

# LAURA MARCUS

Laura Marcus

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 2011

A polyphonic memoir

by

ISOBEL ARMSTRONG

*Fellow of the Academy*

This is a collage of analyses and memories by friends and colleagues, fifteen in all – one writer described it as a ‘polyphonic’ document. All Laura Marcus’s work broke new ground. Colleagues discuss the major scholarly works in life-writing, cinema, psychoanalysis and modernist literature, Virginia Woolf (her great love), and the unfinished posthumous work on rhythm (to be published by OUP). Also featured are the many academic environments she worked in – Kent, Southampton, Sussex, London, Edinburgh, and Oxford, New College, as Goldsmiths’ Professor.



Laura Marcus

Laura Marcus's very sudden and tragic death from cancer at the height of her powers caused consternation and sadness among her many friends, colleagues and students here in the United Kingdom and the wider academic world. Her work was profoundly influential. But more than this she had a unique place in academic life. She was universally loved and respected. Her intellectual brilliance, her warmth and wit – she was a lambent presence in any gathering – and above all the interlocutor's attentiveness that ensured she always returned someone's ideas with added depth, made her not only a deeply respected but also a loveable figure.

Most British Academy memoirs are written when Festschrifts, memoirs and critical essays on the subject's work are available, but Laura died too young for these documents to accumulate. Therefore, this memoir is extended beyond the usual compass of British Academy testaments, describing her academic work and life in more than usual detail. I have included accounts of her work and career by colleagues who worked with her.

Laura was unusual in experiencing a wide range of British institutions of higher education, and this may have contributed to the openness and catholic generosity of her mind. Educated at St Paul's Girls' School, she took her undergraduate degree at Warwick University. Another new university, Kent, saw her postgraduate work (1979-84), and her early career took place first at a provincial university, Southampton (1984-6), before a third new university, Sussex, employed her for another two years (1986-7). She returned to Sussex as Reader in English (1999-2004) and Professor (2004-7), but not before a period at the urban University of Westminster (1987-90) and eight years at the unique Birkbeck (1990-1998), University of London, proudly descended from a Mechanics' Institute. She became Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh (2007-9), and finally Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature and Fellow of New College, Oxford, from 2010 to 2021.

She was a much travelled academic, in demand for international conferences and for fellowships abroad. Even before she took up her graduate award she won a scholarship to Georgetown University (1976-77). She was in Indiana over 1982-3, at the Beineke (1998), Visiting Professor in Paris University V11 (2010), and in 2013 at Montpellier, Leuven, and New South Wales. Zurich and Washington University followed (2016 and 2017). She made a lecturing tour of Pacific rim universities in 2019. The Covid lockdown aborted another research visit to Paris. This international profile was created alongside a most conscientious and indeed altruistic scholarly life at home: she was a tireless external examiner, both in departmental and doctoral categories, particularly the latter.

In addition to producing major works of scholarship, Laura made her mark everywhere she taught. This memoir is a record of her writings, but it cannot help but be a personal document too. Therefore, as I have explained, this account of her life draws on the accounts of the colleagues she worked with, some better placed to discuss her publications

than I am, and students whom she taught. Always speculative and researched in prolific detail, Laura's prodigious interests extended through the long 19th century to modernism. Life-writing and autobiographical discourses, Virginia Woolf, psychoanalytic theory and history, and modernist cinema were the four interconnected areas of her research. Her last (unfinished) book on rhythm, *Rhythmic Subjects: The Measures of the Modern*, explored yet another area of modernist and 20th-century culture. Her first book, developed from her doctoral work, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, which was awarded Birkbeck's Ronald Tress Prize, was published in 1994 and went into a second edition in 1998. I will show that in it she developed a unique form of historiographical and theoretical analysis.

### Laura Marcus at the University of Kent

But first, two colleagues, **Claire Buck** and **Jan Montefiore**, from Kent University, recall Laura. We see from this account that wide theoretical and cultural interests, ranging from psychoanalysis to film, were embedded in her work from the beginning. So too was what her colleagues, with descriptive insight, call her 'receptive generosity'.

As a graduate student at the University at Kent, where the Faculty of Humanities' early interdisciplinary ethos persisted into the 1980s, Laura was part of an unusually brilliant group of students, who were fired up by the excitement of 'theory' to try to think through relationships between psychoanalysis, film, literature and philosophy. Always a wide-ranging and eager reader, Laura would take part in several of Kent's then student/staff research initiatives, notably the Lacan Reading Group, the Psycho/Analysis Group, and a more informal Feminist Theory Reading Group, as well as the English Research Seminar. She was an invaluable participant, not only for what she said but how she listened, with a kind of receptive generosity; any discussion in which Laura took part became searching, curious, fun, and always principled. Laura could always communicate intellectual excitement; when she was asked to give her first lecture, for a core course for which she was a part time teacher, she chose to read George Eliot through the lens of Julia Kristeva. It was amazing, and it was exactly what she would always be – compelling, lucid, funny. In this first professional lecture, she was already the Laura you all knew.

Claire Buck recalls how Laura and she, as postgraduates, went off to the first Southampton University international theory conference, a gathering of those shaping the new approach to the field. Laura insisted that they be bold and circulate at the opening reception: by the time of the next Southampton conference, Laura was a member of the department organising it.

Laura took a long time to finish her PhD thesis on autobiography (which became her ground-breaking book *Auto/biography*), partly because – again characteristically – she kept re-thinking and enlarging her arguments, making them more and more comprehen-

sive and ambitious. Jan Montefiore recalls meeting her external examiner Micky Sheringham (later Laura's close friend) on the Kent campus after her viva, and being told by him 'We felt that really *she* ought to have been examining *us*.'

When Laura had become a senior academic at the Universities of Edinburgh and then Oxford, she kept up her Kent connection with characteristic warmth and generosity, and not only in giving several splendid public lectures. Her many-sided interests, her never-failing curiosity and her kindness made her a first-rate examiner of PhD theses, who is remembered with gratitude for her engagement with students' arguments. As her friends and colleagues, we still find it difficult to realise that we will never discuss things with Laura again.

### The first book – autobiography and life-writing

In 1987 Laura published a forceful and witty article in the first issue of *New Formations*: 'Enough about You, Let's Talk about Me: Recent Autobiographical Writing'.<sup>1</sup> *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* was published in 1994.<sup>2</sup> The gap between these publications indicates how long and deep was the gestation of this book. Starting out as her Kent PhD thesis on life-writing, long considered in the making, this was a first book of such mature amplitude and depth that it can scarcely be seen as the work of a beginner scholar. It is a massive study of the writing generated by autobiography as a form in the 19th and 20th centuries and presages her working methods in later research. The presence of Virginia Woolf in Chapter Three is a thread running through all her scholarship: she loved this novelist, and all her major work returns to Woolf. Her searching analytical and conceptual scholarly gifts were conjoined with a deep lyrical instinct that made her peculiarly responsive to Woolf's writing.

I go into unusual detail in discussing this first book as it indicates so much of what was to come. Laura once told me that she could not seem to help writing large books, but the striking aspect of this book is that it is precisely not a mere encyclopaedic study. It is a searchingly analytical work and makes an intellectual move that was to characterise all her work. In the face of the bewildering plenitude of competing accounts of autobiography and rival taxonomies in the two centuries, she does not adjudicate or redescribe these debates but instead sees them *as* discourses with a historical and epistemological status that emerges through the analysis of these texts as cultural documents. In her introduction she discussed the instability and hybridity of autobiography, as commentators try to establish the nature of the genre through a defining essence or an inaugural moment

<sup>1</sup> *New Formations*, 1:1 (1987), 77-94.

<sup>2</sup> *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994; 2nd edn, 1998). Quotations are from the second edition.

such as Augustine's *Confessions*, and wrestle with the paradoxes of a subject writing the subject. She acknowledges the complexity of competing generic descriptions and descriptive classifications, but her project is to elicit the intellectual, cultural and historical meanings of these debates on autobiography as a new form of knowledge by understanding them *as* discourses. For instance, she comments on James Field Stanfield's *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813) that 'his desire to find systematic ways of classifying biographical writing' is a 'central feature of autobiographical discourse' (p. 24). The drive to classify as much as the classification itself is what interests her. The result is a new kind of work, part critical, part historiographical, part typological, in essence a new way of writing a phenomenology of autobiography. It is a form of meta-commentary that proceeds with a deep inwardness.

