Common Writing: Essays on Literary Culture and Public Debate

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In what was presumably a formative period for Stefan Collini (born in 1947) in the late 1960s, Perry Anderson published a powerful diatribe against English letters for its imperviousness to the great sweep of 20th-century social thought from Marx through Weber, Durkheim and Pareto onwards.⁽¹⁾ Historians were indentured to facts and sources and an impossible ideal of accurate reconstruction. Critics read texts too closely, missing the wood for the trees. Epistemological canons and aesthetic preferences were incidental to a political intransigence, sustaining the 19th-century liberal programme of minimal, incremental reform, containing radical energies to maintain constitutional continuity. Empiricism was associated with conservatism. Matters have never been so simple, and Collini has always stood athwart Anderson's scheme, mining particulars assiduously while maintaining political sympathies more readily associated with totalizing conjectures – his epistemological commitments and his political affiliations working at ostensibly crossed purposes.

Part of what the essays collected in *Common Writing* make clear is that staying faithful to the particulars does not necessarily limit horizons, precluding the construction of patterns or inhibiting the development of themes. Indeed part of the payoff of reading these essays together here – many readers will have come across them before, in earlier versions, in the *London Review of Books* and elsewhere – is that the several particulars begin to yield a clearer sense of the general preoccupations which unite them. One of those preoccupations is a concern for the fate of a certain form of human sensibility in modern life. This is manifest, for instance, in Collini's readings of the poetry of Philip Larkin.

So often Larkin captures our puzzlement about life, our “wondering what to look for” (as “Church Going” has it); something we shouldn't go on about too much but that nonetheless surrounds and threatens to make mock of our everyday activities. (p. 129-30)

Larkin reminds us that we are at once bodies and persons, kids fucking and taking pills and souls seeing through ‘sun-comprehending glass’ to ‘deep blue air’ beyond. We are beings at home (as Craig Raine put it, in a line Collini savours) both in Heaven and in Hull. This concern for the human condition is manifest too in Collini's essay on William Empson. Empson's regard for writing in the pastoral mode might seem dusty

and anachronistic. In Collini's hands it re-emerges as an estimation ahead of its time, a response less to the rhythms of a rural way of life permanently interrupted than to the bracing rigours of late modernity. Empson appreciates the pastoral – in Collini explanation – as a mode of perception at once 'steadying' and 'encompassing'. 'It allows room' for "the feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit". It registers the potential destructiveness of dwelling on that insight'. But it also preserves the insight, 'inducing both a sense of modesty or even humility and a sense of a soaring, untrammelled potential.'

Collini will not get carried away. He takes strong draughts of the Larkin-Amis correspondence as prophylactics against sentiment. He admits that the duo's determination to lower the tone grew tedious, and at times caustic. But it was better – perhaps because more faithful to contemporary experience, more sympathetic to most people's sense of the world – than most of the alternatives. Give Collini Amis and Larkin's gory 'abattoir' for 'sacred cows' over the nostalgia of Raymond Williams's 'tradition', the pathos of Richard Hoggart's municipal library or the grandeur of Lionel Trilling's lecture room in Morningside Heights any day of the week.

Still, Collini has never repudiated the purpose of these latter writers. He certainly honours Amis and Larkin for their wish to redeem certain distinctively human qualities and sensibilities in a time of adversity without too much ceremony. But his interest in Empson and his regard for Williams, Hoggart and Trilling indicates that Collini's intent goes beyond the documentary, the celebration of certain perishable particulars. There is an analytical drive to Collini's thinking which separates him from the heroes of 'the Movement'. His powers of observation are impressive, but one senses that he also shares the interest in processes of social transformation which Trilling, Williams and Hoggart sustained in their own particular ways.

Collini does not say so in as many words. He is perhaps more forthright in this book in describing his own methods and sensibility than he has been in the past. He is 'more drawn to the irregular particularity of the portrait than to the clean outlines of the theory', 'sceptical of explanations but hospitable to characterisations', 'more in danger of being a nuance bore than a concept nerd' (p. 5). Among Collini's subjects in these essays it is David Lodge whose criticism seems most nearly to approximate Collini's ideal, which helps us to date that sensibility in time – and further to support the proposition that there is more affinity between what he is attempting to do and the designs of a 'moral realist' like Trilling than the alignment with Larkin and Amis would suggest (p. 106). The kind of long-form essay the younger Lodge wrote and which Collini seems to prize 'might most economically be described as post-Leavis but pre-Theory'.

In publishing terms, its early natural habitats were periodicals like *Essays in Criticism* and *Critical Quarterly*, journals in which an undogmatic, conversable, but intensely serious form of literary criticism would be confident of reaching a like-minded audience (p. 149).

This is a mode of perception which came into its own in the second half of the 1940s. Essays on Raymond Williams and Richard Titmuss find Collini focusing on the 'crucial' qualities of this early post-war period.

