Useful Works: Literary Criticism and Aesthetic Education

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation identifies the scholarly historicist/contextualist paradigm on the basis of which most work in the discipline of English Literature now proceeds, and proposes a critical and materialist paradigm as an alternative.

The first two chapters offer a new reading of the history of the discipline of English Literature. Chapter one traces the early history of the discipline from the 1920s through to the mid twentieth century, focussing on the project of literary criticism, as distinct from the project of literary scholarship. It demonstrates that literary criticism’s characteristic methodologies of “close reading” and “practical criticism” were initially created as the tools of a broader project of aesthetic education, where the category of the aesthetic was being rethought in instrumental or incipiently materialist terms. This model of criticism was then turned to quite different purposes by later critics, who were committed to an idealist account of the aesthetic. Chapter two traces the history of the discipline from the late 1970s to the present, identifying a “scholarly turn” that transformed it from a discipline housing both the project of literary criticism and the project of literary scholarship, into a discipline that housed the project of literary scholarship alone.
On the basis of this history, the dissertation goes on to argue for the development of a new project of literary criticism, understood as the close engagement with literary texts for the purposes of cultivating readers’ aesthetic sensibilities. The third and fourth chapters begin to lay the foundation for such a project. Chapter three attempts to provide criticism with both a new philosophical basis in a materialist account of the aesthetic, and a new way to conceptualise its institutional site as a site of radical, rather than liberal, education. Chapter four attempts to provide criticism with the first elements of a methodology of reading by way of a case study of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

The dissertation thus has four elements: in chapters one and two, a historical element; in chapter three, philosophical and institutional elements; and in chapter four, a methodological element. Taken together, these provide at least the few first sketches of a foundation on which a project of materialist aesthetic criticism might seek to establish itself today.
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Introduction

I

Very few people, it seems to me, start reading a novel by Virginia Woolf with the primary aim of learning more about British cultural life in the 1920s. Most of those who do are scholars. What non-specialist readers are looking for in literature is rather less easy to define: perhaps the best we can do at the outset is to say that they are looking for something to go on with; something that will help them live their lives.

Few resources now exist within the disciplines of literary study that can help us to respond to this observation. A whole range of mid-twentieth century critical practices that tried to put literature into contact with these kinds of vague and capacious terms, the central example perhaps being F.R. Leavis’ neo-Arnoldian “criticism of life,” now operate within the discipline only in residual, discredited, and nostalgic forms. In their place, today’s most influential methodologies for literary study are all, in their various ways, historicist contextualist, not only in the broad and welcome sense that they see literature in other than transcendental, universalising, ahistorical terms, but also in the rather more specialised sense that they treat literary texts chiefly as opportunities for producing knowledge about the cultural contexts in which they were written and read. Recent efforts to break new ground – “New Formalism”; “Surface Reading”; “Distant Reading” – have been, in this sense, repetitions of the same.1 In contrast to the non-specialist reader, the majority of today’s literary scholarship is most interested in Woolf for what she can teach us about her time and place. One

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might then say that Jameson’s slogan “always historicize” is the horizon beyond which the disciplines of literary study have so far been unable to see.

It has certainly been a very useful slogan. Many of the advances made by the discipline in the 1980s and 1990s were made by those acting in its spirit, if not always directly under its banner – the paradigmatic advance being the movement from those mid-century critical practices that treated works of literature as repositories of timeless and universal human values, to our contemporary scholarly practices that treat texts, in the broadest sense of “texts,” as deeply embedded in particular histories. Yet it has seldom been noted that our period’s governing injunction to historicise is by no means a unitary one, and has in fact concealed within itself two rather different demands, neither of which is logically necessary to the other. On the one hand, it has called on us to demonstrate the historical and cultural contingency of categories elsewhere taken as timeless, essential, or universal; yet on the other hand it has called on us simply to write cultural history. The two projects are quite distinct, and neither is implied in the other: just as one can, if one likes, write history from a universalist standpoint, one can also critique essentialisms without having to act as a historian.

Jameson’s slogan – from The Political Unconscious (1981) – comes to us from a turning-point in the history of literary studies: the point at which our own historicist / contextualist paradigm began to assume its present dominance.² We can see something of the complexion of this moment by observing Perry Anderson in 1982, opening his first Wellek Library Lecture at U.C. Irvine.³ Not without a certain performance of archaism, Anderson begins by looking back to Leavis, reminding his audience that:

literary criticism, whether ‘practical’ or ‘theoretical,’ is typically just that, criticism – its irrespressibly evaluative impulse spontaneously tending to transgress the frontiers of the text

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towards the associated life beyond it. Social theory as such paradoxically lacks a comparable discriminatory charge built into it.

(9, emphasis in original)

Here at, or perhaps just after, the inception of the new historicist/contextualist paradigm, it was still just possible for Anderson to speak in the old way, as if it were generally understood that “criticism” was something distinct from and even opposed to “social theory,” and that the former was primarily a matter of forming judgments about the relative aesthetic merits of literary works – judgments that would then be taken to have some bearing on the rest of “life.” This was, I think, about the last moment in the history of the discipline when one could speak in these kinds of terms and hope to be widely understood. Over the next thirty years, the terms “criticism” and “social theory” would both be absorbed into a single project of historicist/contextualist analysis, making them all but interchangeable. Today “literary critics” read texts in order to understand and theorise the social. The specific sense of “criticism” that Anderson relies on here has been lost.

But at that moment the two categories were still so clearly distinct from one another that it was possible for Terry Eagleton to outline a provocative strategy for turning “criticism” into “social theory,” or as he put it, “cultural analysis.” In 1983 Eagleton wrote that:

Such a strategy obviously has far-reaching institutional implications. It would mean, for example, that departments of literature as we presently know them in higher education would cease to exist… Whatever would in the long term replace such departments… would centrally involve education in the various theories and methods of cultural analysis…. The genteel amateurism which regards criticism as some spontaneous sixth sense has not only thrown many students of literature into understandable confusion for many decades, but serves to consolidate the authority of those in power.⁴

If one could no longer outline this strategy today, that is because it has succeeded: over the last three decades departments of literature have exchanged the project of evaluative criticism, with its

⁴ Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 185-6.
“genteel amateurism,” for the very different project of “cultural analysis.” This profound transformation of the discipline was justified, in the end, on political grounds: “criticism” as a project had merely “serve[d] to consolidate the authority of those in power.” Since then, the shift has widely been seen as continuous with the broader politicization of literary study that had been occurring in the discipline since the mid-1960s. One can then understand why it has seemed to many that the instituting of “always historicise” as the guiding injunction for literary study over the last three decades has represented a dramatic success for the left.

Yet even at the outset, the politics of this turn away from criticism and toward historicist/contextualist cultural analysis were not so clear. A year later, Eagleton observed that:

> The problem of the Victorian man of letters is one which has never ceased to dog the English critical institution, and is indeed quite unresolved even today: either criticism strives to justify itself at the bar of public opinion by maintaining a general humanistic responsibility for the culture as a whole, the amateurism of which will prove increasingly incapacitating as bourgeois society develops; or it converts itself into a species of technological expertise, thereby establishing its professional legitimacy at the cost of renouncing any wider social relevance…

From where we now sit, it is I think possible to see that some time in the late 1970s or early 1980s, the discipline of English Literature opted for the second path. For we are now evidently a discipline of professional scholarship, of “technological expertise,” much along the lines of the social sciences, and this has a great deal to do with the turn from criticism to social theory and cultural analysis that Eagleton himself was calling for. Those who study literature at the higher levels of the academy no longer try to safeguard or intervene in the “culture as a whole,” and certainly do not define themselves as “amateurs.” Instead, we see ourselves as specialist scholars, charged with the more obviously professional task of producing historical and cultural knowledge for an audience of other specialist scholars. If the turn to “cultural analysis” was a turn to the left, it was also the moment at

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which the discipline agreed to transform itself into a discipline of observation, tracking developments in the culture without any more broader mandate to intervene in it.

Perhaps we can now see something of the dual political character of our period’s governing injunction to “historicize.” In so far as it has led to a critique of the essentialisms and universalisms of an old elite, it has been palpably of the left. Yet in so far as it has also asked us to give up the wider social function to which “criticism,” for all its many faults, at least aspired, and has taught us instead merely to observe the culture, however “critically,” by writing cultural theory and cultural history, it has been a depoliticization: in that sense, of the right. Only the first of these aspects of the historicist/contextualist paradigm has been well publicized. A range of questions then impose themselves. Where does our current historicist/contextualist paradigm come from, and how should we assess its real commitments? What interests does it now serve? How are we to determine its potential for making some positive contribution to the society at large? If we find it lacking on this question of cultural intervention, of the necessity not just to analyse but to intervene in the “culture as a whole,” then where might we turn for another method, another paradigm, more genuinely political in nature?

Let us start with the first of these questions: Where does our current paradigm come from, and what are its real commitments? Among those who write the history of the discipline, there is a tolerably general agreement that for the first three-quarters of the twentieth century the central axis of dispute was between “scholars,” for whom literary texts were an opportunity to analyze culture, and “critics,” for whom literary texts were an opportunity to intervene in culture.6 Yet once histories of the discipline arrive at the last three or four decades, this dispute seems to fade out – replaced,

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6 In the United States, the “scholars versus critics” distinction was brought to the attention of many by Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press: London, 1987), but it is not simply a historian's terminology: throughout much of the century thinkers in the discipline explicitly referred to the conflict in much the same terms.
perhaps, by debates over “Theory,” or else by the claim that, in the words of John Guillory, “for us it’s not scholars versus critics.... [For us] scholars and critics... inhabit the same body.” The dissertation that follows proposes a different interpretation: that, on the contrary, during the late 1970s and early 1980s the scholars effectively won the dispute. This makes our own period – the period since the early 1980s – rather an exceptional one, since for the first time in the history of the discipline one side has managed to dominate the field. Indeed, one of the defining features of our period has been the relative absence of “criticism” in anything quite like the sense used by earlier thinkers. There has been what I will call a “scholarly turn,” by which “scholarly” approaches, which have tended to treat literary texts chiefly as opportunities for cultural and historical analysis, have replaced “critical” approaches, which instead tended to treat literary texts as means of cultivating readers’ aesthetic sensibilities, aesthetic here of course being understood in a range of rather different senses. If those who study literature now primarily see themselves as professionals in the field of cultural and historical analysis, this is because for the first time in the history of the discipline, almost all of us are “scholars.” For better or worse, one half of the discipline is gone.

The necessary questions then become clearer. Given that the “scholarly” and “critical” tendencies had existed side by side for the first three-quarters of the century, what particular arrangement of forces led to the eventual victory of the former in the late 1970s/early 1980s? What was the political character of those forces? Once we set aside any temptation to be nostalgic about some lost “heroic age” of criticism, which we have good reason to be glad to have seen the end of, might there nevertheless be reasons to want a renewed commitment to something like the project of culturally interventionist criticism today? If so, what would that criticism look like, such that it would avoid falling into the old elitisms and universalisms? What would be its philosophy and methodology?

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Where would it sit in relation to existing institutions? These are the questions this dissertation seeks to address. Its attempt to address them has four elements: a historical element, a philosophical element, an institutional element, and a methodological element. I will briefly introduce each of them in turn.

II

In the first two chapters I address questions of disciplinary history. Here I have two tasks. In the first chapter, “From Richards to New Criticism,” I try to recover the history of the largely lost project of “criticism.” In the second chapter, “From Williams to the Present,” I try to account for the rise to dominance of the historicist/contextualist “scholar” paradigm that replaced it. Considered as a unit, these two chapters track the development of the discipline throughout the twentieth century, focusing particularly on what I take to be three of the most important strands within it: firstly the project of literary criticism, as distinct from the project of literary scholarship; secondly the history of the various positions in philosophical aesthetics that have been thought to underpin that project of criticism; and thirdly the history of the changing methodologies that have functioned as criticism’s “working edge,” particularly the various reading methods that have sheltered under the names “close reading” and “practical criticism.”