Typically, Chapter One begins, not with a founding work, but with the *origin* of the term 'autobiography' as critics try to define what 'self-biography' is, grappling with its unstable form as self-expression in the public sphere. Chapter One is devoted to the founding discussions of autobiography. Familiar texts, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Mill, De Quincey, have their place in this chapter, as do Goethe and Rousseau, but its scholarly richness derives from the span of its attention, from theory (Bakhtin and Foucault and the historical dawn of inwardness) to previously unread material in Victorian periodicals – *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *The Quarterly Review*, *The North British Review*, *The Cornhill Magazine* – and figures who created a classificatory debate. Isaac D'Israeli, John Lockhart, John Forster, James Field Stanfield, A.O. Prickard, Edith Simcox, Mrs Oliphant, Leslie Stephen feature here. This debate was wide ranging: it could manifest itself as class motivated strategies to restrict autobiography to educated writers with authoritative standing, and attempts to police the genre by excluding working class and popular figures of the entertainment industry: it encompassed enquiries into the ethics of inwardness as a form of self-exposure, into the formation of new categories, and the place of women in autobiographical writing. Three themes are particularly resonant. Laura writes of the prostitute as a place holder for the possible degradation of self-exposure. The situation of women as explorers of the autobiographical subject – Margaret Oliphant cites Madame Roland, a Girondist guillotined in 1793 – and the register of affect associated with female writing is another significant issue. Perhaps most fascinating is writers' perception of the decline of autobiographical writing in this century almost before it has consolidated itself. Edith Simcox, working with Comtean categories (heroic, dramatic, lyric), writes of the impasse of 'lyrical' autobiography and the impossibility of a synthesis of self and world, ego and non-ego: for this entails a de-realising of either one entity or the other as either thought or action is uppermost. The century's pessimism about the 'dialogue of the mind with itself' (Matthew Arnold) ends this chapter, a theme that presages psychoanalytic readings of mind.

Each of Laura's long, succinct chapters would be books in the hands of other critics, each is a tour de force of scholarship. I have discussed Chapter One as an exemplary form of her rich, packed criticism and scholarship. I can only instance some of the features of the following six chapters. The sweep of Chapter Two, 'Autobiography: between literature and science', is from those writers who saw autobiography as the expression of 'great men' or 'genius' (specifically excluding women) that offered data for empirical work on ethnography or psycho-physical classifications – and the inevitable eugenic conclusions – to Freud and the origin of psychoanalysis in a scientific reading of autobiography from Leonardo to Dora. Familiar figures – Havelock Ellis, Otto Weininger, Francis Galton, H.G. Wells and Beatrice Webb – co exist with hitherto unknown researchers, P. Mansell Jones, W.A. Gill, and particularly the work of Anna Robeson Brown Burr (1909), whose neurological and genetic readings of 'auto-dissection' and the laws of self-study defended autobiography from the charge of pathology. Chapter Three, 'Bringing the corpse to life: Woolf, Strachey and the discourse of the "new biography"', is dominated by a bravura account of Woolf's transgressive *Orlando* (1928). This novel recapitulates and often joyously parodies the themes of the 'new biography', where biography and autobiography often merge – Harold Nicolson on 'pure' biography, the anti-Victorianism of Lytton Strachey, his psychobiographical approach and undermining of the fact/fiction binary. Gender and genre are exuberantly deconstructed, and through Woolf's recurrent references to clothing and nakedness, particularly the naked female, Laura points to an aporia at the heart of both biography and autobiography, the concept of *aletheia*, or truth as disclosure, the unveiled, satirised in *Orlando* but a concept at stake for all writers of this period.

Chapter Four ends the first part of the book, which has seen biography and autobiography either as binary opposites or else as forms of one another. Laura turns to the great philosophers of autobiography, principally Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Misch, and Georges Gusdorf, who claim both autobiography and biography as fundamental to the human sciences, placing an epistemology of the subject at the centre of history. For Dilthey, 'life interprets itself', reflexively, and thus 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*) is a founding principle of autobiography. Though temporality, seen as a flow in which the present is always past, is constitutive of autobiography, it is the self-consciously relational element – and thus its historically significant nature – that for Dilthey gives life-writing its form. Misch, Dilthey's follower, carries on the paradigm of critique of historical reason, but valorises autobiography and consciousness of self against biography. This leads to a reading of the subject in terms of power and a differentiation of autobiography from an inferior form, memoirs. A hubristic account of western consciousness follows. But Gusdorf's reading of autobiography, advanced in France in 1956, and in the context of Lacanian thought, is existentially pessimistic. It drives a wedge between the public world of linear historical time and the priority of the writing

subject, who, finding in autobiography a mirror that can reflect the self, not only reflects the self as process but claims the priority of subjective truth. Gusdorf's historical analysis of the emergence of autobiography as a Western phenomenon, coming at the point when Christianity is grafted on to classical thought, is continued in the cultural pessimism of later writers. Both Roy Pascal (1960) and Karl Weintraub (1978) identify estrangement as the product of capitalism and industrialism. The synthesis of self-awareness and historical circumstance in classic autobiography, evident particularly in Goethe, has disappeared.

The final three chapters take autobiography up to Laura's own modernity of the '80s from discourses dating roughly from the Second World War. The tone of her writing becomes more interrogative: 'I would argue', 'I would want to distinguish', 'I would want to question' – these are phrases taken from the final Chapter Seven, 'Auto/Biographical Spaces'. Here the transformation of autobiographical discourse by feminism, by the dialogism of oral history and working-class autobiography (where Carolyn Steedman stands out), by Marxist, psychoanalytical and existentialist thinking, and particularly by women of colour and ethnic minorities, is the theme. Writing one's own life entails writing of others, and thus autobiography and biography are again entwined. The issues of collectivity, interiority, authenticity, the body, as identity is seen as 'something to be made', arise in an intensified form. Nancy K. Miller (personal criticism) and Judith Butler (performativity) are key figures in the new discourses. How feminist writing responds to Deconstruction is a fundamental issue.

Deconstruction takes us back to Chapter Five, 'Saving the Subject'. This chapter, perhaps the outstanding analysis of the book, moves from the formalism of North American New Criticism of the '40s and '50s to the work of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray. It is so complex, subtle and detailed that it defies summary. It traces the move from a literary biography where the subject is virtually unmediated 'as a parable of individualism', to the fractured subjectivity imaged by the doubled and reflected self as mirror in theoretical accounts of the self, to the extreme of de Manian 'Defacement', where the subject is known only 'through tropological substitutions and metonymic displacements' (p. 204). Georges Poulet, James Olney, Emile Benveniste, Philippe Lejeune, Jean Starobinski, and the preoccupation with Rousseau and Nietzsche, are a context for Deconstruction. The chapter ends with Freud and the arrival of feminist critique, where Nancy Chodorow and Elizabeth Grosz are dominant figures. Chapters Five and Six are twins. Chapter Six, 'The Law of Genre', deals with many of the same figures – Miller, Lejeune, de Man, Derrida. But here the 'internal' theme of the subject is turned around and the textuality and legal aspects of the autobiographical subject, the validity of generic categories, its truth claims, the status of the author and the textuality of the self, beginning with Northrop Frye's revolutionary re-taxonomising of genre, are exhaustively researched. The move is from Lejeune's quasi empirical autobiographical



‘contract’ to the poststructuralist reading of the binaries of inside and outside to the questions raised by the illocutionary reading of autobiography as performativity, where J.L. Austin and John Searle complicate Derridean and Foucauldian readings, which have themselves complicated the truth/fiction dilemmas of autobiography.

Autobiography was a thread throughout Laura’s work. After the massive work on rhythm took up her research energy at the end of her life, she was preparing to write a sophisticated study of 20th-century theorists, from Walter Benjamin to Adorno, re-describing their work as a covert form of autobiography. In 1995 she published no fewer than three articles on autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Her last Birkbeck publication (1998), indicating the breadth of her interests, was an edited collection with Bryan Cheyette, *Modernity, Culture and ‘the Jew’*.<sup>4</sup>

### At Southampton

Of Laura’s two important years at Southampton, Professor **Robert J.C. Young**, Julius Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University, writes:

Laura Marcus was a Lecturer in English at Southampton from 1984 to 1986, the first new appointment for some time in a department that for the past few years had only lost faculty to the Thatcher policy of retiring academics over 50. Her arrival marked a new regenerative moment which she seemed to embody in her ability to get on with everyone in an astonishingly personable and ecumenical way. She was later to move to Sussex, and in one sense in doing so she formalised the Sussex-Southampton intellectual axis that had been operative between the two campuses for some years. At the same time, her interest in autobiography meant that she offered a more mediated attitude to the then binarised intellectual landscape of ‘theory’ and traditional approaches. In the era of the death of the author, her interest in the writing self was already transgressive of certain doctrinaire theoretical positions that had abandoned more open forms of intellectual inquiry. For her, theory was simply part of the landscape, not an all or nothing commitment in itself. More than that, her thinking articulated creative possibilities for new ways forward. Her then only published article, with the memorable title ‘Enough about You, Let’s Talk’s about Me’, a review of some contemporary feminist and leftist autobiographies, already voiced ahead of its time the possibility that autobiography could be

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Face of Autobiography’, in Julia Swindells (ed.), *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 13–23. ‘Autobiography and the Politics of Identity’, in Daniel Simeoni and Marco Diani (eds), *Biographical Research*, special issue of *Current Sociology*, 43:2/3 (Autumn/Winter 1995), pp. 41–52. ‘Border Crossings: Recent Feminist Auto/biographical Theory’, in *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, special issue on ‘Gender and Narrative’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 187–94.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Cheyette & Laura Marcus, *Modernity, Culture and ‘the Jew’* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity, 1998).

articulated with questions of subaltern histories and their structures of subjectivity. As she observed, 'black, feminist and working-class writing ... escape all charges of bourgeois and/or masculine individualism; more positively, ... they serve a political function in articulating histories previously silenced.'<sup>5</sup> In making such a claim, Laura was already mapping out the powerful and important intellectual landscape that would flourish for the next decades.

