During my first and second years of university, while reading William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All, I made what I considered, then and now, to be my first valuable observation as a student of literature. The book consisted of prose passages and poems. The poems could be further divided into two categories: “easy” and “difficult.” The easy poems were immediately obvious as they possess a stunning clarity. The difficult poems, on the other hand, appeared to have opaque, inscrutable surfaces, the words lifeless on the page. Then, suddenly, it struck me that the easy poems and the difficult poems existed in conversation. The easy poems often played out a single device, concrete
imagery in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” for instance (Williams 74), or diction and persona in “Our Orchestra / is the cat’s nuts” (Williams 63), and the difficult poems, while more obscure, complicated, and subtle essentially consisted of the same devices that worked so transparently in the easy poems. The easy poems, therefore, taught me how to read the difficult poems. They provided me with the basic vocabulary of Williams’s poetic language, lending me the interpretive tools needed to apprehend and appreciate his more bewildering verse. Spring and All taught me how to read Spring and All.

Reading one poem, I might suddenly apprehend another, so that I seemed to be reading two poems at once, or one poem through another. A later poem might illuminate an earlier poem, thereby seeming both to follow it and precede it. The poems themselves seemed to burst their boundaries and spill into one another, defying any sense I might have of the sequence or structure of the work. The poems arrived not in one order, but in many—or in none. And undoubtedly, whatever order they had for me was unique to me, informed by my own growing grasp of literary language, my own fleeting attentions and the whirl of my psyche. Someone else would read the book completely differently, bringing to it his or her own interests, motivations, and expertise, so that each reader’s Spring and All would be intimate and idiosyncratic. One could hardly speak of a single Spring and All. There would be as many versions as there were readers and it would be difficult to label one of these “correct.” Every reading of Spring and All, - whether thoughtful and considered, rushed and cursory, or interrupted and fragmented - produced something of real, undeniable value.

The conventional description of poems as individual, discrete items in a determinate sequence was barely reflective of my reading experience and, therefore, seemed to me wholly inadequate, even pernicious. These poems were always dynamically intertwined, critiquing, reflecting, negating, illuminating, obscuring, and revising one another. They never stopped moving. The conventional description of a text as a united whole, bound into a conventional form with beginning, middle, and end, revealed itself to be similarly fallacious. Spring and All possessed no beginning, middle, or end. It began when it began for me, whenever I began to get it. One might not truly begin to read a work until its last pages. The meaning of a work, then, depended upon the reader jogging its sequence, visiting and revisiting its parts in an order, individual and profound. Texts had no structure, no skeleton, and no spine. The reader provided the structure, lending the text a spine, a skull, and a home through diverse and multifarious readings, re-readings, and misreadings, skipping some parts, skimming others, dwelling on a
few. If there was such a thing as a fixed and conventional beginning, middle, or end, it was only a kind of formality, upheld in conversation and critical discourse for the sake of ceremony.

When I tell this story, Spring and All itself seems to overflow its edges, becoming a text without borders. Reading Spring and All marked the beginning of my abiding, enduring interest in the borders and boundaries of aesthetic experience, in textual thresholds, beginnings and endings, in order, sequence, and the relation of a part to a whole. Our collective interest in order goes all the way back to Aristotle, who wrote, in his Poetics:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else, although something necessarily else exists of comes about after it. An end, on the contrary is that which naturally follows something else either as a necessary or as a usual consequence, and is not itself followed by anything. A middle is that which follows something else, is itself followed by something. (41)

Like many philosophical notions from antiquity or foundational criticism, this passage seems silly, absurd even, in its methodical account of that which, today, goes without saying. I considered it a revelation: beginnings, middles, and endings were not discovered and examined, but rather formulated, asserted, argued, and finessed. The most basic tenets of narrative and structure masqueraded as natural principles but revealed themselves to be theoretical contrivances, albeit old, securely entrenched, and therefore, potent ones. Over centuries, and with our constant affirmation, they acquired the texture and quality of truth and they gained our credence and confidence. They became basic and fundamental, if not absolute. They were neither true nor false, or they were both. They blurred the line between fact and fiction.

This realization proved immensely influential to me. The artistic object as a “whole,” distinct and defined, vanished, its borders dissolving as it blended with the continuum of experience. This, in turn, eliminated the possibility, if it ever existed, of a final, definitive critical commentary on anything. In the first place, how could I comment on my reading without commenting on my class, gender, race, upbringing, mental and physical wellbeing, sexuality, diet, anxiety, tight shoes, aching feet? How could I write criticism without, in a thousand different ways, writing my own autobiography? Surely these things presented themselves at least implicitly in everything I wrote. Could I claim salience without severely distorting the truth of my experience and misrepresenting the tenuousness of my understanding? And then there was the fact that every text was as dense and multifarious as its readership, far larger
than I could possibly comprehend. To put it simply, grasping these works was impossible. They were far too big, hugely protean, and far cleverer than I could ever be. What could I do except gesture, mute and desperate, at the text itself? There! Read for yourself! I stumbled through my university career, asked to comment, again and again, on works of embarrassing and humbling richness. Endgame. Dance of the Happy Shades. Orlando. The Waves. A Heart So White. Daring to comment on these books, to presume critical perspicacity, meant confronting the limitations of my perception.