My story begins with I.A. Richards, who laid the groundwork for both methods and thus initiated many of the emphases that would subsequently become characteristic of criticism within the university. Today, much of Richards’ work is misremembered within the discipline, largely due to our tendency to conflate it with what followed it: chiefly Leavis-ism, in the United Kingdom, and the New Criticism, in the United States. Against this, I try to recover the distinctiveness of Richards’ work. In particular, I show that the methodological innovations Richards proposed in fact
derived from his earlier philosophical innovations in the field of aesthetics. For it is not often
enough remembered nowadays that Richards first arrived at the methods that would become “close
reading” and “practical criticism” as a result of his sweeping critique of the mainstream tradition in
philosophical aesthetics: for Richards, the aesthetic was to be understood not in the idealist sense,
current since Baumgarten and Kant, as an autotelic repository of final value, but in an instrumental
sense, as indicating the whole range of our social practices for encountering value. One might then
say that the “critical” tendency within the discipline of English Literature has its roots in an
instrumental or even a materialist aesthetics. Certainly criticism’s characteristic methods of “close
reading” and “practical criticism,” at least, were originally designed as the working edge of such an
aesthetics, helping readers, each from their own specific material situations, to use the aesthetic
instruments of literature to cultivate their most useful practical capabilities.

Yet, as I go on to show, when Richards’ work was taken up by Leavis in the United Kingdom, and
by the New Critics in the United States, much of this philosophical basis was ignored or deliberately
cordon off, and criticism was then effectively recovered into the mainstream tradition of idealist
aesthetics, though its characteristic methodologies continued to bear traces of their origins in an
aesthetics of a different kind. This was to have important consequences in our own period. When,
in the late 1970s/early 1980s, the current consensus around a scholarly historicist/contextualist
approach to literature first began to be put together, it was in large part justified by the argument,
offered initially by Marxist thinkers such as Raymond Williams, that aesthetic approaches to
literature must be rejected, since they are necessarily idealist in that they divorce works from their
histories and contexts. It was this rejection of the project of criticism, by way of a rejection of the
category of the aesthetic, that cleared the way for many of the most important movements in literary
studies that would follow, from the cultural studies and cultural materialist approaches that explicitly
took Williams as their emblem, through the influential ideology critique of Frederic Jameson and
those who followed him, to other less obviously related movements including the new historicism, postcolonial literary scholarship, and most recently quantitative literary studies and the new formalism. I thus go some way toward tracing the history of the “scholarly turn” by showing how many of the major movements in the last three decades of literary study were founded on a rejection of criticism and the associated category of the aesthetic.

One must of course add that, in its day, the discipline’s argument against aesthetic approaches had its merits as a means of showing the limits of both the Leavisite and the New Critical positions. Yet, as the first part of my history shows, it was in fact quite wrong to reject the project of criticism as if its motivating concept, the aesthetic, could only ever be thought through in idealist terms. What was being elided here was the fact that modern disciplinary criticism had been founded on an aesthetics of just the opposite kind. In our own period this historical amnesia has allowed a programmatic retreat from the critical project of intervening in the culture, back towards the project of analyzing the culture, without any mandate for intervention – an ironic and indeed dialectical reversal, given the fact that the turn to cultural analysis was argued for initially by thinkers on the radical left of the discipline.

In the third chapter, “Useful Works, Useful Work – Aesthetics, Education, Criticism,” I turn first to questions of philosophy, seeking to show some of the consequences of this position for aesthetic thought within our discipline. Here I try to clear the ground for a new practice of literary criticism by reworking a category that has been central to criticisms in the past: the category of the “aesthetic.” I show that though the discipline has rejected the category of the aesthetic as irredeemably idealist, it is possible to construct a materialist account of the aesthetic if we are willing to consider it as the means through which we encounter elements of our experience as bearers of social value. As it happens we in the discipline do not have to go very far to find such an account:
as the history I trace in the first two chapters should lead us to suspect, one can find an aesthetic philosophy of just this kind implied within the discipline’s central critical methodologies, as deployed even by those who dismiss the category of the aesthetic most forcefully at the theoretical level. Here I return to Raymond Williams, whose wholesale rejection of the aesthetic in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) did so much to determine the fortunes of the concept. The argument against the aesthetic that Williams first proposed critiqued aesthetic approaches to literature as necessarily depoliticising and dehistoricising: in order to recover the aesthetic as a philosophical foundation for criticism, I show how even in Williams’ own work a materialist account of the aesthetic turns out to be essential to theorizing any real engagement with “politics” and “history,” since it is through our aesthetic sensibilities that we register the force of political and historical claims. Focussing particularly on *The Country and the City* (1973), I show that by reading some of the most powerful moments in Williams’ work against the grain, as it were, we can come to see that the materialist account of the aesthetic that he could not quite articulate as theory, his disciplinary practice of reading already knows.

By that point in the dissertation, then, I will have tried to provide a renewed project of criticism with both a history and a philosophical foundation. In the second part of chapter three I try to think through some of the problems of providing it with an institutional location. I therefore turn to show the consequences of a materialist conception of the aesthetic for the category of “liberal education.” The category of “liberal education” is deeply connected to “criticism,” in that the former has so often been used to secure an institutional site for the latter: it is largely under the heading of “liberal education” and allied concepts that our societies have been willing to support, to a certain degree, the critical project of cultivating aesthetic sensibilities. A rethinking of criticism therefore needs to rethink the category of “liberal education,” too. I argue that the category of

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liberal education is one that prevents the aesthetic from ever from being treated as fully material, since the kind of sensibilities we are able to cultivate within educational institutions built according to its mandates are by their nature directed at immaterial ends. Putting this differently, we might say that just as the aesthetic has been defined in such a way as to prevent it from ever coming into contact with the practical concerns of life, so too has the site of aesthetic education – “liberal education” – been defined in opposition to education in practical and vocational concerns. I therefore argue that any future project of criticism must proceed beyond the category of “liberal education” by rethinking the distinction on which it has been based: the founding distinction between “vocational” and “non-vocational” education. I make this argument by way of a reading of John Stuart Mill’s “Inaugural Address at St Andrews,” a locus classicus for accounts of liberal education. Here I show some of the flaws in the concept as originally defined by Mill – flaws that continue to prevent liberal education from reaching its stated goals today. Only by moving beyond the concept as defined by Mill might we be able to conceptualize an institutional site sufficient for the critical work of cultivating aesthetic sensibilities in a fully material sense.

In the fourth chapter of the dissertation I turn to questions of methodology, trying to demonstrate, by way of a case study, how such a criticism might work in practice. Here I offer a critical reading of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925) that sets it to work as a means by which to cultivate a particular array of aesthetic sensibilities. Since “critical” and “aesthetic” approaches to literature largely have been rejected as dehistoricizing and depoliticizing, I go to some lengths to show how a renewed project of aesthetic criticism might address itself to matters historical and political. In relation to the historical, I show how a renewed critical approach might seek to make use of the text’s historical

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context, not as an end in itself, but as an important source of productive aesthetic effects. In relation to the political, I show that once we consider the aesthetic in a materialist sense it comes to seem an essential component of our ability to feel the force of political claims. Putting these two moves together, I attempt to develop a reading practice by which *Mrs Dalloway*, considered in concert with our sense of its implied context, can be used to sensitize us to a nuanced and highly effective mode of feeling about class politics, partly due to and partly despite the author’s own complicatedly ambivalent position on matters of class. In a certain sense, one could see this chapter as an attempt to develop a critical mode that would allow us to address the concerns of the non-specialist reader with whom we began: a mode that would allow us to approach Woolf’s texts, for example, not primarily as a route to a better understanding of her time and place, but as a site for the cultivation of sensibilities that are of assistance to us in some of life’s broadest and deepest but also most practical concerns.

What draws these historical, philosophical, institutional, and methodological elements together is the central argument for a newly considered rationale for literary criticism, as a supplement to our existing scholarly historicist/contextualist rationale: a rationale that would allow us to proceed from our existing analyses of culture into a systematic attempt to intervene in the culture. Whatever the merits of its individual components, it is on the strength of this central argument that I would like the dissertation as a whole to stand.

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12 I should perhaps also record here my impression that this final chapter is, so far, the least satisfactory. I believe it offers an interesting reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, and, relatively speaking, a new one: very few people seem to have noticed, let alone reflected seriously on, the central place taken by class anxieties in the novel – Clarissa’s anxieties; Woolf’s; our own. This is strange, not least since those anxieties are right there, “up in lights” as it were, in the few first lines. It would be interesting to construct a history of our scholarship’s failure to reflect on this, a history which no doubt would have much to say about the class character of the intellectual formations concerned. The reading also goes some way towards showing that a critical and aesthetic reading of the kind I propose would be neither dehistoricising nor depoliticising. In these respects at least I think the reading in this chapter has something new to offer. Yet it is still, for the most part, a reading in the traditional vein, where its role in the dissertation as a whole demands that it be something rather different – and it has thus been something of a failure. The task of a materialist aesthetic education poses serious problems of methodology that the final chapter needs to confront, but at present merely scouts. These problems therefore remain.
III

People write histories of different kinds, and for many different reasons. It may help readers to frame and evaluate the historical element of the dissertation if I begin by saying a few words about the kind of history that it is intended to be.

Clearly, it is not an exhaustive history. It has little interest in painting a rich and detailed picture of the periods it describes, nor in bringing the reader into close imaginative contact with the minds of historical actors. Nor is it a politically disinterested history. It is perhaps better thought of as an attempt to write a tactical or strategic history: a working analysis of existing tendencies in the present situation, as indicated by past trajectories. History of this kind is explicitly motivated by present concerns: one has something like a goal and something like a plan for reaching it, and so one turns to the past, not “for its own sake,” as is sometimes said, but in order both to clarify the goal and to identify tendencies in the present that seem likely either to help or hinder one’s attempts to reach it. One therefore reflects on the past less for the sake of seeing the “full picture” and more for the sake of discovering its main lines of force; and not even for the sake of discovering all the forces that were relevant at the time, but instead limiting oneself to those lines of force that still seem to condition what occurs today. In this sense the objects of the analysis here are not the various historical periods through which the discipline has passed, but the present lines of force themselves.

History of this kind is sometimes felt to be lacking in objectivity or disinterestedness. It may be worth outlining something of a position with respect to this claim, as it will allow me to introduce some of the broader concerns of the dissertation. Here the question of audience is primary. When writing I have had the sense of addressing two imagined audiences, rather different in nature. On the one hand, at many moments I have attempted to find a tone appropriate to addressing readers within the discipline of English Literature: those who already have an obvious stake in the history
and future of the discipline, can be expected to be familiar with many of the figures to which I refer, are versed in at least some of the methodological debates that have surrounded “close reading,” and so on. On the other hand, there are also many moments at which I have attempted to find a tone appropriate to addressing readers on the radical left, which I understand as indicating the collective, or incipient collective, of those who have, for whatever reasons, found themselves in the difficult and vexed position of trying to articulate and even to live a critique, not merely of the excesses of capitalism in its current form, but of capitalism itself. Thirty years of very public debate about the “politicization” of the discipline notwithstanding, the area of overlap between these two audiences is in truth rather slight. This has meant that the choice of a dual mode of address has carried with it certain risks, and has indeed led to certain failures. Readers within the discipline who are not on the left in the sense I indicate here may find themselves somewhat at odds with the political sensibility, and associated ranges of tone, at work in certain parts of the dissertation; readers on the left who are not within the discipline may need more convincing that there is really something at stake, for the larger movement, in an extended discussion of matters literary, aesthetic, and methodological. My reason for nevertheless persisting in trying to address both audiences is that I am seeking to expand the area of overlap between them. Indeed, from a certain angle one might see this as the burden of the dissertation as a whole: one of my larger claims, which comes most fully to light in the third chapter, is that many of the deeper interests of these two audiences would be the same if only we could come to recognise them as such, in that the incipiently materialist account of the aesthetic that lies at the root of the discipline, and continues to mark its central practices of “close reading” and “practical criticism,” is properly understood as part of a longer history of resistance to the economic, political, and cultural systems that prevent us from cultivating deeper modes of life. It is therefore a matter of some intellectual and political importance to try to find a tone that will speak to both audiences, in the hope that each will come to recognize at least some part of its own image in the
whole formation. I cannot say I have succeeded; but readers should at least know what I understand myself to be attempting. I hope not to try their patience too much, wherever on this particular spectrum of views they happen to sit.

But the question of how one’s particular commitments relate to the task of writing history really goes much deeper than these matters of tone and audience, and in this respect it is perhaps worth taking the bull by the horns by putting on record from the outset my sense that a history of this kind need make no general claim to methodological disinterestedness or neutrality, and would indeed be compromised were it to do so. It is a nice historiographical question as to what a truly disinterested historical enquiry looks like, since we have yet to see one: what we keep getting instead are enquiries in which the claim to disinterestedness masks the real interests at stake. Rejecting the historian’s principle of neutrality in this way does not amount, as is sometimes said, to the claim that one can make anything one likes of the past, and nor, I think, is there anything inherently dishonest or intellectually spurious about a history motivated by real interests. The idea that having interests – paradigmatically, political interests – makes one less willing to acknowledge the force of truth is a trick of the dominant liberalism about which I shall have more to say in the chapters that follow. It seems better to ask where one’s will to acknowledge the force of truth comes from, since it can then be seen that one’s interests – even one’s political interests – are what motivate and give meaning to the search for truth. For in fact the demand to identify the true contours of a situation is most pressing when one is in active pursuit of some desired objective. The task of writing a tactical or strategic history thus holds the historian to as high a standard as does the attempt to write a purportedly objective history, though in a different way.  