Beyond that, her interest in autobiography also had more creative aspects, which would endure with her always. She had an extraordinary ability to turn her own life, particularly her problems in dealing with some of its practical and technical aspects, into a constant source of preposterous comedy and entertainment for others. The inspiration was essentially cinematic. Despite her lack of interest in Chaplin as a filmmaker, she narrated and portrayed her experiences in a manner that made it as if you were watching her on film, battling with an essentially belligerent and uncooperative material world. Two notable examples from her life in Southampton: struggling with 'Locoscript', Alan Sugar's user-unfriendly neuron-challenging word-processing software for early Amstrad computers, for which she required many tutors and the constant labour of informal refresher courses; and her ongoing, ultimately successful, attempts to give up smoking. She related how, doubtless inspired by the example of early Freud, she had spent a large amount of money taking out a subscription to a service that offered to stop you from smoking immediately through hypnosis. The therapy turned out to be delivered via cassette tapes, which duly began to arrive in her flat. When she put the first one on, she reported, it was to hear a solemn male voice very slowly repeating the mantra: 'stop smoking'. This ability to turn her own life into a continuous comic performance endured her whole life, and it was doubtless the manner in which she opened herself up to others in this way that made you feel that she was sharing her life with you, so that you in turn felt that you could talk to her about anything. In life, her practice was the very reverse of 'enough about you, let's talk about me'. She would listen and respond in a way that always made you know that she had understood you, across all levels of semantics, analysis, and emotional affect. Her friendship was at once entertaining, intellectually stimulating, emotionally rewarding and therapeutic. These qualities were at the heart of her charm, her sociability, and her ability to connect with others, which saw fruit at an academic level in her many edited volumes which always had the distinction of bringing the most interesting analysts together in the particular field of the book. But in life she was also a comic genius. The overriding memory of her will always be the joy of laughing together with her.

### At Birkbeck

While at Southampton, Sussex and Birkbeck, Laura's work on modernism, psychoanalysis and cinema gestated. At the same time she was an influential and charismatic teacher,

<sup>5</sup>*New Formations*, 1:1 (1987), 77.

introducing a completely new teaching stream, the BA Humanities, at Birkbeck between 1990 and 1993. **Josephine McDonagh** remembers the Birkbeck years, 1990–1998, as an intense period.

After three years working at the University of Westminster as Senior Lecturer in English, Laura was appointed Lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, where she worked from 1990 to 1998. This is a period characterised by extraordinary productivity, interdisciplinary experiment, and intellectual deepening. Her appointment was a joint one between the Department of English, then a thriving hub of innovative literary-theoretical thinking, led by Isobel Armstrong, whom she rejoined from Southampton days; and a new, interdisciplinary undergraduate programme, BA Humanities, an early example of the kind of modular degree programme that reshaped British university curricula in the 1990s. Taught across departments in Humanities and Social Sciences, BA Hums was geared towards Birkbeck's traditional students – part-time adult learners, many of them women, entering higher education for the first time, often with impressive reservoirs of knowledge and experience. Appointed in the early days of the programme, Laura played a leading role in its design, and co-taught the interdisciplinary courses that lay at its core, in particular a sequence of courses in European modernism, on topics such as 'modernism and the City', and 'Politics and the Avant-Garde'. The ambitious range of the curriculum, as well as the collaborative nature of the teaching, played to Laura's strengths – deep erudition and intellectual sociability. In this Birkbeck heyday, Laura was a force of energy and innovation. During this phase, too, Laura began to establish her extraordinary track record of PhD supervision, nurturing the careers of many young scholars who are now senior academics in their own right.

During the 1990s, Laura's research energies widened from her focus on life-writing, the theme of her doctoral thesis and first book, to a broader span of theoretical and cultural topics all clustering around modernism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and film. As with teaching, Laura's research in this phase was characterised by collaborative endeavours. She produced a series of volumes, many of them co-edited. Including the collaboration with Cheyette in this period appeared: *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin* (1993), coedited with long-term friend and colleague, the art historian Lynda Nead; and *Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (1999). Also in this phase she prepared two special issues: *Freud: Dreaming, Creativity and Therapy (Psychoanalysis and History)*, 2001 co-edited with Edward Timms; *Mass-Observation as Poetics and Science (New Formations)*, 2001.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout these years, Laura lived with her partner William Outhwaite in rural Sussex, and her daily journeys to central London were made by train and taxi. The birth of their son, Daniel, in 1995, transformed their lives. With a job offer at the University

<sup>6</sup>Laura Marcus & Lynda Nead, *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993); Laura Marcus, *Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). Special issues: *Freud: Dreaming, Creativity and Therapy (Psychoanalysis and History)*, 3:1, 2001, co-edited with Edward Timms; *Mass-Observation as Poetics and Science (New Formations)*, 44, 2001, pp. 5–20.

of Sussex, Laura saw a way of simplifying the complex logistics of their family life, and in 1998 took up a position as Reader of English.

**Caroline Levine**, once a graduate student at Birkbeck and now David and Kathleen Ryan Professor at the Humanities at Cornell University, remembers Laura like this:

Laura Marcus would have had a theory about why some images stick with us. One single vivid memory of her comes back to me from my postgraduate years, though I must have seen her many times. In this remembered scene, Laura comes upon a couple of us students in a corridor in the old Birkbeck building on Malet Street in London. Just as she passes us, Laura turns and asks a question—some personal thing, how we are doing, how the writing is going. Sunlight is streaming in behind her, and her own face lights up with that warm smile of hers, the one that makes you feel that you are not just some awkward, flailing newbie but an interesting person, a full equal. I come to understand later in life that she is one of those rare people who regularly gives others the gift of her deep attention. Whatever it is that she says to us in the corridor—I wish I could remember any of the words—she makes it clear that she understands and sympathises; she registers the struggle to think and write. It feels terribly wrong that Laura Marcus's rare, astonishing combination of personal warmth and intellectual brilliance is gone from the world. And it is difficult to imagine modernist studies without her, reshaped by her many dazzlingly learned books and essays. But that fellow feeling she projected—that solidarity—is also one of her legacies. Do you think we can try to carry it on, in her honor?

### Sussex and *The Tenth Muse*

From 1999 to 2007 Laura taught and researched at the University of Sussex. The last year of her time there saw the publication of *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*.<sup>7</sup> This second great field-changing work was awarded the prestigious James Russell Lowell Prize by the Modern Language Association. The Committee citation reads:

*The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* is an eye-opening interdisciplinary work of extraordinary depth, range, scholarship, and imagination: a judicious and elegant study of the interactions of cinema and literature – and writings about cinema – in the early twentieth century, with a focus on British and European contexts. From the earliest inventions to the talkies, from Bergson to Deleuze, from forgotten or classic film criticism to Kipling, Wells, and Woolf, Laura Marcus draws the reader into the excitement when cinema made it new and when hopes were high that the arts and human perception would never be the same. Marcus's rediscoveries in the

<sup>7</sup> *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

archives reframe our understanding of literary and film aesthetics – the interplay of time, space, image, word, sound – as well as our historical comprehension of modernism, film, and the antecedents of contemporary theory.

This study terminates with the coming of sound in Chapter 6: its five long chapters are devoted to silent cinema, beginning with ‘Things that Move’, traversing the work of Virginia Woolf, the aesthetics of early film, critique in ’20s Britain, and the magazine *Close Up*. The intricacy and depth of this work cannot be easily summed up. I will point to an exquisite, lyrical discussion of the cinematic in Virginia Woolf’s work (pp. 146–7) as an example of the depth of Laura’s thought. In both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the breaking of waves, she writes, becomes an analogy for the structure of cinematic images: they are markers of ‘repetition and duration’ and of the relationship between ‘stasis and motion’. Thus Woolf saw the image of the wave as central to early cinema. The play of light, the concept of memory as projection, cohere round the memory of Mrs Ramsay, who is conceived cinematically. The unfolding of her shawl becomes a highly cinematic image: ‘sound is incorporated or “folded” into silence (the silence of the cinema)’. The dream space of ‘Time passes’, Laura comments, draws upon ‘the profound conceptual connections between drama and cinema’. ‘The appropriate tense, or mode, of movement and, in Woolf’s writings, of cinema, would appear to be the gerundive’ – the verbal adjective ending in -ing – with its performative enactment of motion and constant living in the present.

