

Mediocrity

“Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself” (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

“Mediocrity is excellent to the eyes of mediocre people” (Joseph Joubert)

Mediocrity: surely we all know what it is ... and no doubt we would all like to think that we are ourselves immune to it, if not always able to fend off its nefarious effects. ... But what is it exactly? Where / when does it start, how can it be demarcated and recognized (and thus, hopefully, exorcised), and can one define and write critically about what forms it takes, especially when it fades into the invisibility of anonymity rather than pushing itself pretentiously forward in self-election?

Stupidity now has its perversely intelligent, acclaimed study (by Avital Ronell), while mediocracy – the more modern equivalent of Ezra Pound’s “pejorocracy” castigating the levelling effects of weak democracy and thinking – has also received its own share of attention (as in Dominique Lecourt’s controversial exposure of neo-liberal restorationist ideology in contemporary French thought). Mediocrity, however, as a “concept” behind a pervasive “practice”, has largely been ignored (with the exception of Paul Fleming’s *Exemplarity and Mediocrity*, which attempts to chart the [largely Germanic] genealogy of the concept, or populist self-help books against mediocrity) and therefore still awaits its critical undoing¹.

Duller, blunter than outright stupidity and its near-analogues (some of which, like “idiocy”, the “idiot or the “dunce” have acquired their *belles lettres de noblesse* via Wordsworth, Dostoyevsky and Pope respectively, or, like Roland Barthes’s “obtuse”, their critical rehabilitation), mediocrity – from Latin *mediocris*: of middle degree, quality, or rank (Horace) – has that deceptively “silent majoritarian” feel of comfortable, therefore not so exceptionable, average, middle-of-the-road pedestrianism. The reverse of exceptionality and exemplarity, despite Barthes’s “mythologies” of the banal, mediocrity’s credentials could be mistakenly sought in modern literary (therefore, in a sense, already not-so-mediocre) antecedents such as *l’homme moyen sensuel* (which Joyce used to describe the anti-hero of his modern *Odyssey*, Leopold Bloom), the “common reader” and the “middlebrow” (Woolf), or Musil’s “man without qualities”, to name but a few ironically exemplary figures blending into a remarkable normativity and normality through which it could found its legitimacy.

In these economically fraught times, when the creative, innovative forces in academe are being increasingly stifled and commoditized by a rampant managerialization of intellectual standards in the guise of research quality control mechanisms (scientometrics) – in spite of such blinkered capriciousness being regularly

¹ See Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Dominique Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since 1968*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2001); Paul Fleming, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity: The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

denounced by top academics of all persuasions ever since Bill Readings's pioneering critique of "excellence" in *The University in Ruins* (1996) – *Word and Text* has thought it appropriate to lend attention to this many-faceted new pejorocracy that does not / will never know its name. The outcome is this special issue, which offers a mixture of critical contributions, "case studies" and interviews in order to situate the phenomenon within its historical, institutional, political and other dimensions, analyzing mediocrity's discursive manifestations, philosophical articulations, or literary exemplifications.

Part of that situating must depart from acknowledging that mediocrity has not always been coterminous with all the negative (if uncannily undefinable features) highlighted above. Emma West's paper which heads this issue of *Word and Text* is amply aware of that. Its argument is motivated by the idea of mediocrity's elusive and enigmatic quality and also by that understanding of mediocrity in the key of average or middling ability which prevails in English-language usage rather than the sense of the unsatisfactory or the incapable, which is what the term tends to denote in other linguistic and cultural contexts. On the basis of a comprehensive genealogical discussion of English literature's and popular culture's long fascination with the mediocre when approached in the former sense, as "a meane betwixt high and low" and as "betwixt and between", West comes to a number of conclusions that attest to a deep ambivalence within mediocrity. For while mediocrity seeks orthodoxy and tries not to disrupt the status quo of established structures and systems, it is also, West argues, (n)ontological in nature, exposing "a violent 'gathering into the One', a violent *imposition* of sameness, an imposition born of the desire to control, to protect, to conceal, to oppress". Carefully assessing mediocrity's readability according to deconstructive ideas involving *différance*, supplementarity, the *pharmakon* and the trace, West concludes that despite and because of the radical otherness within mediocrity and "the detours, the wrong turns, the deferrals" of mediocrity when seen in this light, the mediocre can still be defined as ... the "the 'usual thing', the quintessentially *normal* state of affairs". It is in consideration of that probing understanding of the (n)ontological normality of mediocrity, against which its other aspects and everything else must be ranged, that West's paper heads this collection.