The other objection I must meet is that the history I have written is not exhaustive, and here too it is worth briefly outlining something of a position in order to make my own intentions clear. If one is taking as one’s object of analysis, not the texture of the periods themselves, but the forces that continue to shape the present, then a lean history has certain advantages over a thick one. In saying this I am not presuming to exempt the work from criticism, merely asking that the necessary criticism is made with a sense of the author’s aims in mind. It is of course right to note that more flesh could be put on the skeleton, but to see this as a crippling flaw is to assess the history by another standard than that which it is trying to meet. More serious would be the criticism that my model of the skeleton itself is faulty, or that I have failed to show it to its full extent. In this regard, the following two sections of this introduction will add a few words about the moments at which I feel I have not yet been able to meet the real historical demands of the project, in that I have so far failed to clarify the real lines of force. This will allow me to put the project in its proper frame.

IV

As it stands, my history consists of what I take to be an accurate and surprising account of the intellectual forces that led to the “scholarly turn” within literary studies. What it so far lacks is a deep account of the relevant political, economic, and institutional forces. I touch on this matter in chapter three, but the account really needs to be developed in much more depth, and then taken through to refine the argument in chapters one and two. At stake here is one of the key questions posed by the dissertation: given that the “scholarly” and “critical” tendencies had existed side by side for the first three-quarters of the century, what was the political character of the forces that led to the eventual victory of the former in the late 1970s/early 1980s? Let me then offer, as part of this
introduction, some of the preliminary results of my ongoing research into this question. This will be of some assistance to the reader since it will help to make the larger stakes of the dissertation clear.

General histories of literary study have not to date been very effective in showing the ways in which changes in intellectual movements within the discipline have related, or failed to relate, to larger political and economic changes in the wider society. A large part of the reason for this has been the fact that a crucial mediating body of work has been lacking: up until relatively recently, we did not have a very satisfactory account of the ways in which large-scale economic shifts in the wider society came to affect the structure of the universities within which thinking in the discipline was produced. Yet now at least some of that missing link, as it were, has been provided for us: largely as a response to the neoliberal restructuring of the universities, the last twenty years have seen a significant body of work produced around just this question of how the economic changes of the latter half of the twentieth century came to change the internal structure of the universities, and even the universities’ sense of their own mission. Let us then briefly consider some of the best of this work, in order to shed some light on the larger political and economic reasons for the shift we are tracking: the historic shift in the basic orientation of our discipline that I here name “the scholarly turn.” Here we enter the territory of arguments about a “crisis in the humanities” – a crisis which is, I think, best seen as part of the broader demise of what we might call the “enculturation” mission of the universities.

Speaking broadly, when thinkers in the mid-twentieth century had cause to write piously about the idea of the university, they would tend to say that the university had two higher missions: on the one hand the “production of knowledge” (in another register, the “pursuit of truth”); on the other hand, the cultivation of cultural capabilities and values (a claim which typically involved ethical or lightly political terms such as “character,” “citizenship,” and so on). Since the 1980s, the rhetoric has
shifted: now all parties speak in terms of the production of knowledge alone. What did the rhetoric of “cultivation” or “enculturation” signify, and why did it come to be abandoned? To understand what has been at stake in this shift in rhetoric, we need first to understand how these two perceived missions of the university stood in relation to one another throughout the mid-century. I will first offer a basic sketch of this dualism, and then return to the question of the demise of the enculturation mission by assessing and synthesizing some of the most influential existing accounts.

To begin, we can note that throughout the mid-century there was a rough analogy to be made between these two higher missions of the university and the two different kinds of work that were said to go on within it, that of the “sciences” on the one hand and that of the “humanities” on the other. Roughly speaking, the sciences were considered the key site of the production of knowledge, the humanities were considered the key site of the cultivation of human capabilities, with the social sciences somewhere in between. Such a broad statement needs qualifications: there was of course much overlap. At many points, the sciences were apt to claim that training in the scientific method was already by itself a cultivation of fundamental cultural capabilities, a claim that quickly began to acquire a broader moral and political character – we might think here of the celebrated objectivity and curiosity of “scientific man.”

Similarly, at many points certain branches of the humanities took the production of knowledge as their task, particularly knowledge about human history and the operations of culture: thus a large proportion of the work carried out in humanities fields such as

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14 I will briefly examine a range of evidence for this below; here I am simply offering a summary.
15 For a suggestive history of the social sciences that is sensitive to concerns of this kind, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789-1914* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010), especially the fifth chapter, “Liberalism as Social Science.”
philology, art history, literary history, and so on resembled in certain respects the work of social sciences such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and similar. All of that being admitted, the analogy remains workable: the sciences were, as they remain, chiefly thought of as producing knowledge, and the humanities were chiefly thought of as cultivating cultural capabilities.

There is also a second rough analogy to be made, this time with the split between the “research” and “teaching” functions of the university. The research function tended to be emphasised as the key site for the production of knowledge and the pursuit of truth, and the teaching function tended to be emphasised as the key site for the cultivation of cultural capabilities. Again, one has provisos: the mission of knowledge production overlaps with the teaching function wherever it makes room for the “transferral” of that knowledge, and the mission of enculturation often imagines its proper site to be the society as a whole rather than the university classroom in particular. In the latter case, as I shall note in chapter three, the figure of the “public intellectual” served as a way to carry the university’s mission of enculturation beyond the realm of direct teaching, into the more general realm usually conceptualised as “culture” (in another of its many senses), “civil society” or the “public sphere.” These important provisos notwithstanding, once again the distinctions do have a tendency to line up, and it seems fair to say that the mission of knowledge production was associated with research, and the mission of enculturation was associated with teaching.

So we had then, throughout the mid-century, a rough-and-ready binary. On the one hand, there was a general sense of the university as a place for the production of knowledge or, more loftily, the “pursuit of truth,” and here the emphasis tended to fall on the research function and the role of the sciences. On the other hand, there was also a general sense of the university as a place for the cultivation of cultural capabilities, and here the emphasis tended to fall on the teaching function and the role of the humanities. (Sometimes the term “college” has been distinguished from “university”
in order to indicate the second of these). One could extend the point – for instance, by noting that when one focuses on the research function one usually, though not always, ends up emphasising the role of graduate education, whereas when one focuses on the teaching function one usually, though again not always, ends up emphasising the role of undergraduate education – but perhaps its broad outlines are clear enough. Having made these rough equations, one can see something of how new and strange it really is that in our period even the defenders of the humanities often speak in the terms of the humanities' role in the “production of knowledge” and “the pursuit of truth.” I propose that it is in the context of this broader dropping away of the “cultivation” or “enculturation” mission of the university that we must see the ongoing crisis of the humanities over the last three decades.

We can then bring this account of the history of the university to bear on the history of our own discipline, for it is really the abandonment of the enculturation mission of the university that the “scholarly turn” in literary studies represents. For if the university’s mission of enculturation tended to be assigned, for the most part, to the humanities, it was in fact the disciplines of literary study that, throughout the mid-century, were thought to be occupying the central role. Indeed, we can be even more specific that this: within literary studies, it was the critical, rather than the scholarly, project that tended to be perceived as the centre of the cultural mission. It is in this context that we must understand the way in which, as many have noted, the figure of the literary critic achieved a strange kind of cultural centrality throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, leading some to reflect, in hindsight, on a heroic age of criticism.\footnote{See Stefan Collini, \textit{Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics} (New York: Oxford UP, 2008).} We can start to see something of the close connection between the role of the broader enculturation mission of the university and the more specific role of the critic within literary studies when we remember that I.A. Richards was a key figure in the composition of one of the most influential mid-century statements of the case for a
“general” or “liberal” education, the “Harvard Red Book”; or when we recall that it was F.R. Leavis who issued the famous maxim that the “university’s constitutive function” was to “create and maintain an educated public,” the implicit contrast being with those accounts that saw the task of the university as the production of knowledge and the pursuit of truth.\(^\text{18}\)

We have thus connected, at least provisionally, the question of the demise of criticism, and the associated rise to dominance of the scholarly historicist/contextualist paradigm, with the more general question of the demise of the enculturation mission of the university. Yet this only raises the same question at another level. Why did the enculturation mission of the university drop away in just this period? What broader forces in the wider society were responsible for, or at least associated with, this shift? There are a number of existing accounts, none of which seem to agree in their central elements. Let us turn briefly to review a number of them, before attempting, again provisionally, something like a synthesis.

To begin with, let us take Christopher Newfield, one of the best scholars writing on the history of the U.S. university today. Newfield sees the “public university’s traditional and distinctive mission of broad cultural and human development” (which I take to indicate just what I am calling the mission of enculturation) in retreat from the 1980s onwards, in the face of a series of conservative attacks that came to be known as the “culture wars.”\(^\text{19}\) Why would conservatives object to such a project? Because the class character of the mid-century university meant that its particular version of the mission of enculturation involved cultivating a certain range of tolerant liberal values that then threatened to become the basis of a broader liberal consensus. For Newfield, the mid-century


university represented a kind of collaboration between the largely white, professional, knowledge-worker segment of the “middle class” and the broader “multiracial working class.” Worryingly for conservatives, “this collaboration raised the prospect of a middle class that would rewrite the rules of capitalism in collaboration with the working class, on the basis of college knowledge” (15). The conservative response was therefore to develop a “culture wars” strategy that sought to “erode the social and cultural foundations of a growing, politically powerful, economically entitled, and racially diversifying middle class, while leaving its technical capabilities intact” (6). If one could revoke the university’s mandate for systematic intervention in the culture, one could effectively “sever knowledge workers from the cultural conditions that gave them authority and prominence” (11).

For Newfield, this tactic succeeded, and the university has accordingly been reformed as a “privatizable knowledge factory,” without any broader cultural mission (9). Thus the decline in the humanities – and thus, we might add, the demise of criticism viewed as a form of education in cultural capabilities.

Bill Readings’ influential book The University in Ruins observes the same phenomenon – what I am terming the collapse of the university’s mission of enculturation – but sets it in a different story. For Readings, if “the notion of culture as the legitimating idea of the modern University has reached the end of its usefulness,” this is because we have reached the culmination of a much longer history: the decline of the enculturation mission represents the decline of the Humboldtian model of the university, which in turn is tied to the declining importance of the nation-state.

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20 A simple way to see how Newfield’s point might apply to the question of the demise of criticism in literary studies is to reflect on how oddly central the discipline of English became during the “culture wars” as a target for conservative propaganda, and then to ask what academic professions typically do when they are under attack. Wallerstein gives us the answer in his account of the formation of the social sciences: beleaguered academic professions retreat from any project of direct social reform, which necessarily involves making controversial claims about values; instead, they shore up their legitimacy by emphasizing their role as producers of objective, scientific knowledge, in which role the contentious question of value need not arise. Making this connection gives us one way to understand the turn from the critical project of cultural intervention to the scholarly project of knowledge-production, in precisely the period when the discipline was most subjected to sustained conservative attack. See Immanuel Wallerstein, “Liberalism as Social Science” in The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789-1914 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010).

Since the nation-state is no longer the primary instance of the reproduction of global capital, “culture” – as the symbolic and political counterpart to the project of integration pursued by the nation-state – has lost its purchase. The nation-state and the modern notion of culture arose together, and they are, I argue, ceasing to be essential to an increasingly transnational global economy. This shift has major implications for the University, which has historically been the primary institution of national culture in the modern nation-state…. The idea of national culture no longer functions as an external referent toward which all of the efforts of research and teaching are directed.

(12)

Where once the university was engaged in a project of “bildung” or training in national cultural norms, capitalism’s movement into a new globalizing phase in the 1980s has meant that the university is now “busily transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation” (11).