**Ian Christie**, Anniversary Professor of Film Studies at Birkbeck, writes about this remarkable study here.

The realisation that cinema and modernist art enjoyed a close relationship has long been recognised, although only recently explored in informed detail. The role of women in shaping early film culture was even less acknowledged before Laura’s pioneering work as an editor and cultural historian. This first appeared in an influential anthology which she co-edited with James Donald and Anne Friedberg in 1998, making available selections from the first English-language journal devoted to ‘film as an art’, *Close Up*. Between 1927 and 1933, this eclectic ‘little magazine’ brought together an international cast of contributors, which included Sergei Eisenstein, emerging as a trenchant theorist and polemicist, the Surrealist photographer and occasional filmmaker, Man Ray, and three lesser-known women writers, the American poet H.D., Dorothy Richardson, and Bryher (pseudonym of Annie Winifred Ellerman).

It was Bryher, thanks to her inherited wealth, who funded *Close Up*, which was edited from her base in Switzerland, along with her partner, Kenneth Macpherson. The *Close Up* group also produced experimental films, notably the feature-length *Borderline*, which featured Paul and Eslanda Robeson, as well as H.D. and Bryher, making use of some of the new filmic techniques which the magazine’s contributors were exploring. ‘Theory and analysis’, it promised, ‘not gossip’, like most of the existing film press. But while promoting the montage methods of new Soviet cinema, and defending sexual and

ethnic diversity, *Close Up* also provided a unique forum for early psychoanalytic writing about film, reflecting the interests of both H.D. and Bryher.

It was these concerns that would underpin Laura's major study of the relationship between cinema and literary modernism, *The Tenth Muse*, in 2007. Focusing on the earliest writing about the 'seventh art', also known as 'the tenth muse', by reviewers, critics and theorists in the first decades of the 20th century, she identified new discursive strategies, which would in turn influence writers as diverse as Wells and Woolf, as well as Richardson and Jean Rhys. Here, at last, was a wide-ranging and sophisticated investigation of a field that had long been considered piecemeal, laying the basis for a recognition that cinema had shaped all strata of the 20th century's literary culture.

In what was to be her last major book, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (2014),<sup>8</sup> she would broaden the field still further, considering how diverse aspects of modernity, such as railways, advertising, detective fiction, psychoanalysis and cinema, had all shaped the beginnings of modernist culture. Here, some of the canonic works of early avant-garde film, including 'city symphonies' from Europe and America, were given equal status alongside English, Irish and American modernist literary classics. What she achieved was to overcome decades of divided loyalties between scholars of literature, film and the popular arts, demonstrating that an intermedial approach was possible with rigour and imagination.

We can see, as Ian Christie remarks, *The Tenth Muse* gestating in the 1998 *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, edited with W. James Donald and Anna Friedberg.<sup>9</sup> And her passion for cinema continued after her seminal work in two articles about Dorothy Richardson in 2006 and 2008. Sussex for Laura was a workshop for her thinking about both modernism and psychoanalysis, and the three interests, modernism, psychoanalysis, cinema, played into one another. The year 1999 saw her editing and introducing Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.<sup>10</sup> In a special issue of *Psychoanalysis and History* (3:1) in 2001 she pursued the theme of *Freud: Dreaming, Creativity and Therapy*. In 2005 she co-edited the impressive *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* with Peter Nicholls.<sup>11</sup> One of Laura's playful side interests was in the part railways played in crossing the cultures of Victorianism and modernism. She gave several lectures on railway hysteria, and in 2000 wrote 'Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction', neatly combining two of her interests (she had edited twelve women detective stories for Oxford University Press in 1997) in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, edited by Warren Chernaik and others, for Macmillan.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>*Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>*Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup>*Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Laura Marcus & Peter Nicholls (eds), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup>Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales & Robert Vilain (eds), *The Art of Detective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Sussex, The Centre for Modernist Studies, and *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*

Always a generous and proactive collaborator, Laura co-founded Sussex's Centre for Modernist Studies in 2003 with **Peter Nicholls**, Professor of English and Editor of *Textual Practice*. Peter writes here:

My treasured friend and colleague Laura Marcus joined the English Department at Sussex as Reader in 1999. By 2004, she had been promoted to full Professor and had established herself as a prime mover in the faculty. By this time she had already published widely on autobiography and life-writing; her work had become instrumental in giving 'Auto/biographical discourses', as Laura termed them, a sophisticated new theoretical dimension that would galvanise generations of readers and researchers to come. At the same time, she was still thinking, as in some measure she always would, of Virginia Woolf's writings. The study that she had published back in 1997 would continue to lead a long and productive life and remains one of the subtlest and most probing accounts of Woolf's work that we have.<sup>13</sup> It was her profoundly inward and penetrating approach to Woolf that would lead Laura into contiguous areas that she would come increasingly to make her own: to psychoanalysis, for example, to the development of cinema, and to the complex interconnections between technology, dream and the body that continue to underlie what, sadly, will be her final book: *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern* (2023).

Laura's special gift was her acute grasp of relations, formal and conceptual, and it was this, I think, that allowed her such an extraordinarily rich understanding of literary and cinematic modernism. Desire and fantasy she saw less as 'psychology' than as articulations at once provoked and restrained by the material institutions of modernity. A study of 'movement' in modernity, for example, would almost inevitably become a multi-faceted project: 'spatial, geographical, and political; affective and physiological; temporal and epochal; technological, locomotive, and metropolitan; aesthetic and representation', so Laura and her co-editor, David Bradshaw, set the parameters in the introduction to their collection *Moving Modernisms*.<sup>14</sup> Modernism and modernity are vitally interfused, then, the first actively deriving from the second while also shaping it in turn, a reciprocal effect especially discernible in the early days of cinema when, as Laura noted in another piece, 'film consciousness was everywhere'.

With a modern world thus characterised by cross-fertilisation and rhythmic correspondence, it was perhaps inevitable that modernism itself would need to be understood as similarly complex and capacious. It was with some such thought in mind that in 2003 Laura and I founded the Centre for Modernist Studies at Sussex. Our aim was to bring together researchers and students from a variety of disciplines to review different

<sup>13</sup>Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Writers and their Work series; Tavistock: Northcote House, 1997; revised edn, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>David Bradshaw, Laura Marcus & Rebecca Roach (eds), *Moving Modernisms: Motion, Technology and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

aspects of modernist production across a range of different media. This experiment in interdisciplinarity was a resounding success, with contributions from high-profile speakers from the US and Europe as well as from the UK. As if to recognise this, in 2003 the Modernist Studies Association invited the Centre to host its annual conference. It is a pleasure to note, too, that the Centre is still in operation at Sussex and, directed currently by Drs Helen Tyson and Hope Wolf, it continues to have a strong international presence and a highly enterprising agenda.

Laura's sense of the multifariousness of modernism was also a driving force in our jointly edited *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2005). This large volume (885 pp) brought together the work of more than forty experts in an extended field that comprised the literatures of the United Kingdom along with ongoing developments in the associated cultural technologies of radio, cinema, and television. One reviewer wrote that 'It is one of the great achievements of this volume that the editors have managed to synthesise the period into a coherent history while also giving space to the varied perspectives of their contributors and to the multiple voices of their subjects. As a reference work, it is an essential tool for the undergraduate and taught postgraduate market' (Jessica Gardner, *Reference Reviews*). What I have called Laura's own multifarious modernism stretched the boundaries of this volume in many challenging ways and her extensive knowledge of ongoing scholarship allowed us to assemble a remarkably gifted team of contributors. But, of course, more was at issue here than just meticulous scholarship. It was Laura's never-failing generosity and sensitivity that kept this particular juggernaut moving. Others have commented on her ability to polish someone's rather commonplace idea and then to compliment them on its final shine, and Laura's warmth and gentle humour did indeed make her a very special editor. I shall remember fondly, as no doubt will many others, her response to some less than convincing claim let slip in conversation: the slightly cocked eyebrow, the quizzical half-smile, and then the rather deliciously enunciated response that left one fixed, but very pleasantly so, in a crisply formulated phrase.

### Sussex, a colleague's voice

Another Sussex colleague, **Nicholas Royle**, also Professor of English, comments on Laura's time at Sussex.

Laura Marcus worked at the University of Sussex twice. She was a Lecturer in English in 1986-7, then returned as a Reader in 1999, becoming Professor of English in 2004, before leaving in 2007 to take up the Regius Chair at Edinburgh. Her coming back perhaps contributed to the sense that Sussex was a special kind of home. Her presence here, as a colleague and friend, as a teacher, PhD supervisor and scholar, will continue to be felt for years to come.

Her departure in 2007 coincided with a significant and rather traumatic re-shaping of the humanities at Sussex. Several other colleagues left soon after. I felt touched and



honoured to be asked by Laura to say some valedictory words on her behalf, on 30 May 2007, but I also felt apprehensive. I was delighted that she had secured the distinguished and richly deserved position at Edinburgh; but I was also worried about the emotional difficulties of saying goodbye, painfully aware of how much poorer a place Sussex would be without her. As if under my breath, I made passing allusion on that occasion to the final line of Dylan Thomas's poem 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London'.