The paper by Ivan Callus looks at some of the ethical and political implications when, by contrast, there arises a sense of resentment against mediocrity that is driven by the refusal to accept that the mediocre is what is normal. Basing itself on an extended discussion of *Mediocrity and Delusion* (1988), in which Hans Magnus Enzensberger interprets the fortunes of postwar Germany as a *de facto* rehabilitation and celebration of a certain kind of deliberate mediocrity that is remarkably successful in economic and even social terms (mediocrity's oxymoronic association with its apparent opposites being an intriguing leitmotif that is apparent throughout this issue of *Word and Text*), the paper also reviews aspects of the work of Pope, George Eliot and Hannah Arendt that demonstrate both the offensive and the consoling propensities of the mediocre. In the process, it concludes on the basis of an insight derived from Arendt that mediocrity's unsettling relation of affinities-within-opposition emerges insistently in literature, and with no more unnerving effect than in the relation between a great writer and a great literary work, where the former is compelled by and yet dissimulates the awareness of personal mediocrity in relation to the achievement of his or her own writing.

That impossible relation between the writer and the work is well established as a recurrent theme in the work of Maurice Blanchot. In her essay in this issue Laura Marin

approaches that theme and the styles it imposes by investigating whether the mediocre shares some unexpected similarities with the neuter and *écriture blanche*. She surveys three possible determinations of the neuter: linguistic, or the neuter as blank writing (Roland Barthes); medical, or the intermediary between health and illness (Renaissance medical thinking); musical, or the narrative – rather than narrating – voice of the body-text (Maurice Blanchot). Marin recalls how in the second half of the 20th century, possibly in a manner that bears some loyalty to the idea of Roland Barthes's *Degré zéro de l'écriture*, writers like Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, Jean Cayrol and Raymond Queneau were enlisted as advocates of a new "blank", "neutral" practice of writing. *Écriture blanche* thus becomes a sort of *medium per abnegationem*, which for scholastics designated an intermediary, "mediocre" state with no "extreme meaning". In her historical perspective, Marin likewise uncovers a (Barthesian) third acceptance of "mediocrity" in French Renaissance texts, where it was used in a more neutral sense, corresponding neither to specific social, political, and moral values, nor to the pejorative meaning which has crystallized around it nowadays. What Maurice Blanchot later referred to as *voix neutre* helps Marin redeploy his felicitous phrase, "indecisive mediocrity", in a renewed critical context taken from a trans-historical perspective.

In her paper, Gabriela Vasilescu attempts to chart a brief history of mediocrity, whose evolutionary stages are seen to run parallel to the human condition from antiquity to modernity. It therefore accords with the project of West's paper, while reading a different sets of texts and traditions. Working on the assumption that mediocrity can be interpreted as a sort of virus, Vasilescu looks at the concept from both a cognitive and an axiological perspective. Spinoza's and Rousseau's rationalist-contractual views are recalled alongside Cioran's thesis of the incompatibility between reason and life, from which a new human prototype develops, as well as in relation to Heidegger's and Joseph Borgosz's conceptions of man as an unthinking technological being. Vasilescu contends that contemporary mediocrity is not anticipatory, has neither past nor present, and feeds off the progress of knowledge. Axiologically speaking, the mediocre do not have their own system of values and they follow the crowd unswervingly, as their major fear is singularity. After drawing on Nietzsche's and on Petre Andrei's theories on values, Vasilescu singles out Musil's *The Man without Qualities* as the most representative novel to illustrate how the modern mediocre man behaves.

The papers that have been previewed above therefore elaborate an understanding of mediocrity that is rich in its sensitiveness to the genealogical, philosophical and literary dimensions of the mediocre. Who, indeed, would have thought that the mediocre could yield such conceptual diversity and such penetrating commentary on what is, when all is said and done, coextensive with instantiations of the human condition at its most anonymous and undistinguished and yet, quite arguably, of the human condition in its default mode? However, as is well known mediocrity typically elicits not empathy or compassion but irritation and frustration. To that extent, mediocrity is always personal, so to speak. Mediocrity may have an age-old relation with the moderate and moderation, but the reactions it prompts can be anything but moderate. In response to that and out of a wish to reflect the theme's capacity to provoke heartfelt commentary, the editors of this special issue of *Word and Text* have thought it appropriate to include a number of interviews that can help bring out further attributes and provocations of mediocrity with the freshness and directness that the interview, as a genre, affords. Accordingly Arleen Ionescu's case study is structured as

a Platonic dialogue with five respondents who were interviewed separately but whose answers are shown to have distinct resonances and affinities in relation to each other. These discussions start from the meanings of “mediocre” in Greek philosophy and culture, in the context of beauty defined as a triad of principles: symmetry, proportion and harmony, as well as in Christian doctrine, when “mediocre” became the opposite of “excellent”. Yet most of the speakers, with one notable exception (Alexander Baumgarten), settle for the modern opposition between mediocrity and excellence, regardless of past historical determinations. In the last part of the dialogues, Ionescu’s interlocutors attempt to sketch a way out of the on-going state of mediocrity which plagues the Romanian higher education system, thereby exemplifying just how *engagé* mediocrity can compel its antitheses to be.