To put Readings’ work in context, it will help us to compare it to work done on the other side of the Atlantic. Sheldon Rothblatt, who has been called “one of the foremost historians of British universities,” notes much the same phenomenon, but articulates it in just the opposite way.22 Rothblatt, too, observes the decline of what I am calling the enculturation mission since the 1980s, but for him it is the story of the triumph of the Germanic, Humboldtian model of the university – the university as knowledge-producer, as pursuer of truth – over the English model of the “college” – the university as a place for the cultivation of character, civic virtue, and what one might think of as national subjectivities. This story at first looks rather different from Readings’: here there is not one but “two stubborn traditions of idealizing universities, the first English and the second German”; the German is not declining, but advancing; the university per se is not tied to the destiny of the nation state per se, but tied differently to different national traditions. The end of the timeline, though, is much the same: sometime around the 1980s, the English college model, with its

commitment to the mission of enculturation, starts to be threatened with decline, and the university begins to reorient itself towards the Germanic mission of knowledge production.23

How do we reconcile these three stories? There is, it seems, no agreement as to the meaning of the phenomenon being observed, or as to the shape of the larger history in which it should take its place. Yet this makes it all the more striking that there is such a considerable consensus about the phenomenon itself and its time-frame: despite their real differences, these three important writers on the history of the university all agree that since the 1980s there has been a decisive shift in the structure and function of the universities, such that the mission of enculturation, which once stood alongside the mission of knowledge production, has been abandoned, leaving the mission of knowledge production to hold the whole field. And it would be easy enough to add other accounts that would agree in this respect, while moving the argument into other territory. One could talk, for instance, of the demise, since the fall of communism, of the cold war rationale for state funding of cultural and ideological reproduction within the capitalist centers, and the associated loss of the cultural mission of the university.24 Or one could talk of a radicalization, in the 1960s, of the

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23 I admire Rothblatt’s work on the history of the university tremendously, particularly for its level of empirical detail, but at times his formulations are needlessly confusing, which makes it somewhat difficult to refer readers to clear statements of his larger argument. So it is here – one of the clearest moments at which he articulates the argument I have summarised here is as follows: “In the incorporeal space of the age of computers and the relentless drive for additions to knowledge, is it conceivable that at long last the disembodied ‘idea’ of a university – and we have seen how many there can be – will triumph over the university as ‘place’?” (105). Here the “disembodied ‘idea’” is the German, Humboldtian model of the university, which is well-suited to the “relentless drive for additions to knowledge” in our contemporary, computerized world; the “university as ‘place’” is the English “college” model, spatial in the sense that it understands the mission of enculturation as best pursued by having students spend time absorbing virtue by osmosis in carefully composed locations. “The college was the architectural or spatial counterpart to the liberal education theory of breadth” (66). As this explanation indicates, the initial quote is somewhat imprecise, since for Rothblatt “the university as ‘place’” is one of the key “ideas” of a university: the English college “idea.”

24 See for example Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997), which does a good job of making it clear that the considerable support that the capitalist nations offered for the mission of enculturation, and thus for the humanities, largely derived from a felt need to demonstrate that capitalism could outdo communism in the cultural realm. Seeking to explain the abandonment of the mission of enculturation since the 1980s, then, one can say that with the fall of communism and the global dominance of neoliberalism, capitalism was able to dispense with this particular form of ideological reproduction. To see this in a preliminary way we need only think of mid-century Anglo-American humanism’s distinctive emphasis on the cultivation of habits of “free” and “democratic” thought, defined precisely in opposition to the perceived mental habits of the citizens of actually existing socialist regimes – an emphasis that was then abandoned in the decades after the fall of
subjectivity-forming arm of the university, leading to a conservative counter-attack and “reformation” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Or one could move out of the university and into the culture as a whole, talking instead of the advent of the postmodern cultural condition proper to late capitalism, in which the collapse of the distinction between “high” and “low” culture is symptomatic of a broader collapse of traditional aesthetic distinctions, and therefore a collapse of any project that tries to claim a mandate to “improve” the cultural realm. Or, lastly, one could instead move back into the discipline itself, examining the particular small-scale institutional changes that have done so much to change its larger nature in this period: the birth of the phrase “academic job market” in the 1970s and its leap to prominence in the 1980s, with the associated market ideology; the intensified pressure to “professionalise” in order to compete for scarce jobs; the process of micro-professionalisation represented by the invention of the phrase “hiring field” and the associated hardening of sub-fields, paradigmatically defined by place and period, which is to say in just the way most conducive to favouring scholarly historicist/contextualist knowledge

communism. The “Harvard Red Book” is a central example. As the formal title (General Education in a Free Society) indicates, the larger goal of the authors is to start preparing the nation for the ideological battle of the Cold War, and the argument, implied throughout though never of course allowed to appear as such, is that in the face of communism, capitalist America needs to be willing to commit more of the surplus to the ideological reproduction of the working mind. See: Harvard University Committee on the Objectives of General Education in a Free Society, General Education in a Free Society; Report of the Harvard Committee (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1945).

25 This story is a familiar one, but see for instance Richard Ohmann’s fine essay “English and the Cold War” in the Chomsky volume listed in the footnote above, 73-103.

26 See Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991). Reframing Jameson’s argument in our own terms, we could observe that in the latter decades of the twentieth century it has become increasingly difficult to make claims for modes of cultural or aesthetic value that must be expressed in other than market terms. Under the conditions of a fully developed postmodernity, any intervention in culture for purposes other than those that directly serve the market is rejected, in the name of democracy, as an elitist, statist, or paternalistic attempt to limit the consumer freedom of sovereign individuals. In this new environment, the basic literary-critical claim that our aesthetic preferences and capabilities carry ethical or political weight has come to seem very problematic indeed. Doing a certain violence to Jameson’s account, which sees the crucial shift as that from an imperial capitalism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century to the “late” capitalism of much of the twentieth, we might define the condition of postmodernity by way of contrast to the cultural regimes of the Keynesian period, that traditionally endorsed something like a distinction between “high” and “low” culture and were relatively willing to promote the former through the mechanism of the state. Postmodernism would then be understood as the cultural logic proper to neoliberal capitalism, which would in turn explain the demise of criticism and the “scholarly turn.”
production, and so on. And no doubt we could come up with other ways to observe the same shift. The salient points are, firstly, that the shift has taken place; secondly that it has been very widespread both in its causes and its effects; and thirdly that it is nevertheless specific enough to be identified with some precision across a range of different discourses. It then remains to try to find some language by which to unify the accounts.

Neoliberalism, I think, is the key word we are looking for: the political and economic condition that has determined so much of our collective lives for a generation, and that we are finally now in a historical position to perceive clearly just as it enters its moment of crisis. With this word, we start to grasp the first elements of the language we need to synthesize the various accounts. Here I will turn to the work of the Marxist/feminist thinker Sylvia Federici, who offers us a language capacious enough to cover the field. Federici follows a line of Marxist/feminist thought that emphasises the distinction between capitalist “production” – the production of commodities ordinarily conceived; or, more broadly, those processes by which labour-power is harnessed to produce profit for capitalists – and capitalist “reproduction” – paradigmatically, the “reproduction of the labor-power”; broadly, those activities which may not, in themselves, produce a profit for the capitalist, but which are nevertheless necessary for capitalism in that they maintain the profit-producing workers’ ability to work. These two are each then distinct from a third category, capitalist “accumulation” (often termed “primitive accumulation”), by which the capitalist class uses its existing power simply to take

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28 Readers unfamiliar with this distinction can grasp the first elements of it by thinking it through in relation to the paradigmatic Marxist scene of factory production. The productive labor of the (paradigmatically male) factory worker nets him a wage, and produces profit for the capitalist; but the factory worker is able to perform that labor only by virtue of the reproductive labor of the wife or female houseworker: the constantly necessary activities of cooking, cleaning, giving birth, raising children, and so on, that allow the labor-power to be maintained and reproduced day after day, generation after generation. Those interested in tracing the history of this line of thought may find it helpful to start with Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community (London: Falling Wall Press, 1972) and Leopoldina Fortunati, The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital (New York: Autonomedia, 1995).
what it wants directly from those who have it, without going through the more distinctively capitalistic process of wage labour, commodity production and exchange.

These terms allow us to understand neoliberalism as “the systematic disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the workforce, implemented through structural adjustment programs and the dismantling of the ‘welfare state.’”

In Federici’s view, neoliberalism’s withdrawal of support for reproduction comes about at the point it does – which is to say, in the early 1980s – because:

[T]he struggles of the 1960s have taught the capitalist class that investing in the reproduction of the labor power does not necessarily translate into a higher productivity of work. As a result, a policy and an ideology have emerged that recast workers as microentrepreneurs, responsible for their self-investment, being presumably the exclusive beneficiaries of the reproductive activities expended on them. Accordingly, a shift has occurred in the temporal fix between reproduction and accumulation. As subsidies to healthcare, education, pensions, and public transport have all been cut, as high fees have been placed upon them, and workers have been forced to take on the cost of their reproduction, every articulation of the reproduction of labor power has been turned into an immediate point of accumulation.

(101-2)

Neoliberalism, then, represents the transformation of sites of reproduction into sites of accumulation. What does this mean in the field with which we are most directly concerned: the field of culture? Federici has not focussed her efforts directly on the specific case of the ideological reproduction of labour-power, which is what is at stake for us in the term culture, but some of her comments here nevertheless help to clarify the issue. She notes that though capitalists can improve the efficiency of productive labor by way of a whole suite of familiar techniques of rationalisation, many forms of reproductive labor involve affective and subject-oriented activities that are by their nature somewhat resistant to rationalisation. One can see what she means when one considers the difference between a factory, where a mechanisation of the labor-power results in efficiency gains, and reproductive activities like care-work, nursing, and child-rearing where, at least at certain stages,

mechanisation seems to undercut the effectiveness of the labor altogether. As hard as capitalism seems to try, it is simply not possible to raise children entirely by way of Fordist production-line processes, if one wants them to be effective workers and consumers later in life. This allows us to see:

the dual character and the contradiction inherent in reproductive labor and, therefore, the unstable, potentially disruptive character of this work. To the extent that labor power can only exist in the living individual, its reproduction must be simultaneously a production and valorization of desired human qualities and capacities, and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market.

This comes close to the heart of the issue, for considered as form of cultural reproduction, the university’s mission of enculturation – indeed, as I argue in chapter three, the whole project of “liberal education” as it stretches back, within liberalism, to John Stuart Mill – has been defined by its need to finesse just this opposition: on the one hand, the necessary “production and valorization of desired human qualities and capacities”; on the other, the necessary “accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market.” The loss of the enculturation mission of the university represents the neoliberal retreat from this whole problematic, as the capitalist classes instead opt to withdraw their Keynesian support for the long-term reproduction of the workforce, gambling with their own long-term interests by transforming the sites of reproduction into sites of direct profit. Returning to the discipline, one can then see the moment of the “scholarly turn” in

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30 I intend “mechanisation” here simply as a shorthand for a whole array of techniques from many periods, from early mechanical looms and “frames,” through Taylorization processes that result in alienated, “robotic” forms of labor, through to the actual replacement of workers by robots, and so on.

31 “Contradiction” here is a bit misleading, since in this context the term really ought to be given its more specific Marxist meaning. Classically, a contradiction is of great strategic significance since it indicates a necessary site of struggle, unavoidable because intrinsic to the logic of the system. In contrast, what Federici is pointing out is a contingent site of struggle which classically would be considered less significant because extrinsic forces must be brought to bear on it in order for it to be realised as an actual fault-line in capitalism. In this sense many of the other terms she uses, such as “tension” and “potential separation,” are better. I hope it does not seem churlish to point this out, for it is not simply a matter of semantics: at stake is the question of the dialectic itself. My sense is that Federici would reject, as a fantasy of orthodox Marxism, the hope of finding a fully intrinsic “contradiction,” which I think really means rejecting the dialectic entirely.
this light: when we look at the demise of criticism in the late 1970s/early 1980s, what we are really looking at is a Keynesian site of cultural reproduction being transformed into a neoliberal site of production and direct accumulation. In this sense the project of criticism was the first casualty in the neoliberal attack on the humanities, which in the mid-century sense are all but gone. Neither, I think, will return while neoliberalism lasts.