The idiom of *under one's breath* seems especially apt in the context of Laura Marcus. She was inspiring and rarely outspoken. She breathed life, different life, new life into everything. There was nothing self-regarding or self-aggrandising about her. She was an exceptionally good listener. She had an amazing ability to hear what someone (a colleague, a PhD student) was saying and then comment or reflect it back in a way that suggested she wasn't really adding anything, and yet she invariably was. She returned one's thoughts enhanced and illuminated, quietly transformed.

Laura was a superb scholar and researcher, yet she was never only serious. She had no enemies, but she managed to supplement everything she did with a sort of mischievousness, a sense of irony, play and humour that could make even the dullest committee meetings pleasurable. Best of all, if you had the good fortune to sit next to her, she could reduce you to tears of laughter with the things she would say under her breath.

## Edinburgh

Laura's time in Edinburgh was brief but influential. **Penny Fielding**, Grierson Chair of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, writes here about this period.

Laura was appointed to the Regius Chair in Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh in 2007, the first woman to hold the chair. Although she was only with us for two years before taking up the Goldsmiths' Chair at Oxford, she was an inspirational presence and did a great deal to strengthen the teaching of modernism. As Research Director for the department, Laura introduced regular faculty work-in-progress seminars, always with an eye to supporting and valuing the research of early-career colleagues. Her generosity with ideas and her good humour made these events highlights of the semester for everyone. In 2009, Laura acted as judge for the James Tait Black Prize in Biography, awarded by the University at the Edinburgh Book Festival, with the prize going that year to Michael Holroyd for *A Strange Eventful History*. An unexpected thunderstorm and power outage during the award ceremony taxed Laura's presentation skills, but she and the crime writer Ian Rankin, who was hosting the ceremony that year, continued by torchlight to the great satisfaction of the audience—testimony to Laura's gentle wit and acuity.

Edinburgh University was extremely fortunate that in 2021, shortly before her death, Laura was able to give the Susan Manning Memorial Lecture on 'The Noise of Time: autobiography and History in the 1930s'. It was a typically wonderful talk, wide-ranging

and brilliant, that speculated on the relations between location, temporality and memory in pre-war Europe and was a really exciting event amid the monotony imposed on us by the COVID pandemic. In the lecture, she quoted Walter Benjamin's insight that memories of a life can consist only of 'moments and discontinuities' but that this is what makes reminiscence so vivid. Despite the shortness of her time in Edinburgh, our memories of Laura are full of these moments.

### Goldsmiths' Professor of English, Oxford

Laura moved to Oxford as Goldsmiths' Professor in 2010 and remained there as a powerful figure until her eleven rich and intellectually fertile years were cut short so harshly. They were some of her happiest years. She loved New College. She and her husband William settled with their son, Daniel, at the Hermitage in Bampton. Always a passionate gardener, she thrived in the country. And yet despite enjoying a comparatively sequestered rural experience she led a full Oxford life, taking part in committee work for New College, committed to the Oxford Faculty and particularly to graduate teaching and examining, working two days a week in an advisory capacity for Oxford University Press. Her friends, knowing that she did not drive, often speculated with wonder on how she managed this heavy workload, given the dearth of country buses.

### Oxford University Press

**Jacqueline Norton**, of Oxford University Press, writes here about Laura's work:

Laura had published with OUP – her 2007 book *The Tenth Muse* won the MLA's James Russell Lowell prize – before she arrived in Oxford to take up the Goldsmiths' chair, but her involvement was to deepen when she took up a role on the Press's Delegacy in 2011. The OUP Delegates – academics from the university whose expertise corresponds to its key areas of research publishing – formally (and collectively) evaluate its publishing proposals. Laura was the Literature and Music Delegate and was kept very busy reading and evaluating proposals by the editors in the Oxford office as well as by editors working on the Very Short Introduction series and those from adjacent disciplines with work crossing into literary studies.

Laura worked closely with OUP to shape and set the direction for the Literature list and was particularly committed to the addition of some key 20th-century writers to OUP's stable of scholarly editions including Wyndham Lewis and Dorothy Richardson, the latter being one of Laura's great passions and a project she was working on herself. She shared the aim of balancing publishing beyond and across the strongholds of early modern and modernist studies and was pleased to see 19th-into-20th century work from Isobel Armstrong, Stefano Evangelista, Kate Flint, Jo McDonagh, Clare Pettitt, David

Trotter, and others. Her own co-edited volume *Late Victorian into Modern* (Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature series, 2016)<sup>15</sup> added to this concentration of publishing. Laura also actively encouraged the development of a cluster of books reflecting on the wider value of literary studies and the humanities, including the Literary Agenda series, Helen's Small's work, and Lyndsey Stonebridge's account of how the literary shapes and constitutes the language of human rights. She also contributed to the growing interest in life-writing with her own *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

As a Delegate at Oxford University Press for approaching ten years, Laura read and evaluated many proposals from the Literature and Music editors and others, attended dozens of faculty monograph meetings, supported numerous Clarendon and Wells lecture series (co-sponsored by OUP and the English Faculty), and much more. Colleagues across the Press benefited from her warmth, intelligence, interest, and support. Her instincts were always for inclusion and this chimed with everyone who loved her and in the case of OUP's literary publishing had a great influence, anticipating much of the more formalised work towards inclusion which has come to shape our work. In the latter part of her term of office she took on an additional role on the Press's Finance Committee. Finance Committee was not obvious territory for a Literature and Music Delegate, but Laura was undaunted and quickly established herself as an important advocate for the Delegacy. Nigel Portwood, OUP's Chief Executive, wrote of her as the conscience of Finance Committee – its 'beating heart', reminding members of the human and academic values that underpin all of the university's activities.

The book that Laura was working on, *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern*, was approved by the Delegates in her absence and during her illness in September 2021, and is being prepared for publication by OUP by colleagues and friends.

### Oxford, Psychoanalysis

Laura's ongoing work on psychoanalysis came to fruition in Oxford in a major work, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2014, and through a collaboration with **Ankhi Mukherjee**, *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture*, published by Wiley.<sup>17</sup> Ankhi reflects on Laura's work here, and her impassioned belief that psychoanalysis, literature and cinema are three interconnected forms of knowledge.

<sup>15</sup>Laura Marcus, *Late Victorian Into Modern* (Twenty First Century Approaches to Literature series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup>With Ankhi Mukherjee, *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014).

We were travelling to London for a British Academy ‘Thinkers for our time’ event on Sigmund Freud in November 2015 when Laura suddenly said, ‘theory is thought’. We were going to be talking about the legacy and afterlives of Freud, with which came the usual disclaimers about speculations by the Viennese doctor that are best left in the lumber room of history. Laura was saying that theory should be treated as thought, not ossified but travelling with facility from one historical context to another. It lays itself open to reflexivity, questioning, and resistances in the process. We were willing to agree on a moving train that theory – Freudian theory – denotes disruption, not reification, of place.

Psychoanalysis is a non-veridical discourse, relatable though not identical to imaginative fiction, but the resources of both storytelling and psychoanalysis can, nevertheless, be drawn on to tell the truth. Not courtroom truth, perhaps, which follows the course of natural justice, but one that is contextual and contingent, and of distinct kinds (emotional, fictional, mathematical, poetic, for instance). Psychoanalysis alerts us that we occasionally archive the truth by forgetting it: memory makes history in the very moment of erasing it. The truth of fiction, however, is a memory system that knows no forgetting, and where there can be no comforting elimination of history. Laura has commented on the clashing yet conjoined imperatives of these two truth systems in autobiographical writing, which turns ‘life into text and text back into life’, as she observes in her monograph *Virginia Woolf*.<sup>18</sup> If one of the impulses behind Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* is a laying to rest the ghost of her brother Thoby, a relinquishing of the lost object and returning to the land of the living, Woolf knows all too well the perils of the room of fiction – and Jacob’s gloom – becoming Jacob’s tomb. Laura thinks about Jacob’s old, now-empty shoes and Betty Flanders’s plaintive ‘What am I to with these, Mr Bonamy?’ The question, Laura says, could ‘as properly be posed by the reader, confronted with a further indecipherable sign in a text the empty centre of which is a “character” which cannot be read’ (p. 93). It is ‘one of the novel’s paradoxes’, Laura writes, that ‘it figures absence in more substantial terms than presence’ (p. 93).