Further aspects of that appear in the interview with Peter Mayo, a Maltese academic with a distinguished record in the critical sociology of education, who is deeply alert in his conversation with Ivan Callus about the vulnerability and, indeed, the ethics of setting up an opposition between oneself and the mediocre. At the same time, Mayo is committed to the idea of emancipative action concerning the mediocre, particularly in relation to the potential therein that is provided in the critical thought of Antonio Gramsci and Paolo Freire. His interview brings a valuable angle to the discussion of mediocrity in these pages, as it helps to foreground a political resonance to the topic that might otherwise have remained under-emphasized. For if mediocrity exists then there surely arises a responsibility toward it and the need for resistance to the indulgence of and complicity with what Mayo, following Freire’s suspicion of the vernacular, refers to as *basismo*. Mayo is aware, however, as Enzensberger in *Mediocrity and Delusion* is, that mediocrity will forever be hard to resist, for it has its well established processes and procedures. If it is comfortably installed, then even those in favour of whom one militates might prefer to remain as they are.

The interview with Francesco Marroni, an eminent Italian critic and comparatist, is interesting because of the balance it maintains between stern yet sad awareness of the diminishing effects of mediocrity in contemporary life and culture and, on the other, scholarly sensitiveness to a rich range of mediocrity’s representations in literary history and humanist learning. In that latter respect, his interview ought to be read in conjunction with the papers by West and Vasilescu, because it is correspondingly aware of the History of Ideas where mediocrity is concerned and provides further insights derived from Marroni’s expertise in nineteenth-century and contemporary English, European and Italian literature specifically.

There are other approaches to the mediocre featured in this issue, however, and this is the appropriate juncture to acknowledge the interdisciplinary range and reach of these pages as well as their readiness to explore other aspects of mediocrity. For if mediocrity is to be opposed to the putatively excellent and exceptional, taking up a position alongside the average and the middling, then it is necessarily consequent at some level and to some degree on processes of evaluation and hierarchization of performance. In reflection of this, Ioana Galleron and Geoffrey Williams’s article focuses on the evaluation of research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, offering an innovative and potentially more neutral way to assess academic production. Using a combination of corpus linguistics and genre analysis frameworks as a method of inquiry, they compare the Anglo-Saxon and French models of assessing books on literature. The authors chose the *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* as an aptly representative journal in France and annotated manually four of its issues, comprising

68 reviews by 60 different authors, from 2008 onwards. Galleron and Williams assert that, unlike its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, critical discourse in studies on French literature tends to steer clear of evaluative functions; the book reviews analyzed displayed mediocrity “disguised under a clothing of excellence, easy to borrow in a context where benchmarks are never clearly stated, or vanishing in a grey zone of non-summarized negative comments”. The authors’ conclusion is that French reviews are more descriptive and rarely negatively critical, which poses a difficulty in distinguishing the good from the mediocre in the field.

This special issue of *Word and Text* is rounded off by three review articles. Stefan Herbrechter reviews Thomas Docherty’s *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution* (2011) in the light of what he calls “the Posthumanist University”, commenting on Docherty’s concern with universities’ “unholy alliance with business and politics” which results in a “general crisis in democracy”. Drawing on Docherty’s debt to Readings’s *The University in Ruins*, Herbrechter considers that we belong to the “post-historical” (or post-ideological) university, which “witnesses the end of the classical liberal education based on the German, Humboldtian, model, with its principles of the autonomy of knowledge, Kantian critique, Enlightenment reason and the Cartesian subject”. Increasingly operating on human “speciesism”, as emphasized by recent posthumanist or postanthropocentric theories, we have come to split the universal liberal and rational subject into categories like gender, race and class. Accepting that not a single academic working in the humanities (or social sciences) can afford to ignore Docherty’s message, Herbrechter wonders whether the book does not in fact offer an image which should be labelled “nostalgic” or “elitist”, “unrealistic”, too “idealistic” or simply “irrelevant”, taking into account that most of its principles were already in place when Readings wrote about the university in ruins. His article is important because it counterpoints the recurrent references to the idea of the (excellent) university in other contributions to this special issue, and in effect suggests that all of us who lament mediocrity in today’s higher education provision find it very hard to escape a sameness of concerns, thereby precipitating despite themselves a further example of that inescapable mediocrity about the mediocre that is alluded to by Ivan Callus in his essay, so that what follows in effect is an instigation of the mediocre, of which we are all guilty, in the very space where mediocrity could be most effectively combatted.