V

So that is one way in which the history in the main body of the dissertation is incomplete: it so far fails to integrate the general account of the turn to neoliberalism that would allow it really to answer its guiding question of how and why the “scholarly turn” in literary studies came about. But there is another important gap in the historical element of the work that follows, this time at the start of the story rather than the end. In the interests of giving the project its proper frame, it may be worth adding a few brief words about it here. At the beginning of my history of the discipline I have placed the figure of I.A. Richards, whose work in the 1920s did so much to lay the groundwork for a disciplinary practice of applied aesthetic criticism. It is true, I think, that the development of the new account of the aesthetic and the associated practices of “close reading” and “practical criticism” represents a real and substantial break with earlier critical modes, and is therefore the substantial point of origin for criticism in the academy. But once one has seen this, and acknowledged the force of the break, one then wants to go back and ask what led up to it, and where it came from – again, not simply out of antiquarian interest, but in order to see whether there may not be some other lines of force, which one has not accounted for, that continue to exert their pressure on the discipline in the present. Let me then briefly indicate here my sense of how such research would proceed, in order to provide a further historical frame for the account that follows in the main body.
of the dissertation. One would need to push the opening of the history back to at least the late nineteenth century, in order examine the continuities between the nineteenth century tradition of cultural criticism and the twentieth century discipline of literary criticism. Specifically, there now exists a body of research on working-class educational institutions in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which seems essential to the story of the origins of the discipline of English literature, though it has never been worked properly into a full-length history. Taking this into account seems particularly important for a real understanding of the history with which we are concerned, since I suspect that it is here, in institutions like the Mutual Education Societies, the University Extension courses and, later, the Workers’ Educational Association that a version of a materialist aesthetic criticism first began to be formulated – a materialist aesthetic criticism that was later taken up and codified, as it were, by Richards.

Perhaps surprisingly, one crucial and much-overlooked mediating figure here is William Morris, who appears at key points throughout the dissertation, but is never engaged with in a direct and thorough way. Though he is often, I think wrongly, considered something of a minor figure, Morris’ insistence that “nothing can be a work of art which is not useful” in fact makes him an important but little-acknowledged forerunner of Richards’ instrumental conception of the aesthetic, and thus, in a certain sense, of twentieth century criticism itself – hence the gesture to him in my dissertation title (“Useful Works”). It is at this point that the argument I offer with respect to the fortunes of criticism in the twentieth century would, if extended back, connect up with the classic reading of the nineteenth century offered by the British New Left, in which figures such as Morris were taken as emblematic of a historic confluence between two traditions of revolt: the tradition of Romanticism and the tradition of organised working-class resistance. Speaking in necessarily schematic terms for a moment, if we see the former as an aesthetic tradition and the latter as a materialist one, then we are not so far from the materialist aesthetics I am trying both to track and to propose in literary
studies. Assessing the truth of this conjecture would necessitate following the idea of a materialist aesthetics back through Morris to illuminate certain important aspects of the nineteenth century tradition of moral and cultural criticism, particularly in Ruskin and Carlyle. One would need to look for continuities not simply by comparing the work of the relevant thinkers, but also by examining the history of the educational institutions with which they were involved. This would have important ramifications for the view of the discipline I present here. If it is true that this strand of criticism was initially developed by a cultural matrix of working-class organisations for what seemed, at the time, progressive purposes, then that would do much to trouble the current consensus, established in large part by Williams, that aesthetic criticisms are somehow conservative in essence.

VI

A final re-articulation of the main argument may help to make explicit the stakes of the project as a whole. Historians of the discipline have told us that the central axis of dispute within the discipline since its inception has been that between criticism and scholarship. Against that background, I suggest that our period has been an unprecedented one in the sense that since the early 1980s, for the first time, one party managed to dominate the field. I also suggest that the effaced project of criticism represented the discipline’s strongest line of connection to a longer history of materialist practice, and that the currently dominant mode of historicist/contextualist scholarship, for all that it was argued for by the left, has in its most salient aspects constituted a depoliticizing retreat to cultural analysis as a result of the spread of neoliberal forces in the wider economic and political sphere. Once one has articulated this, it is possible to state further that the absence of the project of criticism in our period – the absence of any programmatic commitment, not just to analysing and describing culture, but to taking action to change it – needs ultimately to be seen as a symptom of
the broader political situation of the radical left, struggling, as it has for the last three decades, to continue in the absence of any broader movement to support it. One can trace this most clearly in the intellectual tradition that developed out of the work of Williams and similar figures. As Perry Anderson noted in his now famous editorial on the occasion of the re-launch of the New Left Review in 2000:

Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view. It can be put like this. For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions – that is, systematic rival outlooks – within the thought-world of the West; and scarcely any on a world scale either... Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neoliberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe, the most successful ideology in world history.

(17)

As Susan Watkins, the new editor of NLR, noted on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, the events of the ten years from 2000 to 2010 – most importantly, in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, the near complete lack of any serious positing of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism by those in power – have seemed to confirm this view. No real reform, let alone revolution, has seemed on the horizon. Given this situation, the question for thinkers on the left has been, as Watkins puts it: what can be achieved by intellectual work “in the meantime”? The kinds of projects the left has offered us here should, I hope, strike the reader as both powerful and familiar: our “first commitment must be to an accurate description of the world” (Anderson 14), which is to say, to “attend to the development of capitalism” (Anderson 17), to “attend to the development of actually existing capitalism” (Watkins 23). For the left in this period, everywhere prevented from proceeding into action, further and better analysis has again and again been the answer. It is thus no surprise to find that the 2000 volume also contains Franco Moretti’s paper “Conjectures on World Literature,” in which the famous argument against the final remnant of criticism, “close reading,” first appears,
nor that when Anderson and Watkins come to discussing the study of literary and artistic phenomena from a left perspective, both recommend Jameson.

In the face of such a consensus it is a little daunting to observe that for the left today politics must be a question, not just of taking reckonings in the service of some longed-for victory in the future, but of taking action in the present: of fighting to develop for ourselves and others lives at least minimally rich in capabilities and sensitivities. For we do not live “in the meantime,” we live in the now; and it is only from these continually present struggles that any chance of a humane future may someday come. If, when Watkins was writing in 2010, “no real reform, let alone revolution, has seemed on the horizon,” the worldwide events of 2011 immediately put this view to the fire: a global echo-chamber of protest and dissent; reforms from above, still no; actual revolutions from below in key sites, yes. For many on the left, it has begun to seem possible that neoliberalism has entered a series of cascading crises from which it will not recover. It remains to be seen what form capitalism will take on the other side of the crisis. In any case, it seems as if for the first time in a generation there is a chance, however slim, that the left may be able to halt its thirty year retreat and tentatively begin to advance once again.

How must the academic study of literature reconstitute itself in order to make a contribution in this new era? Not, I think, by continuing in its present mode, for in our new situation the old slogan “always historicize!” will no longer serve. If the historicist/contextualist paradigm has been adopted locally for the best of political reasons, it has also been pushed into position by more general political, economic, and institutional forces of a much harsher kind. On the one hand, the turn to scholarship has meant a genuine rejection of easy universalisms and essentialisms, as well as, in the best cases, a sophisticated intellectual commitment to the material rather than the ideal. On the other hand, it has also involved a rarely examined and professionally enabling assumption that our
immediate task as higher students of literature is the production of new and better cultural and historical knowledge, rather than the development of new methods for cultivating subjectivities and collectivities. In this latter respect, its main effect has been to prevent us from taking action. In search of a balanced assessment of “always historicize,” then, the best we can say is that it has been a very good banner under which to conduct a retreat.

What banner for a renewed materialist criticism? The question lies beyond the scope of the project, and these things are decided collectively in any case. But I hope the reader will forgive me if I close by briefly offering for consideration thoughts from three thinkers, each of whom, in their own moment, saw the need to fight for something like a project of criticism. First, and closest to the matter of the dissertation, we may consider two of I.A. Richards’ founding maxims: “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds” and “the critic is as closely occupied with the health of the mind as the doctor with the health of the body.” If these come to seem increasingly indispensible today, this is because of, not despite, our more radical politics. For surely after three decades of ideology critique it is apparent enough that Richards’ qualification to the second of these – “in different ways, it is true, and with a wider and subtler definition of health, by which the healthiest mind is that capable of securing the greatest amount of value” – is hardly sufficient, since it eschews the political, and the grounding of the political in the social, in favour of a cognitivist utilitarianism that, like so many liberalisms, seeks to bracket the economic entirely. From where we now stand it is only too easy for those on the left to observe that this is still just the traditional bourgeois protest against the consequences of the rise of the bourgeoisie, and to then reject the whole project of criticism on those grounds. What is harder for us to see is that in throwing out these kinds of arguments, we have tended to throw out the very idea of literary study as a discipline, not merely of cultural observation, but of cultural intervention. Secondly, let us consider supplementing Richards with two
of the most powerful slogans of the Romantic period: Shelley’s claim that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” and that “we want the creative faculty to imagine what we know.” The latter is often quoted, but in fact points to something very different from our present “scholarly” conception of literature as a means by which to come to know what we have imagined. In contrast, Shelley is offering us something like a mandate for criticism in our sense. We might take Shelley’s two slogans together by saying that any attempt to secure a better society must involve, as a critical element, an attempt to cultivate the aesthetic sensibilities necessary to experience – and thus to demand an order that allows us and others to experience – new, richer, more capacious forms of life. That, I think, is the political stake of criticism today. Consider, then, a third and final slogan, from another thinker who felt the need to critique the social order in the name of deeper human possibilities. Hitherto, literary scholars on the left have only interpreted the world. We are now in a new situation. Might there not be a case for trying to change it?
General Introduction to Chapters One and Two

In these two chapters I try to provide a new history of three important lines of thinking within the discipline of English Literature. The first is the project of literary criticism, as distinct from the project of literary scholarship. The second is the idea of the aesthetic, and the various associated claims that have been made for the aesthetic value of literature. The third is the discipline’s characteristic method, most often called either “close reading” (in the United States) or “practical criticism” (in the United Kingdom). This helps me to provide a new schematic through which to understand the history of the discipline, as well as its present situation. As we will see, if we track these three lines of thinking as they develop through the twentieth century, treating them as central, then something rather surprising emerges: it begins to look as though the history of the discipline since the 1920s falls roughly into three periods.

In the first period, I.A. Richards inaugurated all three lines of thinking, putting the project of criticism on a disciplinary footing by developing for it both a philosophical foundation in an incipiently materialist account of the aesthetic and a working tool in the methodologies that came to be called “close reading” and “practical criticism.” In this period, those methodologies were directed at the practical end of cultivating the aesthetic capabilities of readers.

In the second period, the project of disciplinary “criticism” was taken up by the New Critics in the United States and by F.R. Leavis in the United Kingdom, and turned to purposes almost directly opposed to those for which Richards had initially intended it. Specifically, the anti-idealist aesthetic foundation was transformed into an explicitly idealist one, and the methodologies of “close reading” and “practical criticism” were redirected so that their emphasis lay not on the cultivating of aesthetic capabilities, but on the ranking of the relative aesthetic values of literary texts. This period
continued through the middle of the century: even when they differed in other ways, the most influential mid-century humanist criticisms largely accepted the assumptions of this second, more conservative, version of “criticism.”

In the latter part of the century, this began to lead to the sense that “criticism” as a project was necessarily depoliticising, dehistoricising, and universalising – and thus to the transition to what I am calling the third period. In this third period, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and continues through to the present, the project of “criticism” was rejected as necessarily depoliticising, dehistoricising, and universalising; the idea of the “aesthetic” was rejected as necessarily Kantian, idealist, and elitist; and “close reading” and “practical criticism” were transformed into methods for the extraction of historical knowledge from small units of text. Viewed as part of the longer history of the discipline, the most striking feature of this third period is that “scholarship,” which had always accompanied “criticism” within the discipline, gradually came to replace it, and increasingly defined the work of the discipline *tout court*.

As I noted in the introduction to the thesis as a whole, it would be quite wrong to pretend that the schematic I offer here is anything other than provisional. Like all schematics, it leaves out a great deal – and no doubt some of what it leaves out will prove to be important in ways I have not managed to acknowledge. I do think it brings some of the real contours of our discipline’s history, and thus the particular impasses and opportunities before us in our present situation, into rather sharper relief.
Chapter One: From Richards to New Criticism

[T]he trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon… At bottom, it’s a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously – whereas what we really need is a little pact with the Devil.

- Franco Moretti

Introduction

Let us begin with a historical puzzle. “Close reading” is often thought of as the discipline of English Literature’s characteristic method, and its distinctive contribution to the work of other disciplines. Where does it come from? What is at stake in it politically? Our attempt to find answers to these questions will soon lead us into a much wider territory. Within the United States, debates about “close reading” often proceed as if the method were first developed by the New Critics. More thorough accounts sometimes acknowledge that “close reading” began on the other side of the Atlantic, with I.A. Richards and William Empson, but often do so in such a way as to assimilate Richards and Empson to those who followed them by treating them as “early New Critics,” “Anglo-” New Critics, a “prologue” to the history of close reading, or similar. In this chapter I am going to insist that both kinds of accounts are mistaken. Specifically, I am going to insist that “close reading” as conceived and practiced by Richards and Empson and “close reading” as taken up and disseminated by the New Critics were very divergent methods, directed towards opposed ends.