As a psychoanalytic critic, Laura was drawn to that ‘blurred borderline between ordinary experience and psychic life’, as she called it in *The Tenth Muse* (p. 366). A striking example of this is her critical reading of H.D.’s *Tribute to Freud*, in particular the ‘visionary’ experience in Corfu in the early 1920s. H.D. recounts this to Freud as a significant life event, where she sees hieroglyphs projected on a wall, and in light, not shadow. These look like magic-lantern slides at first but start to resemble early cinema as H.D. recalls them frame by frame (p. 149). The cinematic images, H.D. states, closed the gap between the ordinary dreamer and the psychic or clairvoyant, and between sleeping and waking selves. H.D. is gesturing to the kinship between psychoanalysis and film here, Laura comments: ‘Psychoanalysis is itself a form of cinema, the projection and play of sign, image, and scene upon a screen’, which is both wall and not-wall (p. 367).

<sup>18</sup> *Virginia Woolf* (Writers and their Work; Tavistock: Northcote House, 1997), p. 121.

Laura's psychoanalytic scholarship on literature, cinema, and modernity in works such as *Dreams of Modernity* posited storytelling itself as a form of modern dreaming and awakening. It is not simply future-oriented, a form of teleological and transmissible historical knowledge. The dream looks back and looks awry at the past, the dream scene's 'very lack of narrative and subjective motivation, the unthinking quality of its presentation . . . a part of the condition of its transmission to another's subjectivity' (*Dreams of Modernity*, p. 226). This 'unfurling' of the scene (of writing) is captured in Lily Briscoe's thoughts on Mr and Mrs Ramsay: 'She was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen' (p. 226). The transmission is intergenerational as well as intersubjective, marking the moment of movement between selves – and from the artist's solipsism to their conception and eventual reception by a lay audience. Yet, Laura reminds us, in her exquisite reading of the novel as elegy in *To the Lighthouse*, a renegotiation of influence and the past is not a reliving of old forms, 'familial or literary' (*Virginia Woolf*, p. 109). The Ramsay family returns to the house, but repetitions in the novel are new departures too.

Pondering, as editor, on the critical legacies of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Laura observes that the term 'method', deriving from the Greek *hodos*, meaning path or way, resonates with Freud's journeying through and to his dream theories. The paths, however, are far from straight. Not only are there different points of origin, 'the interpretative path often ends in a tangle of roots' (Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*; p. 18). Laura was not only a psychoanalytic thinker but an avid reader and curator of new scholarly perspectives in psychoanalytic criticism. Writing the introduction to *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture*, she notes with bemusement that in the twenty-year gap between Maud Ellmann's *Psychoanalytic Criticism* and our own co-edited volume, the emphasis on 'Oedipal and Oedipalisation' has given way to 'queer and postcolonial theory, cultural criticism, translation . . . models of time and temporality, and the human-animal interface' (p. 1). In the final paragraph of the introduction, she celebrates the 'zoological diversity' (Maud Ellmann's term) of the thought inspired by Freud and his followers, and its polymorphous vitality, to which we now add Laura Marcus's lifetime's work (p. 11).

### Oxford, colleague and supervisor

**Helen Small**, Merton Professor of English language and Literature at the University of Oxford, writes about Laura's influential role as colleague and supervisor of graduate students.

Laura Marcus was appointed to the Goldsmiths' Professorship of English Literature at the University of Oxford in 2010, when her friend and fellow Woolfian, Hermione Lee, vacated the Chair to take up the Presidency of Wolfson College. Their shared interests in modernist women's writing and life writing made for strong continuity and ongoing

allyship as Laura took over leadership of research and teaching in modern and contemporary literature, joining the board of the Oxford Centre for Life Writing, and raising the profile of Faculty expertise in history of cinema and critical theory. (The fluctuating prominence of theory at Oxford mystified her: how, she wondered aloud more than once, could a Faculty that had produced many of the most influential theorists in the world not have done more to embrace its own success?) With Oxford graduate study at Masters and doctoral level increasingly concentrated in the modern period, she was in heavy demand as a lecturer, MSt course convenor, and doctoral supervisor. Students from around Britain and further afield were drawn to the Faculty not just by her reputation but by meeting her at international conferences and sensing her quick, keen interest in their ideas (she ‘immediately took me under her wing’, a Swiss graduate recalls of Laura’s 2016 visit to Bern, ‘and encouraged me to apply for a DPhil’). Exceptional intellectual range, and a willingness to entertain ambition wherever she saw it generated huge demand for her involvement as a reader or examiner, so that she was soon handling a portfolio of doctoral work stretching from ‘women’s university fiction’ to ‘Benjamin, Economics, and Literature’, Woolf and Mansfield to David Foster Wallace, ‘defamiliarisation’ to ‘the nature of infinity’.

In a climate where academic jobs were becoming scarcer and more competitive by the year, Laura had a remarkable ability to guide young researchers into ongoing academic employment. Her effectiveness as a supervisor had much to do with her ability to strike a ‘perfect balance’ between directiveness and freedom. ‘My final DPhil thesis feels like it is fully mine’, one reflects, ‘– my brainchild and first big academic accomplishment’, though ‘Laura is still there: in every chapter, in every line’. She had little truck with old-style Oxford arrogance, but a quick ability to see where the appearance of confidence might be covering youthful insecurity: ‘quizzical glance: glasses pulled off, eye brows raised, the faintest touch of a bemused smile. It was a glance that said: go on, tell me more, ... (As an over-confident young man, you more than likely will be wrong); but that isn’t what matters right now. What matters is taking the risk.’ Many of the doctoral and postdoctoral projects she oversaw would have sat as happily within a department of cultural studies as in a department of literature: projects on visual culture, on material objects, on remediation between text, image, and moving image: ‘the rhythm of a locomotive, say, was as “bookly” for her as a Joycean tome’. At the same time, she could startle her students by knowing their primary literary texts so intimately that, when a quotation eluded them she would supply it (at length and from memory). Brilliance, passion, kindness, warmth, conviviality, and ‘shared hilarity’ are constants in her supervisees’ recollections.

Laura’s research leadership for colleagues in the modern period rested on the same remarkable generosity with her energy and attention, despite plural demands on her time from Faculty, college, Humanities Division (she was a mainstay of events at The Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities) and Oxford University Press. The two days a week committed to reading submissions for OUP no doubt helped to feed her extraordinary up-to-dateness with new work, not only in her dedicated period but across the full scope of English literature and its many interfaces with Modern Languages, comparative

literature, history, classics, philosophy. She was a constant presence in research seminars and local conferences, her questions going to the heart of the matter. Reading draft work for numerous colleagues, at all career stages, she was mentoring unofficially at least as much as she was doing so officially. Advice on book development, on new project proposals, on publishing, was given without any hint that her time might be stretched.

Even in pandemic lockdown, supervising and leading research seminars from home (and making no attempt to hide her dislike of online formats), she managed to imbue a new cohort of students with enthusiasm and pleasure in becoming part of a global research community of modernists. Equality of access to the conversation was a matter of principle to her. She had ‘a unique charisma’ but not a ‘shred of ostentation’, students and young researchers recall: ‘even through a computer screen, or simply as a voice on the phone, Laura never failed to give ... courage and guidance.’ Above all, she respected intellectual independence: ‘there were no implicit demands to praise her, idolise her, follow her, ... You went into a supervision and came out a better version of yourself – not a version which was more like her.’ As those who knew her best came to realise, that rare ‘egolessness’ had its basis in her happiness. ‘She was already a full person with a full life, and didn’t rely on you to shore her up or validate her. It was beautiful.’

### Oxford, Virginia Woolf, a shared passion

Professor Dame **Hermione Lee**, Laura’s predecessor, writes of their shared interests in Virginia Woolf, as we have seen one of her deep passions.

Laura Marcus and I had several links. She succeeded me as Goldsmiths’ Chair of Literature at New College Oxford in 2010, and then as the Literature Delegate to Oxford University Press. We taught together on the Oxford English Faculty’s life-writing option for several years, and we had shared interests in Woolf and in life-writing.

Like everyone who knew her, I feel extremely lucky to have been her friend and colleague. Intellectually, it was a privilege to learn from her influential work on modernism, life-writing, psychoanalysis, fiction and film; personally, it was always inspiring and delighting to cross paths with her. She had a humorous, wise understanding of life and people, an unquenchable curiosity and spirit of adventure, and a generous openness to ideas and debates. Generosity was at the heart of her nature. Her integrity, love of fun and emotional warmth were legendary. Writing on autobiography (*Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 112; hereafter *VSI*), she quoted Mansfield’s idea of the self as ‘a plant which grows through years of darkness and is finally discovered by the light’: “‘and – we are alive – we are flowering for our moment upon the earth’.” That flowering self of hers was grand, vital and lavish, and gave colour and brightness to all who encountered it.