Meanwhile, and on this related theme, Ionela Neagu’s review article “The Romanian Education System – Between Mediocrity and Competitiveness” provides a succinct account of Petre Frangopol’s four-volume study *Mediocritate și excelență - o radiografie a științei și învățământului din România* [Mediocrity and Excellence: A Radiography of Science and Education in Romania] and points out the main fears which Frangopol expressed between 2002 (volume one) and 2011 (volume four) concerning the lack of radical educational reforms in Romanian universities, which would be necessary for national institutions to rank more highly in international league tables of excellence in higher education, such as the Shanghai Ranking. In the wake of Docherty’s dichotomy between the “Official” and the “Clandestine University”, Neagu attempts to draw a parallel between academic assessment criteria in Romania and in Britain and, underlining some intriguing contrasts, looks at what appears to be “a similar crisis”. Interestingly, Frangopol’s updated views (which can be read in Arleen Ionescu’s case study) do not differ greatly from what he asserted in his compendium of volumes, pending the publication of a fifth instalment currently in preparation.

Adina Nicolae's review of Paul Fleming's *Mediocrity and Exemplarity* helps to anchor this issue's articles in one of the seminal studies of the mediocre, for Fleming's volume is indeed exemplary in tracing the fortunes of the mediocre in aesthetics and in the History of Ideas, particularly within German thought. The review ends by recalling something that Fleming places at the start of his volume: Flaubert's injunction to write the mediocre well, which he considers to be an infernal task. And indeed, if we ask what, in the end, one is to draw from the survey of the mediocre that proceeds in these pages, we could do worse than to articulate final thoughts after rereading Dante's lines on the most mediocre inhabitants of Hell, whose abjection is so complete that they scarcely merit the gaze of the reader. Nevertheless, let us look upon them. Here is the third Canto of the *Inferno*, where the *ignavi* are encountered and provoke possibly the most disdainful of all reactions in Western literature: the injunction to move and pass on, "*guarda e passa*", without further consideration of the wretches thereby eternally, infinitely overlooked:

E io ch'avea d'error la testa cinta,

dissi: "Maestro, che è quel ch'i' odo?
e che gent'è che par nel duol sì vinta?".

Ed elli a me: "Questo misero modo
tegnon l'anime triste di coloro
che visser senza 'nfamia e senza lodo.

Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro
de li angeli che non furon ribelli
né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro.

Caccianli i ciel per non esser men belli,
né lo profondo inferno li riceve,
ch'alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli".

E io: "Maestro, che è tanto greve
a lor che lamentar li fa sì forte?".
Rispuose: "Dicerolti molto breve.

Questi non hanno speranza di morte,
e la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,
che 'nvidiosi son d'ogne altra sorte.

Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:
non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa².

Consider in relation to that the kind of gloss provided below:

The *ignavi* are precisely those who have been 'base' in their relation to God or their fellow men. These sinners have never chosen to commit themselves to any truth or heroic cause (34-39). And it is for this reason that Virgil now approaches the sinners with a contempt unmatched in subsequent encounters: 'Do not speak of them, but look and pass on' (51) Virgil can understand this sin: the *ignavi* are not worthy of words; they have won no fame,

² Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. Tommaso di Salvo (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1993), 59-61 -- Canto III, ll. 31-51. The editors acknowledge their debt to Gloria Lauri-Lucente for this point.

they have left no mark upon the world in which they lived (48), and have made not made any contribution to the common cause of humanity. ... [T]hey have never lived to the full extent of their human powers in the way that Virgil insists that the protagonist should do³.

This, then, is mediocrity's hell: recognized for what it is and, thus registered, forever neglected. If the lot of the mediocre, whether earthly or otherworldly, is to be beyond reason's bothering ("*non ragionam di lor*") – reason not deigning to consider mediocrity – the conclusion must be that humanity, the overwhelming proportion of which must by the law of averages find itself in that predicament, will *for that very reason* desperately crave having the nature of its own condition scanned rather than disdained. No wonder, then, that mediocrity is so difficult to write about, when it brings commentary up against that default mode of the human condition which makes it not only easy but incumbent upon the dutiful and diligent gaze to look beyond and away from the average. No wonder, either, that the predominant tone of these essays is wistfulness, for having turned their gaze upon the mediocre they find ample compulsion to think the mediocre differently *and* ample compulsion to move elsewhere. To affirm mediocrity, then, it might be enough to look upon it at all. To go on to *write* about it (let alone well, which is what Flaubert attempted) renders that affirmation, contrarily, perverse.

At the end of this Introduction, then, just over the page, a number of perverse, affirmative essays follow.

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³ Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante: The Divine Comedy*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.