These two ‘great men’ in the history of media academics could be as conversational as many academic presenters today. After all, Clark’s series was subtitled *A Personal View*.

To me, the real difference between Berlin or Clark and younger scholars starting out in the media today is the amount of air time devoted to one individual speaking, let alone lecturing: contemporary programmes more often include a multitude of voices, and a range of settings. Critics may interpret this as a decrease in the attention span of the general public, or in the patronizing attitude of the media, who do not trust that the public can cope with more apparently rigorous material (quite aside from the fact that the BBC was as much set up to *entertain* as it was to *inform*). In Habermasian terms, a programme’s *montage* is typical of the cultural industry’s contortion of *discontinuities* into an apparently *continuous* argument; if it were poetry, such a technique would defamiliarise – but as popular, public critique it is merely consumed.<sup>5</sup> I disagree. In my limited experience, these programmes follow new and varied formats not least because they are the result of a collaborative effort with producers who are themselves creative and critically-informed professionals, not to mention intelligent *collaborators*. The programmes are not of just one person talking, but an exchange of ideas and creation of an argument by a production team, which includes the academic as one important voice, but one voice of many; and they are the result of unscripted and informal interviews prior to any recording. In other words, programme-making can entail at least *two* types of conversations: those that lead to the programme, and those of the programme itself. Accordingly, in REF terms these conversations lead to multiple types of impact — including impact on the academic.

This historical, stylistic shift in programme-making with academics mirrors the changes currently taking place in other areas of academic endeavour, for example the increase in collaborative research projects within the humanities. Reflecting on how and why I have worked with the media, I have experienced academic labour in that sphere chiefly as a *loss of sole control* over the ideas I personally disseminate, and characterize in my media persona. At times this is laughable — I was dubbed a ‘hairstyling historian’ in one programme by either a witty producer or one momentarily unaware of linguistic ambiguity. But the experience has not been lamentable. On the contrary, I have thereby gained new conversation partners, and stimulating insights. The listeners and indeed the broadcasts are only part of the story. Significantly, producers and commissioners have conversed with me about the fundamental questions of my research, and why they matter (or to whom). I find these sorts of exchanges enormously fruitful and critically provocative for my return to my solitary study in spite of them being — or perhaps *precisely because* they are — ‘undisciplined’. I am grateful

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<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Konsumkritik - eigens zum Konsumieren’, *Frankfurter Hefte* 12 (9: September 1957), 641— 645 (p. 642).

to the producers I have worked with and hope to continue making programmes with, and to my own university for accepting such activity as academic 'work'.