Laura Marcus’s interests in life-writing and in Virginia Woolf were always intertwined. In her 1994 *Auto/biographical Discourses* (Manchester University Press; hereafter *AD*) she writes on Woolf’s especial interest in ‘collective’ lives (pp. 97-98), a theme to which

she would return, and on how Woolf ‘dramatises’ the ‘dissolution of ego-boundaries’ (*AD*, pp. 130, 222). Here, as later, Laura’s account of Woolf’s view of life-writing is implicitly political: she sees Woolf as always looking beyond the boundaries of individual selfhood. Laura expands on this in her excellent 1997 book on *Virginia Woolf* (Northcote House, revised 2004; hereafter *VW*). Here she again draws attention to Woolf’s interest in collective lives (p. 49), to the way that in *The Waves* identity is not ‘isolable’ (p. 137), to communal identities in *Between the Acts*: “‘I’ rejected; ‘We’ substituted’ (p. 177). She notes how often Woolf’s concept of ‘self’ co-exists with ‘impersonality’ (p. 136). Mixed with this thoughtful enquiry is a delight in ‘fun’, especially in *Orlando*, as part of Woolf’s armoury: pastiche, mockery, transgression, fantasy, playfulness, and the ‘celebration of life’ (*AD*, p. 117; *VW*, pp. 121, 126).

There is always an oscillation in Woolf, Laura shows, between an individual self and ‘diffuse identities’ (*VW*, p. 100). Woolf is drawn to ‘the self-in-pieces’, to moments where ‘looking and being looked at, knowing and being known, subject and object, self and other, lose their distinctiveness’ (p. 159). That theme returns in Laura’s ‘Very Short Introduction’ to *Autobiography* (OUP, 2018), where she writes of the sense of fluctuating identity, ‘the conception of the self from the “inside” and from the “outside”, as reflected back to us by others’, as the vital quality of modernist autobiography (*VSI*, p. 4). In this valuable guide to the genre there is much about time and ‘the work of memory’ (*VSI*, p. 4), especially in Woolf. Laura says that, according to Woolf, ‘the central problem of autobiography ... is the nature of time: “for no sooner has one said this was so, then it was past and altered”’ (*VSI*, p. 115). The ‘apprehension of the fleeting, evanescent, and fluid qualities of identity and experience’, so crucial to Woolf, ‘lies at the heart of modernist autobiography’ (*VSI*, p. 115). That to-and-fro between the self and the other, and between time present and time past, is summed up for Laura in the image of ‘oscillation’ (*VW*, p. 124). The word links to Laura’s life-long fascination with rhythm in modernism. Her book on Woolf ends its final chapter on *Between the Acts* (*VW*, p. 186) with a moving example of that ‘oscillation’.

The disintegration recorded or relayed in the final part of the pageant could well be read as a reflection of Woolf’s broader sense of dissolution and destruction – of a culture, a history, a land ... Woolf, in fact, leaves us with fragments which sound out something other than annihilation – but ambiguously, ambivalently. The final syllabled sounds of the gramophone, which has ticked like a clock throughout the performance, try to spell this out: ‘Dispersed are we’, ‘Harmony’, ‘Unity-Dispersity’, ‘Un ... dis ... And ceased’. If we hear this as ‘undeceased’, we are left with a negation that cancels out death, a ‘Yes’ and a ‘No’: “‘Yes”, Isa answered. “No”, she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted. The old boot appeared on the shingle.’ This is the rhythm of the waves, which does not cease.



## Oxford, Fellow of New College

The Warden of New College, **Miles Young**, writes of Laura's life as Fellow of New College.

From 2010 to 2021, New College was Laura's home. Home, it very much was. She often used to stay the night in order to avoid the drive to and from her real home, and our breakfast in 'The Chequers' of the Senior Common Room was enlivened by her conversation: the previous day's events were dissected and commented upon, amusingly, and sometimes mischievously. Passing characters were ruthlessly appraised. Books were found either wanting or interesting – and all with a gentle charm, and more than a twinkle in the eye.

Within the College, she was an active and conscientious participant in governance, the very opposite of the stereotypical disengaged Professorial Fellow. She expressed her views with grace, but with pungency on the big issues; on the smaller ones, from commissioning portraits to protecting some parts of the garden, she made an inimitable mark. She was a source of friendly counsel and emotional support to the younger fellows. And, though not a teacher in the College, she was always there for the English students: interested in them, encouraging them, joining our trips. Importantly, she also helped ensure the future of the Duff Cooper Literary Prize, by persuading us to have it vested fully in the College.

Laura epitomised the very best of collegiality. She relished and epitomised the spirit of commons, and of engaging with them under the umbrella of the Wykehamical ethos of 'manners making men and women'.

## Feminism

Throughout her life Feminism was a formative influence on Laura's work, just as it was reciprocally an influential element of her critical writing. She read feminist theory and feminist scholarship avidly, but her own writing tended to embed feminism in studies of particular writers. For example, between 1987 and 2019 she wrote fourteen book chapters and periodical articles on Virginia Woolf. Typical was 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, edited by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers in 2000.<sup>19</sup> Her practice was to look scrupulously at the discourses of gender, just as she looked attentively at the discourses of autobiography. An example is the probing and witty 'Staging the "Private Theatre": Gender and the Auto-Erotics of Reverie', an essay of 2000.<sup>20</sup> On the one side, Laura argues, there are Breuer, Freud, Havelock Ellis, and on the other Anna O. and Anna Freud, patients of Freud, Lou Andreas

<sup>19</sup> Sue Roe & Susan Sellers (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2000); Susan Sellers (ed.), 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 142–179.

<sup>20</sup> Reprinted in *Dreams of Modernity*, pp.110–123.

Salomé and new women novelists. Operating round what Laura, mindful of the association by male analysts of the New Woman and the bicycle's excitation, calls the 'friction fiction' divide, the analysis is of a move from internally generated female reverie and fantasy to other-directed imagination and action, a move from the internal to the external that cannot be unequivocally accepted. From the first, in a rigorous essay in *New Feminist Discourses* (1992), 'Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism',<sup>21</sup> her earliest feminist essay, she was attentive to the changing debates and arguments of feminist thought. In this essay she discusses the implications of the politics of a divide between the feminist theory that located a feminist aesthetic in experimental, gendered avant garde writing, and those theorists who explored and defended popular realist genres of feminist fiction. Identifying the traditions represented by Julia Kristeva and Rita Felski, this essay was prophetic in its analysis of different strands of feminist thought.

It is fitting to end her colleagues' accounts of Laura with the reflections of **Helen Carr**, Emeritus Professor of English at Goldsmiths, University of London, and founding editor of *Women: A Cultural Review*, where Laura was a lifelong co-editor. Laura's association with *Women* began when she joined the Birkbeck department and only ended with her death.

I first met Laura on the train coming back to London after the 1984 University of Essex Sociology of Literature conference. Younger readers may not be familiar with those conferences, but they were occasions where every self-respecting left-wing literature student had to be. 'Theory' was heavily male-dominated back then, black leather jackets *de rigueur*, but the Essex conferences did make a genuine effort to include women's voices, so were particularly worth going to. I was with Deborah Philips, one of the people with whom I would go on the next year to found *Women's Review*, the precursor of the present *Women: A Cultural Review*. Deborah, who knew everyone, introduced us, and we had a most entertaining journey back, Laura being, as she always would be, enormous fun. We were all working on PhDs, but Laura was based at Kent, so I only saw her occasionally over the next few years, mainly, I seem to remember, at book launches rather than conferences.

Laura finished her doctorate before I did mine, and we would meet up at Covent Garden wine bars, lamenting our inability to find full-time work. I was by then working with Isobel Armstrong on setting up *Women: A Cultural Review*, which was to be published from Birkbeck, where Isobel had recently been appointed to the University of London Established Chair of English (later the Geoffrey Tillotson Chair). By a wonderful chance, before the first issue had come out, Laura joined the English Department, and immediately became an enthusiastic supporter. She wrote a piece of feminist film criticism for the first issue, an early sign of her passion for film studies. To start with, Isobel and I did everything for the journal – it simply hadn't occurred to us what an impossible task that would be – but by the third issue of the first year, Laura had moved to rescue us

<sup>21</sup> *New Feminist Discourses. Critical Essays on Theories and Texts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), pp.11–25.

and had become our excellent Reviews Editor. At the beginning of 1997, she was became a full Editor.

Laura would move to the University of Sussex, then to Edinburgh, and finally to Oxford, but in spite of increasing weight of duties, conferences, publications, research students, she remained fully engaged with the journal. We used to meet for lunch once or twice a year, always occasions of immense fun and laughter, Laura commenting wryly on whichever institution she was then connected with. She knew, it seemed, everyone in the academic world. Whenever we were lost for a reviewer for an article which came in, on however obscure a topic, Laura would know just the person. She was always warm and supportive to us all. When I discovered at the very beginning of lockdown that my husband had terminal cancer, she was incredibly kind and understanding, and she and my other fellow editors took over all my tasks. It was so horrific to discover the next year that she too had terminal cancer, and we were all to lose her vivacity, warmth, charm and incredible knowledge. We were, of course, so truly lucky to have had her support, friendship, immense knowledge and perspicacity over all those years, and however sadly, remain grateful for all she gave us.

