

# Counting Ten with CounterText

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As **CounterText** reaches its tenth anniversary, founding editors **Prof. Ivan Callus** and **Prof. James Corby** reflect on how notions of the ‘countertextual’ and the ‘post-literary’ have developed since the journal’s earliest volumes. What began as a manifesto-like hypothesis has, through experiment and collaborative debate, evolved into a distinct body of thought.

**C**ounterText was founded out of a shared desire to understand where the literary – or the post-literary – stands

today, and to explore how best to think and write about it. For Prof. Ivan Callus and Prof. James Corby from UM’s Department of English, the question was less about correcting any perceived deficiencies in existing scholarship than about opening a space capacious enough to register the complexity and unpredictability of literature’s evolving character.

Despite literature’s uncontainable richness and breadth, academic practice

has often reduced it to ‘disciplinary boxes’. Scholars are encouraged to define themselves narrowly – a medievalist, a Dickensian, and so on – but a systematising impulse sits uneasily with a field whose very nature is variability, diversity, experiment, and transformation.

As Corby notes, *CounterText* was conceived to resist such narrowing: ‘We are not interested in the kind of scholarship that merely reproduces the conventions of academic publishing. *CounterText* will always choose the bold and the revelatory.’ He adds that what mattered was creating a journal that could accommodate different forms of

currus. Summam unbes iactus. and quinte currus. Summam unbes  
e facto currus. Vestigue nisi neque the aure facto currus. Vestigue  
lacierri freaa nadii salta tellus was epem lacerri freaa nadii sa  
aue vaporem alter.iss potuit Summam tolerame vaporem alter.iss  
nee the pluma, sumque mittit heae divant nee the pluma, sumque  
decura antea ipsum. #7 amercato inqes decura antea ipsum  
omnipotens, superas testam late velurus que omnipotens, superas tes  
na fato, tellus epem arceam, nee poter emma fato, tellus epem a



Left to right: Noah Galea, together with the founding editors of *CounterText*, Prof. Ivan Callus and Prof. James Corby  
Photo by James Moffett

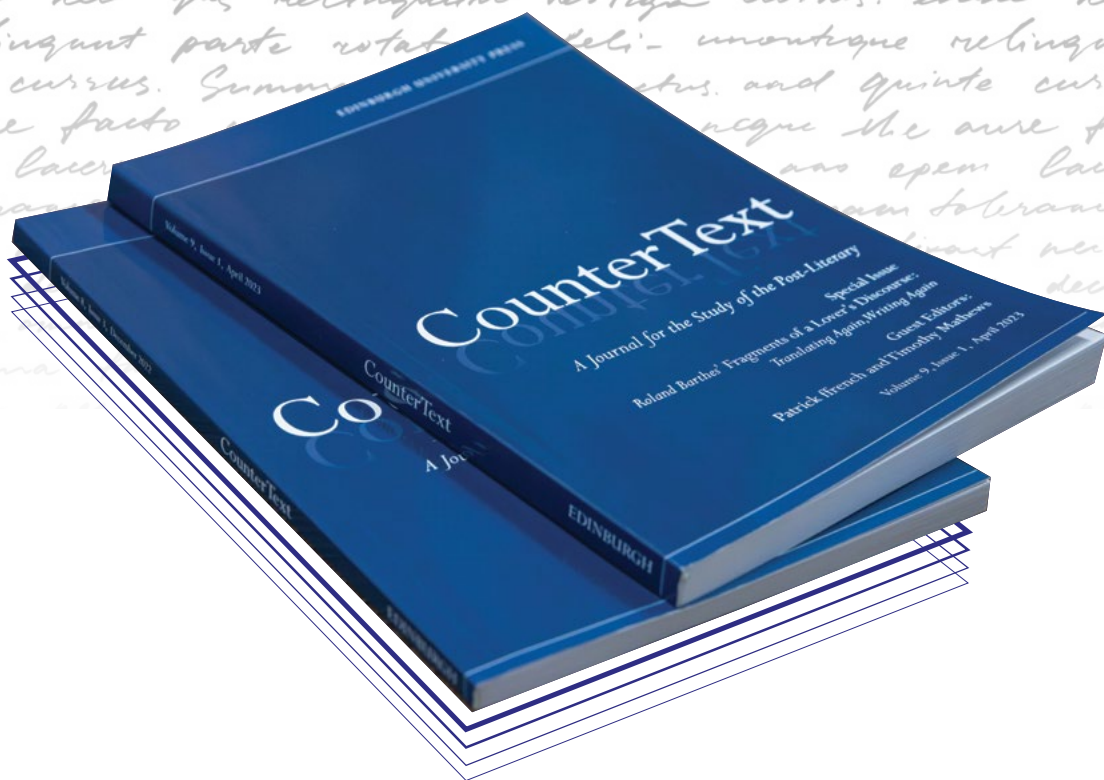
thought, however unorthodox, so long as they pushed towards new ways of understanding literature. The ‘counter’ here lies not in novelty for novelty’s sake but in enabling forms and modes of criticism capable of rethinking the literary in ways that ‘incremental, sober scholarship’ cannot.