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2 For some recent examples of the first kind of account, which treat “close reading” mainly as a New Critical innovation, see Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois eds., Close Reading: The Reader (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), especially DuBois’ introduction; Franco Moretti “Conjectures on World Literature” New Left Review 1 (2000) pp54-68; and Jane Gallop’s “The Historicization of Literary Study and the Fate of Close Reading,” Profession (2007), 181-5, as well as her “Close Reading in 2009” ADE Bulletin 149 (2010), 15-19. For some recent examples of the second kind of account, in which “close reading” is seen as originating with Richards and Empson, but Richards and Empson are then seen as “proto-New Critics,” see John Guillory’s very interesting “Close Reading: Prologue and Epilogue” ADE Bulletin 149 (2010), 8-14, (Richards is the “prologue” here); and Jonathan Culler’s very fine piece “The Closeness of Close reading” ADE Bulletin 149 (2010) 20-25, which makes the same move via the formulation “Anglo-American New Criticism.”
To show this in any thorough way, one needs to examine the history with an eye to the kinds of positions in philosophical aesthetics being proposed, and that will be the main task of this chapter.\(^3\) But to begin with, it is worth pointing out that one can also begin to suspect it simply by considering the nature of the intellectual formations involved. Richards and Empson were, among other things, Cambridge League-of-Nations liberals, internationalist, cosmopolitan, and secularist. The New Critics were Southern U.S. Christian political and cultural conservatives, who sought a return to the “traditional Southern values” of family, religion, and an agrarian way of life. Once one reflects on this, the widespread assumption that the New Critics represented a continuous, rather than at best radically dialectical, development out of the work of Richards and Empson comes to seem rather surprising. Can we really expect a method developed by one of these groups to be taken up by the other without undergoing fundamental change? The Southerners claimed Richards and Empson as forefathers, and we have largely believed them; but Richards and Empson both emphatically disavowed the connection.\(^4\) What was really going on?

The real story, in its broad outlines, runs as follows. Richards and Empson put together what might fairly be called an incipiently materialist practice of close reading, based in an instrumental or (loosely speaking) pragmatist aesthetics, directed towards an advanced utilitarian model of aesthetic and practical education. This was taken up and co-opted by the New Critics, who re-made and

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\(^3\) For reasons of space, I will focus on Richards and the New Critics; the important and in many ways exceptional case of William Empson will have to be left for another time. So, too, will T. S. Eliot, who is clearly a key mediating figure between the two groups, but one who really warrants a separate treatment.

\(^4\) Richards said that he didn’t “know much about the Am. New Critics and never wanted to acknowledge any relation, whatsoever, to whomsoever they are”; or on another occasion: “I can’t add anything about my ‘followers’ not having known who they could be or easily acknowledging any who seemed to regard themselves so.” These statements are Richards’ way of divorcing himself entirely from New Criticism as a critical tendency, and should not of course be taken literally: as Richards’ biographer John Russo notes, Richards in fact knew a great deal about the New Critics, being personally acquainted with many of them. John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 524. William Empson, for his part, referred to the view, associated with the New Criticism and with Neo-Christian criticism more generally, “that the reader of poetry only has the words on the page, and the author didn’t mean him to have anything else so he mustn’t know anything [else],” as “dogma” and “absurd.” William Empson, “The Argument about Shakespeare’s Characters,” *Critical Quarterly* 7:3 (Autumn 1965), reprinted in John Haffenden, *Selected Letters of William Empson* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) 389.
institutionalised it as a thoroughly idealist practice, based in a neo-Kantian aesthetics of disinterest and transcendent value, directed towards religious cultural conservatism.\(^5\)

This may seem like a minor point, but it is in fact a fairly major one, since lack of awareness about this early reversal in the political and philosophical orientation of what is often celebrated as our most central and characteristic disciplinary practice continues to have some rather unfortunate effects on literary studies today. One of them is the widespread sense that “close reading” has its origins in Christian hermeneutic practices, and that rejecting it may therefore seem something of a progressive act – see my epigraph. Our poor sense of the origins of the practice gives us the impression that it is somehow, at root, a practice of autonomous or idealist aesthetics, and as such originally or even necessarily dehistoricizing or depoliticizing. However, once we take a closer look at the history of the discipline, it becomes apparent that close reading is now being critiqued on the grounds of its purported origins in the very kinds of positions in philosophical aesthetics it was built to oppose.

More generally, the effect has been to motivate the widespread conviction that “critical” and “aesthetic” justifications for literary study must ultimately be rejected, since they can only be made in idealist terms of the kinds favoured by the New Criticism and cognate movements. The early history of the discipline shows that this is not so: the case of I.A. Richards shows, not only that another kind of aesthetics is possible, but that it once existed, and was indeed responsible for the development of many of the discipline’s characteristic methods and concerns. One would not of course want to resurrect Richards’ particular brand of aesthetics, even if one could: flawed in its day

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\(^5\) As I note towards the end of this section, it is very striking that the story of Richards’ reception within Britain followed a closely parallel course. There, the debate used the term “practical criticism” rather than “close reading” and assimilated Richards, not to the New Critics, but to Leavis – but, as we shall see, in crucial respects the effect has been the same. A typical example: the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* describes Richards merely as “Leavis’s Cambridge collaborator,” which was really far from the case. See Philip Smallwood and Philip Trew, “British Theory and Criticism: 5. 1900 and After,” in *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism, Second Edition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005).
in ways that we shall shortly note, it would no doubt continue to fail to serve our needs in the present. But perhaps being reminded of a left-liberal, rather than Christian conservative, version of the aesthetic – and one that in many ways reached beyond liberalism by explicitly trying to break with the idealism that has been the dominant strand in bourgeois aesthetics since Kant – might help us to appreciate the possibility of taking it further, to build instead a genuine aesthetics, and a materialist aesthetic criticism, for more radical purposes within the discipline today.

First Period: Criticism Established

I.A. Richards, Inventor of Close Reading and Practical Criticism

Accounts of the history of close reading that treat it primarily as a New Critical practice often begin with Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929), on the grounds that there Richards pays attention to very small units of language in short lyric poems in a way that led directly to the New Critics’ emphasis on “the poem in itself,” and their associated rejection of the analysis of any kind of historical or political context. What is much less often acknowledged is that Richards’ methodological innovations were based on, and enabled by, his earlier theoretical innovations: the clearing-out of old aesthetic theories that Richards, C.K. Ogden, and James Wood undertook in *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1922); Richards’ and Ogden’s systematic study of linguistic misunderstanding in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923); and, in particular, Richards’ development, in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), of a sophisticated answer to the fundamental question of what literature is good for.\(^6\) The last of these is of most direct relevance to us here.

In the simplest terms, we might say that Richards’ argument in *Principles of Literary Criticism* was that the most important thing about works of literature was their aesthetic potential, by which he meant not their formal beauty as an end in itself, but their ability to act as means by which readers can train many of their most useful practical faculties. His account of what this signifies for literary study generally is a complex one, but we can catch the general tenor of it as it comes through into *Practical Criticism* in his line: “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds” (327). The work of literature, for Richards, was to be a kind of therapeutic technology, and the critic was therefore to be something like a doctor of applied psychology, helping us to use that technology to improve our minds. It was on the basis of this kind of aesthetic thinking, which sees the aesthetic as a mode of instrumental, rather than final, value that Richards began to develop the practice of close reading.

It is worth taking a moment to examine the philosophical foundations of this view. One of Richards’ chief goals in *Principles of Literary Criticism* is to try to develop a general answer to what he takes to be the fundamental question for criticism, and for aesthetics generally, viz.: “What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotions of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours?” (3) Clearly, this is a large question, and not a new one. Richards’ attempt to answer it begins with a tremendously ambitious ground-clearing exercise: a dismissal of the entire body of writings on philosophical aesthetics since Kant.

The title of Richards’ second chapter, *The Phantom Aesthetic State*, sufficiently indicates the main line of attack. Richards thinks that Kant led the whole tradition of philosophical aesthetics into a dead end by positing the existence of a special “aesthetic state” which we might describe, loosely, as a mode of experience radically divorced from practical matters such as inquiring and desiring. In rejecting any such state, Richards’ most immediate target is the art-for-art’s-sake aestheticism of the
1890s – he cites Vernon Lee’s *The Beautiful* (1913); Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater are also clearly on his mind – but his description is also intended to fit a vast range of aesthetic thinking, before and since, that tries to use the Kantian division of the faculties to set up the “aesthetic” as a special or privileged mode of experience, divorced from experience of both intellectual/cognitive and desiring/moral kinds.

In view of the ways his work was later taken up by thoroughgoing Kantians, it is worth dwelling here on the fact that his rejection of this Kantian, idealist aesthetics is made in the strongest terms. He tells us that Kantian aesthetics “has had an influence upon speculation which would be ridiculous if it had not been so disastrous. It is difficult even now to get out of ruts which have been seen to lead nowhere” (8). While he broadly accepts many of Kant’s claims outside the realm of aesthetics, he informs us that within aesthetics Kantian idealism has led to “calamitous distortions” (9). Whatever the merits of his line of argument as a critique of Kant – and we should, I think, be at the very least suspicious of any thorough critique of Kant’s aesthetics that does not understand itself as necessarily undermining much of the other two parts of the system – it is hard to miss the fact that Richards is in earnest here.

Against these idealist philosophies of the distinct aesthetic state, he offers us what it seems fair to call an incipiently materialist view of the aesthetic: a view of aesthetic experience that vigorously insists on its continuity with experience of normal, practical kinds. He insists that:

> When we look at a picture, or read a poem, or listen to music, we are not doing something quite unlike what we were doing on our way to the gallery or when we dressed in the morning. The fashion in which the experience is caused in us is different, and as a rule the experience is more complex and, if we are successful, more unified. But our activity is not of a fundamentally different kind. To assume that it is, puts difficulties in the way of describing and explaining it, which are unnecessary and which no one has yet succeeded in overcoming.
Richards, then, is putting together his theory specifically to oppose any attempt to set up the aesthetic as a self-sufficient category insulated from the rest of life. This becomes most explicit at the end of the chapter, when Richards turns to show that his critique of the art-for-art’s sake philosophies of the 1890s is also a critique of the modernist aestheticisms of his contemporaries in the 1920s:

A further objection to the assumption of a peculiar aesthetic attitude is that it makes smooth the way for the idea of a peculiar aesthetic value, a pure art value. Postulate a peculiar kind of experience, aesthetic experience, and it is an easy step to the postulation of a peculiar unique value, different in kind and cut off from the other values of ordinary experience. ‘To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.’ (Clive Bell, Art, p25) So runs a recent extreme statement of the Aesthetic Hypothesis, which has had much success. To quote another example less drastic but also carrying with it the implication that aesthetic experiences are *sui generis*, and their value is not of the same kind as other values: ‘Its nature is to be not part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but a world in itself independent, complete, autonomous.’ (A.C. Bradley, Oxford Lecture on Poetry, p5)

This view of the arts as providing a private heaven for aesthetes is, as will appear later, a great impediment to the investigation of their value.... *Art* envisaged as a mystic, ineffable virtue is a close relative of the ‘aesthetic mood,’ and may easily be pernicious in its effects, through the habits of mind which, as an idea, it fosters, and to which, as a mystery, it appeals.

(13; I have tried to reproduce the change of font on “Art” in the original)

If this had been published in the U.S. in 1983 rather than in the U.K. in 1923, it would surely have been unreadable except as a full-scale assault on the lingering legacy of the New Criticism. In direct opposition to the kinds of positions that it will come to be mistaken for, Richards’ theoretical project is to break the aesthetic out of the Kantian loop of self-sufficiency and redundancy and instead to put it back into contact with the material concerns of life. For him, this means shifting the emphasis away from the supposedly “objective” aesthetic or formal qualities of the work of art considered in isolation, and onto the nature of the relationship between the artwork and its most
important context – its audience. “We are accustomed to say that a picture is beautiful, instead of saying that it causes in us an experience which is valuable in certain ways” (15); “We continually talk as though things possessed qualities, when what we ought to say is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another” (16): Richards’ aesthetic theory continually asks us to turn our attention away from the artwork “in itself,” and to focus instead on the nature of the relationship between artworks and their audiences. Having effected that shift, much of the rest of Principles of Literary Criticism is devoted to trying to show how much of life that relationship involves. Morals and capacities for morals; pleasures and capacities for pleasure; opportunities and capacities for cognition and analysis – the aesthetic, considered in this contextual and instrumental sense, comes to overrun all the borders that Kant erects to divide the faculties. Morals and the will, truth and cognition, beauty and the capacity for pleasure: Richards’ account of the aesthetic tries to throw lines out to them all. If we had thought that Richards was a kind of proto- or Anglo- New Critic, then reading Principles of Literary Criticism should set us straight fairly quickly: in philosophical aesthetics, at least, Richards holds views of just the opposite kind.