### *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern*

This book – even unfinished as it is – will show Laura at her full maturity, depth, imagination and fullness of intellect: it will be published in its unfinished state by Oxford University Press in 2023. Laura’s final research, the work on rhythm, was long in gestation, beginning as early as the end of her time at Sussex (2007). In 2016 she gave a paper at an international conference entitled ‘The ubiquity of everything that beats’. This sentence might be a summary of her massively learned and imaginative study. She did not live to complete her intellectually formidable and prodigiously scholarly book. But the brilliance and originality of its ambition is clear – to establish rhythm as *the* formative category of the late Victorian and modern imaginary. In describing rhythm as the ‘measures’ of the modern, she intended to demonstrate that rhythm was not only the central concept of modernity, the concept it owned, but also to explore how rhythm could itself ‘measure’ or index the modern, establishing its nature anew. Rhythm was, she suggests, in an earlier article in 2018, ‘a connective tissue between . . . areas of knowledge’ – life sciences, philosophy, psychology, music and literature – ‘and between the arts and sciences more broadly’.<sup>22</sup> Her research led her to refuse customary periodisations, crossing from the 1850s and occasionally right to the 1970s, and thus to change what Victorianism and modernism looked like.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Rhythm and the Measures of the Modern’, in Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada & Anne Besnault-Levita (eds), *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 211-227, at p. 211.

She did not leave an Introduction to this first draft of the book. But it is clear that she would have emphasised the necessity to ‘open up the longer history of rhythm’, as she put it in 2018, and also to open up its wide as well as its long historical perspective. ‘Rhythm’, she wrote, in a description of her research for her Fellowship application to Paris, taken up briefly in 2020 before it was suspended by Covid-19, ‘served as a way of mediating between different areas, at a time when many of the modern disciplines were in the process of formation or consolidation’. Rhythm science crossed the disciplines, from Herbert Spencer’s study of motion in the physical universe through the rhythms of wave and wind, to psychological study of periodicity in the laboratory, to physiological aesthetics, to dance, to painting, even to town planning, and of course prosody. What links these fields is rhythm’s pre-linguistic nature, prior to signification, and a concern with the body. Writers and thinkers of these periods, she wrote, are concerned ‘to connect “rhythm” (etymologically and conceptually) with natural and organic processes . . .’ The metaphors of the ‘pulse’, and the ‘heart-beat’ as well as of waves, come to define ideas of ‘rhythm’ in a very wide range of concepts. They are also linked by a common impulse – ‘the desire to reclaim or retain human and natural measures in the face of the coming of the machine and the speed of technological development’. The preoccupation with pulsation, conflict of force, rise and fall, periodisation, recurrence, all those synonyms for rhythm, belongs to this desire. Perhaps recurrence was a cultural need, almost an ontological need, in the face of uncertainties created not only by technological change but evolutionary ideas. Certainly the reach and depth of rhythm theory testify to a concern charged with common energy.

We do have some clues about the contents of Laura’s Introduction. She would have begun, as the book begins, with Herbert Spencer in the middle decades of the 19th century, and his influential writings on ‘The Direction and Rhythm of Motion’. But there are some indications that she would also have introduced the book with Nietzsche, his understanding of ‘rhythm’ as movement and becoming, and his distinction, as she put it in her application document, between the “rhythms” of Classical and Modern which came to define the different concepts of time, historicity and cultural formation in the two periods [Victorian and modern]’. She would have traced this through to ‘Bergson and his modernist followers and detractors in literature and the visual arts’.

Most people associate ‘rhythm’ with prosody and metrics, and it is likely that Laura would have discussed this association in her Introduction. Though prosody was important to her, Laura was much more interested in the importance of prose rhythm to the period, the blurring of the prose and poetry divide in modernist poetics and practice, and the extension of rhythm to include diverse psychological and cultural experience. She saw William Morrison Patterson’s *The Rhythm of Prose* (1916), which included in rhythm studies the child on the swing and the investor who is ‘subject to the movements of capital’, taking rhythm into the ‘psychological laboratory’, as a significant text. Music,

defined as rhythmic form, offered ‘rhythmic patterns pre-existing, in the creative process’, and it is this she wanted to explore, through the work of Paul Valéry, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield.

There are six chapters in the present book. Laura envisaged eight. So, though this is hard to believe, a quarter of the book is missing. The two chapters she was unable to complete were at one time Chapters Six and Seven. Chapter Six was entitled ‘Urban Rhythms and City Symphonies’. She notes that it focused in particular on ‘film rhythm in the work of Hans Richter, Abel Gance, Eisenstein and others’. Chapter Seven engaged with ‘Syncopations and polyrhythmia in writing, including prose rhythm, and in early 20th century music, including jazz and also Stravinsky, Scriabin, Honegger’. There was to be a coda, ‘Rhythmanalysis’, to include the later 20th-century theories of Henri Lefebvre, Henri Meschonnic, Pascal Michon and Roland Barthes (on idiorhythm). Bergson and Bachelard may have returned at this point.

Of the existing chapters, Chapter 1 begins with Herbert Spencer and ends with Marie Stopes, exploring the physics and the physiology of rhythm in modernity. Chapter 2, Rhythm, Art and Experience, considers the commitment of both the arts and sciences to a science of rhythm in the late 19th century. Chapter 3, Eurythmy, Eurythmics, explores the cultural implications of these two powerful dance movements. Chapters 4 and 5 chart the separate aesthetics and politics of rhythm in the two parallel movements of modernism, the group round little magazines such as *The New Age* and *Rhythm*, and the Bloomsbury group. Chapter 6 turns to the United States and to the coming into prominence of American Indian dance rhythm.

Rather than dwelling on the tragedy of what is not here, it is best to celebrate the extraordinary richness of what is. This work creates juxtapositions and relationships unthought of until now. There are three arresting features. The historical arc, from the middle of the 19th century to high modernism and beyond, even to the Second World War, from Herbert Spencer, whom Marcus, as we have seen, locates as the founding theorist of rhythm, through to D.H. Lawrence in Chapter 6, who read Spencer’s work: this is remarkable for refusing conventional periodisation. The sweep from Spencer to Marie Stopes, from the physics of wind and wave in the mid-19th century to the periodicity of sexual life in the 20th in the first chapter is a brilliant and unexpected move. It clears away conventional associations and prepares us for new. (It’s notable that many figures Marcus references throughout the book lived well beyond the Second World War.) Secondly, the book welds together empirical physiological and psychological studies throughout this period with aesthetic debate. Scientific experiment and aesthetic theory together open out a comprehensive culture of enquiry into rhythm. The third arresting feature of this book is its attention to the presence of the body in rhythm theory, whether in the aesthetics of Dalcroze’s eurhythmics or in attention to graphology. This

enables Marcus to foreground dance in particular (which I think she sees as the art most central to her theme), from Havelock Ellis's physiological aesthetics and the 'dance of life' (Chapter 1), to the celebration of American Indian dance rhythms by American critics (Chapter 6). Finally, a recurrent motif is the rhythm of the wave, whether seen through the experiments of scientists and psychologists or as the founding principle of the arts, the wave both as a substantive principle and a poetics, from Spencer through to Virginia Woolf. The wave, a signature element in so much of Laura's writing, takes on an entirely new resonance in this study. The wave unifies the diverse enquiries of this book.<sup>23</sup>

It is fitting to end a memoir of Laura with an account of this extraordinary work. It says so much about her, her steadfast originality, her intellectual ambition. It breathes her scholarly generosity, that unforgettable quality that shone on all who knew her.

There are so many images of Laura to leave with a reader. Her wit, for one thing: 'You have to love a book enough to begin to write it and hate it enough to finish it.' But I think that the prevailing passion of her work was the intense response to lyricism that I mentioned earlier. It is appropriate to end this memoir with the mysterious lyricism of the poem by Edith Sitwell that she asked to be read at her memorial, 'The Youth with the Red-Gold Hair'. I think she would find this elegiac poem an appropriate ending. And I like to think that the wind-made waves of wheat in the poem echo her love of the waves in the novels of Virginia Woolf and in the work of the thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries who addressed them from so many perspectives.

The gold-armoured ghost from the Roman road  
 Sighed over the wheat  
 'Fear not the sound and the glamour  
 Of my gold armour --  
 (The sound of the wind and the wheat)  
 Fear not its clamour . . .  
 Fear only the red-gold sun with the fleece of a fox  
 Who will steal the fluttering bird you hide in your breast.  
 Fear only the red-gold rain  
 That will dim your brightness, O my tall tower of the corn,  
 You, -- my blonde girl . . .'  
 But the wind sighed, 'Rest.' . . .  
 The wind in his grey knight's armour  
 Sighed over the fields of wheat, 'He is gone . . .  
 Forlorn.'

<sup>23</sup> See for further discussion the Introduction to the book by Isobel Armstrong and Josephine McDonagh.

*Note on the author:* Isobel Armstrong is Emeritus Professor of English at Birkbeck, University of London. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2003.

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