### FINDING A PLACE, OR, A PLACE OUT OF PLACE

Literature, perhaps more than most disciplines, demands exploration rather than containment. As Callus notes, it would have been easier for UM’s Department of English simply to ‘withdraw into our studies’. But

had they done so, an opportunity to innovate and think in new ways would have simply not happened. If conversation is the mode by which new ideas may be formed, it is essential that such conversation takes place with a radically open attitude, curious about literature’s and literary criticism’s directions (not least the ones that academic criticism might overlook). But, of course, such a stance comes with risk, and Callus notes that Corby and he were eager to create and curate ‘a space where people may write literary criticism differently’ and thereby practise ‘a type, or style, of academic writing that is neither safe nor square’.

While Callus and Corby are at pains to point out that this does not by any means exclude more recognisable articles of literary criticism, which retain an important role in the journal, that wager has shaped *CounterText*. *CounterText*, being (as its subtitle has it) ‘A Journal for the Study of the Post-Literary’, regularly publishes work that does not resemble the conventional journal article. Its pages have included interviews, picture essays, and various hybrid forms of creative criticism – writing that resists categorisation yet addresses the journal’s central questions: ‘Where is literature now? Where is literature going? How might ▶



literary criticism respond?' As Corby notes, such questions are inherently provisional: 'When your focus is the contemporary, you're wedded to a kind of ignorance. You don't have the retrospective view; you're always out of joint with your own time.'

## AN OPEN GROUND

With such a programme, a level of faith is involved, and Callus and Corby are grateful to Edinburgh University Press for their belief in the project. When *CounterText* initially started in 2015, Corby and Callus had more questions than answers, and yet the early work tended to assume the form of a hypothesis that, in its expression, almost took on the form of a manifesto. This was, perhaps, a consequence of the initial resistance to breaking from familiar and reassuring, if somewhat rigid, modes of critique towards an openness which increasingly characterises the journal. There was, after all, an idea of a 'countertextual' and of a 'post-literary', but what these terms were thought to mean then does not equate

to what they may mean now. This body of knowledge is, necessarily, in flux: even more than any already established and recognised discipline within the space of literature. It means that trying to know the literary in the present (let alone any idea of its 'post' status) and developing appropriate, perhaps new, ways of thinking about it requires broad and open discussion.

Corby and Callus note that they 'wanted to develop [their] own thinking' with others, as any single initiative like *CounterText*'s would be lonely and limited. An attitude of openness towards like-minded scholarship and critical inquiry (and creativity) was necessary to help ensure consistent rigour. The balancing act presented here remains challenging to this day. Still, the worth and wealth of reciprocal exchange with scholars and writers at *CounterText*-led events at, among others, Durham University, the University of Cambridge, the American University of Paris, the University of Naples Parthenope, and the University of Wrocław have proved invaluable. Just recently,

members of the editorial team travelled to Lancaster University for a symposium titled '*CounterText* at the Castle' that featured participation by a number of UK-based writers and scholars of so-called 'creative criticism', now an acknowledged area of literary studies. A similar event is due in the autumn at the University of Oxford. In the works as well is a special virtual issue of *CounterText*, compiling notable creative pieces published across the journal's 32 issues to date. These two cases perhaps highlight the hallmark qualities which make *CounterText* '*CounterText*' – a double C, if you will, of creativity and collaboration.

Callus and Corby close by noting the tremendous privilege this undertaking has been for them – to edit, to communicate, to engage very deeply with emerging literary and critical material hosted in *CounterText*. They are clear-sighted about the responsibilities that come with the role, but remain excited about what is revealed about contemporary literary and critical practice as it manifests itself in the journal. **T**