As I continued in my degree, my first bewildered attempts at a more honest criticism developed into the clumsy beginnings of a methodology, an infant poetics. First, if it was impossible and indeed undesirable to bottle these works, to pin them down and proclaim over them, then there was no point in conducting serious and exhaustive research. Comprehensiveness, after all, was out of the question. If every text was, for every reader, idiosyncratic and singular, one ought to embrace this and allow oneself, as much as possible, to be guided purely by one’s own sensibility, proclivity and perversion; this would suggest the point of entry for critical inquiry. Second, since it was not even possible to speak of a whole text, there was no point in struggling to apprehend one. One would demonstrate far more convincingly the richness of the work and the acuity of one’s own critical powers by contracting one’s vision and focusing on a single chapter, a single page, a single line, a single word even, and probing it to reveal the wonder of the whole text—the whole world!—played out in miniature, just as David George Haskell, in his remarkable book The Forest Unseen, detects all the marvelous and improbable biological phenomena of the forest in a small “mandala” of old-growth Tennessee bush. As Haskell puts it, “the truth of the forest may be more clearly and vividly revealed by the contemplation of a small area than it could be by donning ten-league boots, covering a continent but uncovering little” (xii).

I have to confess, somewhat guiltily, that this sincere strain of argument dovetailed all too conveniently with my inveterate lethargy. The text is necessarily infinite, shifting, and fragmentary, I told myself. Why bother even reading the damn thing? If I am only going to discuss a single page, why read anything more? I had therefore contrived not only a method of addressing and coping with what I saw as an infinite text, but a singularly compelling reason not to do my readings. But the fact that this line of thought validated my worst habits did not discount it. The completion fetish that I sensed in my classes and in society more broadly still required dismantling. The idea of “doing Wuthering Heights” in a week, as some of my friends did for class, was as foolish and presumptuous
as that of “doing Europe” in a week, and there was nothing I wanted less than to be a literary tourist. It occurred to me that perhaps this obsession with completion was peculiarly Western, correspondent to other conventions of consumption, such as the taste for large portions that, combined with the injunction that one should lick one’s plate clean, have led to an epidemic corpulence in North America. Perhaps, I mused, in certain Eastern countries, the practice is rather to read until one is full, even to leave a little on one’s plate as tribute and testament to the substance of the meal and the generous hospitality of the host.

When, in my third year, I presented on Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, which I had read years earlier on my own initiative and despised, I reasoned that I could get away with reading and presenting on no more than the first, second, and final chapters, referring to the bulk of the text only in abstract terms. To my great surprise, I enjoyed those three chapters more thoroughly than most of the volumes that constituted my “pleasure reading.” Moreover, I blackened those few pages with notes, finding more in them than in most of my classes. Who knows what cocktail of contexts, what amalgam of influences, bumped the planets into line and precipitated that wonderful reading experience. Who knows whether I could reproduce it, had I the ingredients and the recipe. I tend to doubt it, and that is beautiful in its own way.

It is, in fact, remarkable how much one can know about a book by reading its first and final chapters. One can know that On the Road ritualizes narrativity. It signals its own structure, its own status as story, relentlessly. The very first sentence on the very first page, for instance—“I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up” (Kerouac 3)—contains the word “first,” which appears three more times on that very first page. By the time the reader has flipped that first page, he or she has heard reference to Dean’s birth, to the “first reports” of Dean, and to “the first time” Dean came to New York. Kerouac, as Sal Paradise, writes that “the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (Kerouac 3). In this way, the book casts its spell, scooping the reader out of mundane reality and into the discrete and special universe of the novel.

Just as the opening chapter ushers us neatly in, the closing chapter guides us neatly out. The final paragraph—all one sentence, as a matter of fact, the prose equivalent of the long cinematic fade to black—begins with the image of the setting sun, as Sal sits on “the old broken-down river pier,” reflecting on life, America, life in America, and the recent departure of Dean Moriarty, thinking ahead to the “coming of complete night” and the “forlorn rags of growing old” (Kerouac 281). In highly dramatic, forthright fashion, On the Road resolves all of its opening notes, thereby charting a certain course: from arrival to departure, birth to death, sunrise to sunset, beginning
to end. I imagined I could trace this line through the book, like a clothesline upon which episodes dangled as so many wet socks do. Even though I had only vague notions of what happened in between, I knew exactly where On the Road began and ended, and I knew, more importantly, that whatever happened in the middle, no matter how chaotic or anarchic, was contained and controlled by the cupping narrative. The structure of On the Road was fundamentally conservative.