To Collini's mind, however, the moment of this particular form of intellectual seriousness was ephemeral. This is an implication of his appraisal of the *New Left Review* at 50. The drive to explain leaves the would-be expositor reliant on abstract generalisations. Even under the enduring influence of Perry Anderson, who set out to solicit a more diverse range of viewpoints than the founding editors had favoured, *NLR* contributors still tend (in Collini's estimation) to use 'the familiar abstractions' to sustain their sense of purpose.

Even the term 'neoliberalism' may suggest something more monolithic than the confused and conflicting economic policies of the last few years. And when I'm told, for example, that 'the thought-world of the West' is increasingly determined by 'Atlantic-centred structures of wealth and power', dragging academic disciplines in tow, I find myself feeling that the search for pattern and causation is starting to lose sight of something no less important – the uneven,

awkward diversity that is apparent when viewed from a little closer (p. 169).

This is not an egregious misdemeanor. Collini acknowledges that this 'search for pattern and causation' too is a form of 'intellectual seriousness', the issue of a 'magnificently strenuous attempt to understand, to analyze, to theorize'. But it is not the kind of seriousness Collini himself practices. It makes him 'queasy' (p. 169). Contributors to *New Left Review* are of course not the only offenders here. 'All intellectual enquiry is see-sawing between abstraction and particularity', but Collini shows a marked reluctance to let tendencies toward abstraction pull him away from concrete particulars (p. 169). He remarks upon Ernest Gellner's 'constant urge to seek a wider understanding of forms of life than was held by the social agents themselves'. This was not an urge peculiar to Gellner. 'This, it might be said, has been the urge informing the very project of the social sciences' (p. 236–7). In Gellner it generated an 'imperious "theoretical" intent', leaving 'empirical detail subjugated to conceptual forcefulness' – a subjugation which makes Collini 'uneasy' (p. 240).

The drift of these critiques of the *New Left Review* and of Ernest Gellner might be thought to indicate that Collini disapproves of theory and abstract generality entirely. But this is of course not so. A narrow focus on empirical particulars is not sufficient. David Lodge's criticism came into its own when he let 'new theoretical ideas coming from Europe' leaven the close readings at which he excelled.

Drawing upon such sources did not mean abandoning his lucid, relaxed mode of writing, but it enabled him to supplement the kind of close reading he had been good at from the start with a broader grasp of patterns and archetypes, seeing beyond the surface texture of a novel to the structuring design of its narrative choices (p. 149).

It is judging precisely how far to let abstractions carry one away from empirical particulars that is hard, feeling the lift of the theory without losing one's grounding in the details, bringing the bigger picture into focus without flattening the 'surface texture' of the scene.

Collini's judgment in this regard is hard to fault. One way to think about his achievements would be to say that he has transcended the antinomy between fact-bound empiricism and theory-driven totality that had opened up in English letters by the late 1960s. Staying assiduously focused on particulars, he has found means of articulating a universal significance in the individual experience of human dissociation. Collini has redeemed a tight focus on particulars by using that intensity of focus to find a universal significance in a number of discrete cases, something 'common' about the singular 'writings' he studies, emanating not from general subjection to uniform sociological forces but from the pervasiveness of distinctively human responses to the world – the 'wondering what to look for', the 'feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit'. These are partial and fragmentary articulations of what it is that we have in common – but perhaps that is all that we can hope for, and all we need.

What the pathologies of English culture excluded, in Perry Anderson's estimation, was innovation in the 'strategic band' of the culture, the part of it 'which provides our fundamental concepts of man and society', concepts in turn which function as the 'essential axes of all social action'. Empiricism took each individual as self-contained. Totalising perspectives tended to subordinate individual agency to sociological forces, positing that each was a function of their social environment. If Collini has managed to transcend the antinomy between empiricism and totality which Anderson's essay itemised, has he disproved Anderson's accusation that the 'strategic band' of British culture was sterile, bereft of the crucial 'concepts of man and society' which might function as 'axes' of 'social action'?

Perhaps. The form of 'undogmatic, conversable and intensely serious' intellectual activity Collini finds thriving in the middle of the twentieth-century shows little sign of polarisation into reactionary empiricists and totalizing revolutionaries. The intellectual life Collini discovers – in these essays, and in his writings more broadly – does not feel inert. The region of British culture from which promising new

conceptualisations of 'man and society' might have emanated was characterised by significant innovation through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s – this is an implication we might draw from Collini's writings, from his emphasis on the 'post-Leavis and pre-Theory' period in British criticism, from his regard for Empson and Larkin and Amis, from his feel for the 'crucial' qualities of the immediate post-war period.