By the time he comes to write Practical Criticism (1929), then, Richards is doing something rather different to what readings of his work back through the lens of New Criticism suggest. Famously, Practical Criticism is an account of an experiment Richards conducted in the 1920s, in which he had his Cambridge English students write commentaries on various poems without being told anything in advance.\(^7\) From the vantage point of the late twentieth- or early twenty-first century

\(^7\) A word here on the reception of Practical Criticism. Richards’ central finding in this work was that, by and large, the students tested found even fairly simple poems very difficult to make sense of, and moderately complex ones completely unintelligible. One initial conclusion he drew was that we had overestimated most people’s ability to construe language: a more direct and focussed form of education in simple comprehension was required – hence “close reading.” Yet much of the subsequent reception of Practical Criticism has offered a rather different account of what the experiment revealed: an account that emphasises that the students were unable to distinguish poems by authors generally considered geniuses from those by authors generally considered dunces – i.e., that the students had made a failure, not of “construing” in its most basic sense, but of “taste,” of aesthetic judgment. Such readings are symptoms of the history I am trying to outline. As we shall see, as the century proceeds Richards’ distinctive emphasis on training basic cognitive
historicist, a cursory glance over the history of the discipline will all too often light first upon Richards’ removal of the poems’ titles, dates of publication, the poets’ names, and so forth, and assume on that basis that it is witnessing the opening salvo in the New Critical war on context. This reading misses the core of Richards’ project. A more sustained look at the disposition of the forces reveals that Richards is really firing in the opposite direction: far from trying, in proto-New Critical fashion, to strip works of their contexts in order to encourage a close attention to literary language “for its own sake,” Richards is in fact trying to find the most rigorous and precise way he can to put works of literature into a productive relation with their contexts of reception.

His commitment to “context” in this sense is in fact rather deep. Before anything else, Practical Criticism is an attempt to examine as precisely as possible the actual relationships existing between works of literature and their most important context: their readers. Once we have put aside the idea that Richards is an early New Critic, we can begin to see that he is concerned everywhere to put the text into some productive relationship to its context of reception. For present purposes, it is important to note two parts of this project in particular: what I am going to call the “diagnostic” and the “therapeutic” parts. The first part of Richards’ project – the diagnostic part – is to propose the use of works of literature, in concert with readers’ responses to them, as sensitive instruments with which to determine the state of feeling in contemporary culture. Or, as he puts it, poetry can serve as:

and emotive capacities rapidly gets buried beneath the Leavisite and New Critical emphasis on coming to the “correct” aesthetic judgments about specific works. It is only when we read Practical Criticism back through the lens of those later texts that it starts to look, first like an exposé about the failures of literary studies as aesthetic education, and then, as the century proceeds, like a kind of unwitting critique of the aesthetic per se.

8 There is a great deal to be said at this point about Richards’ student William Empson. For our purposes, it is enough to note that, like Richards’ Practical Criticism, Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity (Norfolk: New Directions Press, 1947 [1930]) is often read back through the history of its influence in America: its focus on “ambiguity” and its very close attention to fine linguistic detail in poetry allow it to be read as an early work of New Criticism. Yet Empson’s work in Seven Types is less a model of close attention to “the poem itself,” and more a detailed investigation into reader responses: a tracking of, and speculation about, the sorts of associations an ordinarily competent language user makes when encountering poetic language. As with Richards’ Practical Criticism, the effort is not to sever the text from its context, but to investigate the nature of the relationship between the text and its context of reception.
An eminently suitable **bait** for anyone who wishes to trap… current opinions and responses… for the purpose of examining and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings.

(5-6, italics in original)

In this capacity, he tells us, *Practical Criticism* should be considered a “record of a piece of fieldwork in comparative ideology” (16). Contemporary historicist/contextualist scholars often overlook this diagnostic aspect of Richards’ project, though it is one with which one might have thought they would have some sympathy. Indeed given its strong resemblance to the general project of cultural

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9 A good example here would be Terry Eagleton, who overlooks this diagnostic aspect of the project when he tells us that:

> To my mind… much the most interesting aspect of *Practical Criticism*, and one apparently quite invisible to Richards himself, is just how tight a consensus of unconscious valuations underlies [the students’] particular differences of opinion. Reading Richards’ undergraduates’ accounts of literary works, one is struck by habits of perception and interpretation which they spontaneously share…. [Richards] as a young, white, upper middle-class male Cambridge don was unable to objectify a context of interests in which he himself largely shared, and was thus unable to recognize fully that local, ‘subjective’ differences of evaluation work within a particular, socially structured way of perceiving the world.


This is of course one of the left’s classic critiques of liberalism – that liberals like Richards fail to see how individual cases are determined by larger social forces. In so many places, this is a necessary and principled critique. Yet it seems odd to apply it to the Richards of *Practical Criticism*, for here he cannot really be accused of failing to perceive larger structures: his project in the second half of the work is precisely to observe and analyze the ways in which the various students’ different errors of reading fall into broader, socially determined patterns of perception and response. The left critique should rather be that Richards analyses these structures at what we might now call a “cognitive” level, without then going on seriously to interrogate the political, economic, and ideological structures which would help to explain the production and distribution of the cognitive ones. Yet for the left the analysis of cognitive patterns remains of considerable value as long as we are prepared to see it in light of a broader account of determining forces.

For a much more nuanced reading of this diagnostic part of Richards’ project, we can turn to Eagleton’s teacher, Raymond Williams, who tells us that *Practical Criticism* demonstrated:

> [T]hat the cultural consensus around certain earlier notions of cultivation or taste could be quite brutally refuted by presenting people with texts without any cultural signals like the author’s name, or any other cues to ‘the right response.’ If you asked people about the authors who had written these pieces, they knew what to say within the terms of the consensus. When they actually had to read and describe their writings, the result was radically different – in some cases nearly the reverse. So the effect of Richards’ practical criticism was anti-ideological in a very crucial sense: it exposed the disparity between the cultural pretensions of a class and its actual capacities.


As a way of recuperating Richards’ project for leftist purposes, Williams’ reading of *Practical Criticism* as an insistence on the gap between the “cultural pretensions of a class and its actual capacities” seems rather useful. Yet, by reading the results of Richards’ experiment as evidence of a failure in “taste,” a failure of aesthetic education, Williams here threatens to elide what is really the more fundamental point revealed by the experiment: that the institution of literary study, as
analysis that the historicist/contextualist approach posits as the main goal of disciplinary literary studies, it is really not at all incompatible with current modes. Later, we will examine Raymond Williams’ work as an early example of cultural analysis in the current mode; here, it is worth noting that Richards is proposing, in passing, something not at all unlike Williams’ method, in which works of literature are taken as indices of “structures of feeling” operating within culture generally, the key difference between the two being that, where Williams directs our attention to the context of production, Richards directs our attention to the context of reception.\footnote{For reasons I note when I come to address Williams’ work directly, it is not clear to me that the first task is inherently more politically viable than the second. See chapter two, footnote 9.}

Of course, one needs to say in the same breath that, having once outlined this diagnostic aspect of his project, Richards did not go on to carry it out in any systematic way: nowhere in his work can we find rich and coherent historical and cultural analysis of the kind we find in the best of our contemporary historicisms, from Williams onwards. Indeed, from the vantage-point of the best scholarship on the left of the discipline today, it is not hard to see that Richards is naïve about the nature of the political and economic contexts his “fieldwork in comparative ideology” is seeking to analyse, and indeed that this is a naiveté characteristic of the tradition of utilitarian humanist liberalism from which he springs. It would certainly be possible to make much of this failing, which folds a flaw into all of Richards most useful theoretical and practical tools from the early analysis of language and meaning, through the science of misunderstanding, the practical aesthetics and the associated method of reading, all the way through to the cluster of work on “Basic English” – a flaw that makes them unable to stand up to the real historical, cultural, and (especially) political and economic forces on which they are designed to be set to work. But this is to take Richards at his weakest. For present purposes the more important point is that, from the outset, an important part

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well as the broader social order, had failed to provide the students with the ability to construe basic meanings in simple poems – i.e., that they were unable to read, even in the ordinary sense of the term.
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of Richards’ project is motivated by a will to use literary texts together with contemporary readers’ responses to them as diagnostic instruments to determine the state of culture. A more thoroughgoing commitment to cultural and contextual analysis, of much the kind we have today, would thus be consistent with Richards’ more general position. In realising that Richards was proposing the use of literary texts, not as aesthetic objects gloriously isolated from all possible uses and contexts, but as diagnostic instruments for “fieldwork in comparative ideology,” we realise that he was a lot more like us than he is generally thought to be. He was, in fact, clearing new ground for historicist/contextualist scholars of culture; he just did not yet have the tools to work it.

That much for the diagnostic part of Richards’ project. The second part of Richards’ project – what I am calling the “therapeutic” part – takes us into rather different territory. For a large part of the interest of Richards’ approach to literary studies – and certainly a large part of its difference from otherwise similar approaches today – lies in its commitment to proceeding on from diagnosis and into treatment, as it were: to proceed from “fieldwork in comparative ideology” in the service of a “history of human opinions and feelings,” into a full and systematic effort actively to intervene in that history. Thus Practical Criticism was intended to provide “not only an interesting commentary upon the state of contemporary culture, but a new and powerful educational instrument.”\(^{11}\) The larger goal of Richards’ study of misunderstanding, his aesthetics, and his method of “close reading” was to improve on the historicisms of his contemporaries by developing a way to use literature, not just to analyse cultures, ideologies, and psychologies, but to improve them. This is what would come to distinguish literary “scholarship” from literary “criticism” throughout the mid-century: where the former tried to use literature as a means through which to analyse culture, the latter tried to set literature to work on the aesthetic sensibilities of readers, with the aim of bringing about some larger change in the culture as a whole.

\(^{11}\) *Principles*, page x.
There had, of course, been “criticisms” of something like this kind before. Since the beginning of aesthetic discourse proper in the late eighteenth century, many had tried, under the sign of “criticism,” to call on literature, or else on the aesthetic generally, as a way to intervene in the state of culture. Here we can list again the classic names of the nineteenth century “moralists” or cultural critics: Mill; Carlyle; Arnold; Ruskin; Morris.... Yet until Richards none had yet been in a position to develop for “criticism,” to the standard required by the modern university, both a philosophical foundation and a sophisticated practical methodology. Even in his own day Richards was not alone in seeing the need for a general project of aesthetic education, nor was he alone in seeing that a real commitment to aesthetic education would mean developing a method for teaching aptitudes and sensitivities of the broadest and most general, as well as most unreliable, tenuous, intuitive, and idiosyncratic kinds. He was, however, virtually unique in his insight that this new era, in which the study of English Literature was being institutionalised, could support, and would in fact require, these aptitudes to be taught by a method that was repeatable, reliable, and precise enough to take its place among the disciplines. In this sense the development of “close reading” was a genuine advance. The effect of Richards’ work here was to put literary criticism, considered as an active attempt to use literature as a tool of aesthetic education in the service of broader cultural change, on something like the scientific footing required in order to qualify it as a discipline within the modern research university, alongside – and even sometimes in competition with – literary scholarship, philology, literary history. Once they crossed the Atlantic, however, close reading, with its foundation in an anti-idealist aesthetics, was to become a very different thing.
When one moves from Richards and Empson to the New Critics, the first thing one notes is a dramatic shift in world-view and ideology. It is worth dwelling on that shift for a moment, since it did so much to determine the fate of “close reading.” The best place to look for an account of the New Critical worldview is probably *I'll take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), the Introduction to which was effectively the manifesto of the Fugitives, the movement of which the New Critics were almost all, in their early days, a part. The guiding question there is: “Just what must the Southern leaders do to defend the traditional Southern life?” This emphasis on the defence of a specific “tradition” leads quickly enough into education: “What policy should be pursued by the educators who have a tradition at heart?” It seems fair to say that the dominant feeling in the manifesto is a frustrated sense of entitlement – the particular kind of frustration, and associated anti-modern resentment, that arises when an intellectual formation feels that a new order is denying it rights and privileges that an older, now idealised order would have granted to it as a matter of course. In the case of the Fugitives, the current order is “Industrialism,” seen as “Northern” and “Communist”; the older order is that of the traditional agrarian South, idealised chiefly through the elision of any serious engagement with the system of slavery on which that order had been based; and the rights and privileges being denied are those due to these men as men – as white men – or rather, more precisely, as white male Christian property owners brought up as the inheritors of a certain concept of culture. Of course many of the New Critics moved on from this initial position when, for various historical reasons, it began to seem intolerable, but the traces of the structure of feeling are everywhere in their major work, and must be borne in mind when we evaluate it.