This hyper-delineated sense of structure made me highly uncomfortable. Unlike Spring and All, On the Road possessed an undeniable formal totality: it practically beat you over the head with it. I remained convinced that the reader provided whatever form the text could be said to have, that of course On the Road didn’t necessarily begin where it began or end where it ended or proceed in the order that it appeared to. However, On the Road prompted the reader to forfeit the idiosyncrasy of her or his reading and to surrender to structural convention, and I resented that. The reader was encouraged to occupy a typical interpretive position, to dance according to the diagram, to be a certain, boring kind of reader. Similarly, the Penguin Classics edition of the book, in its very material being, locked the text into historical and canonical place. One glance at the cover, with its faded, blue photographs and the silver Penguin Classics banner told one exactly where this book fit and what to make of it, so that one had, in a sense, already made up one’s mind without reading one page; the irony that this was what I was doing by reading only the beginning and the end did not strike me until much later.

The structural cues in the novel and the historical cues in its packaging allowed the reader to seal the experience away, as if in an envelope or a box, easily stored, in a closet or an attic alongside all the other dreary, conventional reading experiences one collects over the course of a literary education, and, finally, easily forgotten. On the Road encourages the reader to cordon themselves off from the life of the text, to consider its characters literary formalities, comfortable and snug in their own foreign and miniature world, like the world within an old photograph.

I presented this reading, or part of it, coupled with some contrasting observations about Richard Brautigan’s mysterious Trout Fishing in America. If On the Road models structural orientation and navigation, Trout Fishing in America models the opposite: disorientation, dislocation, and lack of direction. Unlike On the Road, Trout Fishing in America blurs all boundaries. It begins before it begins, and after. The supplementary material, the paratext, becomes part of the experience. The title page, for example, features the letters of the title soaring backwards in an arc, presumably the arc of a fishing rod and line, and the dedication, “For Jack Spicer and Ron Loewinsohn,” is contained within the loops of a smiling, hastily sketched fish. The first chapter, entitled “The Cover Page for Trout Fishing
in America,” begins: “The cover for Trout Fishing in America is a photograph taken late in the afternoon, a photograph of the Benjamin Franklin statue in San Francisco’s Washington Square” (Brautigan 1). The first move in the text is not to enclose us in a narrative and point us in the right direction, but instead to launch us backwards, out of the book. The formal cue to begin does not arrive until the second chapter, when Brautigan writes, “As a child when did I first hear about trout fishing in America?” (3). Even this deferred opening hardly allows the reader to settle, and instead torments us with further questions, such as: “What the hell does this phrase ‘trout fishing in America’ do or signify anyway?” Does Brautigan refer, mysteriously, to hearing of his own book? Does the title Trout Fishing in America refer to a national pastime, or a character, or a movement, or nothing at all? The ending, meanwhile, refuses to close any open circuits: in the second last chapter—titled “Prelude to the Mayonnaise Chapter”—Brautigan writes, “Expressing a human need, I always wanted to write a book that ended with the word Mayonnaise” (111). This desire is fulfilled in the final chapter, which consists of a letter addressed to “Florence and Harv” and concludes with the postscript: “Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonnaise [sic]” (Brautigan 112). The final words of the book are a parenthetical comment tacked onto the end of a letter that seems to have no relation to the rest of the book and was possibly found by Brautigan. There is nothing inevitable about it. It is simply the expression of the author’s whimsical desire. Trout Fishing in America, therefore, has no beginning and no end, which is to say, in a sense, that one never starts reading it and one never finishes, which is to say, in a sense, that one has always been reading Trout Fishing in America and will never stop.

This is either a very silly thought or a very profound one, or both. Whatever the case, I thought it served as a more honest allegory of our experiences with literature, with art, with life. Trout Fishing in America, like life, and unlike On the Road, could not be read conventionally, but only improvisationally. It was, in fact, a difficult book. It requires more from one as a reader, as a person. It required that one must labour to enjoy it and also that one must surrender instinct to work on the text, to assimilate every detail into a comprehensive scheme. It makes one work at passivity and project receptivity. It does not allow swift departure or tidy significance. That struck me as a very important thing, personally, politically, and so forth.

**Works Cited**

Brautigan, Richard. Trout Fishing in America. In Richard Brautigan’s Trout Fishing in America, The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster, and In
“the ugly feminists” (Wolf 2008). Wolf describes the ways in which some women are afraid of identifying as feminists solely because of the stigma associated with being ugly or unattractive. If a woman’s value is based on her physical appearance and submissive nature, a female will reject the feminist label because she is “not radical” (Douglas, 2007). To be a feminist, one simply needs to believe that there should be equality for all genders and sexes. Being a female feminist does not mean that you need to burn your bra and hate men (Douglas 2007), it means that you believe you should not be condemned for your sexual behaviour, that you should receive the same pay as your male counterpart, and that you should be able to exist freely without criticism simply for being born female.

However, women continue to condemn the movement that sought to bring them equality. Misconceptions regarding feminism undermine the entire ideology of the term and work against the people it is meant to benefit. The “ugly feminist” is merely a caricature used to hinder the progress of feminism (Wolf 2008) and thus works to further patriarchal social constructions. Women being silenced, and then women silencing other women, prevents women as a whole from receiving the same rights as their male counterparts.

Feminism today needs to be redefined to be more accepting of all women, with no attention even paid to

Condemning the Patriarchally Perpetuated Woman-Made Glass Ceiling

Natane Allison

The word feminist must be updated to include all women, rather than only including what Naomi Wolf has termed