But then the major challenge is probably not disproving Anderson's characterisations of 20th-century British intellectual life – pointing to counter-examples, illuminating awkward particulars, demonstrating that matters were not so simple. More difficult is the task of venturing an account of developments in British culture during this period that goes beyond disproving Anderson's polemical account to construct an argument about what the relevant developments actually were. Collini leaves us with a fairly good sense of the kind of writing he admires, and the methodological commitments which underpin it. He is slower to say anything provocative about the significance of the development of this form of writing through the middle of the 20th century and the broader ferment in the 'strategic band' of the culture out of which it emerged. Shifts of prose style are indices to more deeply-seated changes, transformations of sensibility: any doubt about Collini's assent to that proposition can be removed by reference to his writings on T. S. Eliot's criticism in the 1920s and 1930s.(2) So were new 'fundamental concepts of man and society' forged during this period? Were new 'axes of social action' uncovered?

These are questions Collini is probably as well-placed as anyone writing today to answer. But answers are not forthcoming here. That may be because of Collini's scepticism towards explanation. Or it may be because Collini has not yet found the terms in which to make his answers to those questions plain. Collini is hospitable toward characterizations and sceptical toward explanations, but scepticism towards explanations can only ever go so far. The language out of which characterisations are constructed is shot through with explanatory significance: 'language carries its own DNA,' as Collini himself observes here, 'which works itself out without our intending or even being aware of it' (p. 315). The further one gets through this volume, and thus the further forward Collini's focus shifts in time, the more one senses that some such prefiguring of thought is afoot, so that the promise of his method is going unrealized because the terms in which to describe its results are still wanting.

Collini falls back repeatedly here on the language of 'individualism' and 'collectivism'. It was Collini himself who reminded us (in *Liberalism and Sociology*) that this terminology was an artefact of late Victorian conceptualisations of the 'social problem'.(3) It was Collini's Sussex colleague John Burrow – in his 1985 Carlyle Lectures – who challenged historians of the twentieth-century to abandon that terminology, seeing that it was essentially inadequate to the social complexity of the period they were trying to understand.(4)

And yet Collini's book reverts again and again to an omnibus 'individualism' in reckoning with his frustration about life in the late 20th-century: the 'relentless cultivation of individualism by both governments over the past 30 years' (p. 315); the 'individualist assumptions behind the Thatch-Lab pact, making a transition from do good to feel-good' (p. 317); the 'antinomies of individualism' which augment 'the rhetorical stress on "choice", "respect" and so on' so as 'to compensate for the loss of any real prospect of collectively altering the economic structure that shapes and sets limits to all agency' (p. 326).

The 'strategic band' of the culture was more fertile in the first half of the 20th-century than Anderson allowed. Innovative new conceptualisations of the individual's relationship with society were developed, drawing on the social psychology of William James and Graham Wallas, recalling the conjectures of the great 18th-century political economists, leaving the utilitarianism of the 19th century (in both its 'individualist' and 'collectivist' permutations) behind, feeding eventually through into innovations in contemporary historiography, criticism and economics – in particularly promising ways in social choice theory, for instance. Collini's intuitive sense that something particularly important was happening in the 1940s stands vindicated by these developments. His own readings of authors like Larkin and Empson deepen our understanding of how these developments unfolded. But his attempts to repurpose the moral energy which his predecessors in Trilling, Hoggart and Williams brought to their task have yet to bear fruit.

Collini's eventual reversion to the Diceyan terminology bespeaks our continuing failure to throw off this legacy of late-Victorian liberalism and understand our own time in its own terms.

Some images minted in this volume imprint themselves in the reader's mind. Maurice Bowra's nightly ascent to the solitude of his rooms in Wadham College, Oxford, the echoes of his famous table talk dying behind him, become in Collini's hands an adjournment into desperate loneliness. Kingsley Amis's drinking – complete with paraphernalia of clinking bottles and vegetable garnishes at a Midlands roadside mid-morning, mid-way through a driving holiday with friends – is an abyss which Amis is forever pitching into, forever lifted clear of by sheer impetus of his gifts once again. But the vividness of these characterization only sharpened my appetite for an explanation of how and why the sensibility that produced T. S. Eliot's 'The Metaphysical Poets' and R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* gave way to the surmise that a habit of 'wondering what to look for' and a 'feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit' is all that we ever really have in common.

Notes

1. Perry Anderson, 'Components of the national culture', *New Left Review*, 50 (July-August 1968), 1–51. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Stefan Collini, 'Where did it all go wrong? Cultural critics and "Modernity" in interwar Britain', in *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate*, ed. E. H. H. Green and Duncan Tanner (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 247–74; Stefan Collini, 'The European modernist as Anglican moralist: the later social criticism of T. S. Eliot', in *Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity: Historical Essays on European Thought and Culture*, ed. Mark Micale and Robert Dietle (Stanford, CA, 2000), pp. 207–29. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 13–50. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988), p. 153. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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