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Others have given much fuller accounts of the ideological conditions within which the New Critics first formed their views. I will draw attention to just one element, albeit one that seems to determine much of their position: their very insistent anti-communism.

[I]t must be insisted that the true Sovietists or Communists – if the term may be used here in the European sense – are the [Northern] Industrialists themselves. They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government. We therefore look upon the Communist menace as a menace indeed, but not as a Red one; because it is simply according to the blind drift of our industrial development to expect in America at last much the same economic system as that imposed by violence upon Russia in 1917.

(xli-xlii)

This is a kind of view with which we are only too familiar today. One of many sad reflections available to us at this point is that the New Critics’ best insights occasionally approached those of the communists they so detested: in particular, their quite radical insistence, in the face of conventional educational humanism, on the fact that “the trouble with the life pattern is to be located at its economic base, and we cannot rebuild it by pouring in soft materials from the top” (xliii-xliv). This seems to me a good Marxist diagnosis of the chief weakness in the main liberal response to the problems of industrialism: liberalism’s failure to acknowledge the ways in which the superstructure is determined by the base. Having made that diagnosis, though, the New Critics did not see the need to proceed to anything like a serious analysis of the “economic base.” Instead, they retreated precisely to the kind of individualist positions that had been developed by the dominant liberalism in its most conservative forms: “The responsibility of men is for their own welfare and that of their neighbours; not for the hypothetical welfare of some fabulous creature called society” (xlvi). It is in formulations like these that their defence of “community,” which might seem to resemble a Leavisian defence of an “organic community” in England, in fact collapses very quickly into a defence of the rights of the individual. In this way their fixation on the threat of communism

ensured that they remained out of touch with the political and economic realities of their time. This lack of political and economic realism made itself felt particularly in the ungrounded optimism of their more constructive assertions, including, crucially, their view that “an agrarian regime will be secured readily enough where the superfluous industries are not allowed to rise against it.” They discovered the unrealism of this position soon enough.

This structure of feeling could not but have a profound effect on Richards’ project as it was translated across the Atlantic. The easiest way to summarise this effect is to note that, while the New Critics happily took up many of Richards’ practical innovations and made them into core components of literary study in the US, and thence elsewhere, they did so in a way that split them off from their theoretical foundations in an incipiently materialist aesthetics, and then reoriented them such that they began to point in the opposite direction – back towards Kant. In shorthand, one might say that the determinedly anti-Kantian theoretical project of Principles of Literary Criticism was dropped, and the method prepared for in Practical Criticism was kept, the latter text therefore being read in a rather distorting light.

We can see this by considering the case of Cleanth Brooks. His reminiscences about his first encounters with Richards’ work – entitled, significantly enough, “I.A. Richards and Practical Criticism” – insist on just these distinctions. He was, he said, “happy to give in full measure to the practical critic what I have withheld from the theoretician” (594). He tells us that he found much of Richards’ theoretical apparatus, “particularly in Principles of Literary Criticism,” “distasteful” or

14 It is worth noting that Brooks insists on this distinction again and again: he likes the practical Richards of Practical Criticism, and he rejects the theoretical Richards of Principles of Literary Criticism. “The practical effect of Richards’ discussion [in Practical Criticism] of his thirteen selected poems was almost overwhelming, and was to make its fortune in the world of letters. The theoretical aspect of the work, however, was another matter… (587; my italics); “[The] 'precepts' and 'admonitions' [for the reading of poetry that Richards] urged in Practical Criticism… impressed me so much that they made up in part for what I found difficult or distasteful, particularly in Principles” (589); “I wrote long letters to John Ransom and Allen Tate in which I argued that, in spite of his philosophy and his terminology, Richards was a perceptive critic of great power who, at least in his application, arrived at judgments that were almost wholly compatible with mine” (589; my italics); “His practical criticism tends to correct his inadequate theory” (592); and so on. Cleanth Brooks, “I.A. Richards and Practical Criticism,” The Sewanee Review Vol. 89, No. 4 (1981): 586-595.
“difficult” (589). The latter two terms seem particularly significant as markers of the New Critical response to the work of the Cambridge critics. Surely this is precisely what one expects to see when a set of practices developed by one intellectual formation is taken up by a very different one, operating both with a very different ideology (“distasteful”) and a very different level of intellectual sophistication (“difficult”). The theory seems somehow at once at odds with and irrelevant to one’s own real concerns, and as such is both resisted and misunderstood.

Brooks gives us a more thorough account of this response in the first few paragraphs of the paper. He begins by contrasting Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism. After praising the latter, he writes:

With Principles I encountered more difficult going. What Richards had to say was exciting, but I resisted the new psychological terminology as well as the confident position of the author. Nevertheless the book could not be dismissed. I had to cope with it – to try to form an adequate answer to it – or else capitulate.

The result was that I read Principles perhaps a dozen times during that first year of acquaintanceship – and profited from the experience. For the kind of reading that I practiced in trying to find a sound basis for rejecting what Richards had written was intense reading, the sort from which one learns. If I did not gain an understanding of Richards’ whole system, an understanding so clear that it compelled acceptance, I did at least sharpen my insight, ways of perceiving, and methods of analysis.

(586)

Brooks, to his credit, has no qualms about telling us that his difficulties in understanding the work formed no impediment to his rejection of it. On the contrary: it is his “attempt to find a sound basis for rejecting” Principles – his sense that to agree with Richards here would be to “capitulate” – that leads him to try to understand it, again and again.

What in Richards’ theory struck Brooks, and the other New Critics, as so objectionable? On the surface, the problem seems to have been with something called “psychological machinery.” Here,
with this much re-iterated phrase, we again encounter the symptoms of a situation in which one intellectual formation fails to understand another: Brooks rather disarmingly admits that “my rejection of it sprang from no theoretical sophistication on my part: instead, such machinery simply seemed irrelevant as well as mystifying” (591). “Irrelevant” and “mystifying” here go quite nicely alongside “distasteful” and “difficult” earlier: Brooks strongly dislikes the “psychological machinery,” but it is at the same time not quite clear to him why he should care.

But, to pursue the question a step further, what was the problem with Richards’ “psychological machinery?” It is tempting to say that the emphasis is on the noun, and that Brooks and the other New Critics were simply rejecting Richards' scientific bent: they were, after all, the source of a great many influential restatements of what we might take to be a traditional Romantic opposition between science and poetry. But this does little to solve our problem: one could just as easily observe that the New Critics tended to call anything they disliked “machinery,” and to contrast it with their own more “organic” approaches, even if they were in fact rejecting it for quite other reasons. And there are other aspects of Richards’ scientific approach to which Brooks does not repeatedly object: his tight, “scientific” focus on specific details of language in lyric poems being the obvious example. No, surely we must say instead that the emphasis is not on “machine,” but on “psychological,” and that what is really being rejected here is the reader, as a form of context that the New Critics want to insist is strictly irrelevant to the pure aesthetic text.

This is worth examining, since it is largely from this kind of interpretation that we derive both the long-standing characterisation of Richards as a “psychological” critic first and foremost – rather misleading a characterisation, as we shall see – and our current sense that “close reading” originated in an attempt to focus attention on “the text itself” rather than on the reader of the text. The most celebrated and derided instance of this New Critical rejection of the reader is, of course, Wimsatt
and Beardsley’s “Affective Fallacy,” which, together with their “Intentional Fallacy,” sought to cut off both reader and writer from the literary work; but those texts have been much discussed elsewhere.\footnote{See William K. Wimsatt, \textit{The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry} (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).} Instead, let us observe Ransom making the same move in a more sophisticated fashion in \textit{The New Criticism} (1941).\footnote{John Crowe Ransom, \textit{The New Criticism} (Norfolk: New Directions Press, 1941).} For many decades now, this has proved a convenient and popular book for those looking to learn something about this particular phase in the history of the discipline – no doubt in part because the title seems to promise a clear summary. Ransom treats Richards at length in his opening chapter, first claiming him as a founding father for New Criticism, but then moving to offer a rather damning critique. It is in no small measure as a result of Ransom’s account of Richards here that many students and scholars, particularly in the United States, have been given the impression that Richards’ project was reasonably contiguous with that of the New Critics, rather than opposed to it in central respects.

Ransom’s main effort in \textit{The New Criticism} was to show that the New Critical effort to sever the text from its various contexts in order to enable it to be treated purely “in itself” had not yet gone far enough. Within this he had two more specific concerns: “psychological” and “moral” considerations in criticism.

Briefly, the New Criticism is damaged by at least two specific errors of theory, which are widespread. One is the idea of using the psychological affective vocabulary in the hope of making literary judgments in terms of the feelings, emotions, and attitudes of poems instead of in terms of their objects. The other is plain moralism, which in the new criticism would indicate that it has not emancipated itself from the old criticism. I should like to see criticism unburdened of these dregs.

\( (x) \)

It is to be noted that in both these cases the concern is ultimately to ensure that valid considerations about texts in themselves are distinguished from invalid considerations about their effects,
psychological or moral, on their readers. Richards is Ransom’s example of the former, and Yvor Winters is his example of the latter, but Richards, with his theory of how literature can be used to train, among other things, richer and more ethical psychological responses, could just as easily have been critiqued as an example of both. The fact that he is not critiqued as an example of both errors gives us a preliminary indication of how strangely Ransom construes Richards – he seems to think of Richards’ criticism as based in a rather simplistic theory of affective response, which is not the case. Here he is on Richards:

Probably the most stubborn popular error which aestheticians are agreed upon in fighting is the notion that the work of art deals immediately with the passions, instead of mediately… Richards is well aware of this chapter of aesthetic theory, which begins with Kant and has gone through several equivalent versions since. His peculiar interest in the attitudes or consequences of the cognitive stimulus takes some of the emphasis off the emotions. What is left is an unfortunate, and, I judge, unconscious evasion of the cognitive analysis. He employs a locution which is very modern, and almost fashionable, but nevertheless lazy and thoughtless. He refers to the distinctive emotion of a poem instead of to its distinctive cognitive object.

(16-17; my italics)

These – “lazy” and “thoughtless” – are strong terms, made stronger by the fact that the terms that might seem intended to qualify them – “modern” and “fashionable” – are among the most damning in Ransom’s lexicon. What is it about Richards’ “reference to the distinctive emotion of a poem” – if that is, in fact, what Richards provides – that incites such a reaction? Is Ransom’s just a grumpy rejection of the “new-fangled”? Again, it is tempting to pair this with Brooks’ resistance to Richards’ “new psychological machinery,” and put them both down to Southern Agrarian antimodernism, but once again, this actually tells us rather little.

It tells us more, perhaps, to note the real strangeness of Ransom’s invocation of Kant. “Richards is well aware of this chapter of aesthetic theory,” Ransom tells us, “which begins with Kant and has gone through several equivalent versions since.” Ransom here seems to be saying: “Richards is well
aware of what the authorities have said about this issue; why, therefore, does he ignore them?” But this is to proceed as if Richards had intended to bow to the authority of Kant. Given the clarity, explicitness, and ferocity of Richards’ assault on Kant in the opening chapters of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, it is difficult to know what to make of this. Is it simply that Ransom has not read *Principles*, and is instead proceeding solely on the basis of a reading of *Practical Criticism*? But that seems a serious charge. I think perhaps we must say instead that Ransom, like Brooks, has read *Principles*, but found it “mystifying.” To say this is not to accuse either of a merely personal failing, for what we are encountering is a fundamental difference in the nature and ideology of the two intellectual formations. The thinking of a Richards or an Empson develops within a specific milieu, in which it is assumed that to engage with an authoritative text is at least in part to critique it. As a shorthand description of the milieu, we could do worse than simply to observe that often enough they could both be found attending meetings of the Cambridge Heretics. In contrast, for thinkers brought up in the Southern United States, who then came to see it as their task to reaffirm and defend a conservative cultural and religious tradition under threat from an encroaching modernity, it was much more natural to assume that one reads a text primarily in order to expound its authority, or to come to an assessment of its relation to other textual authorities. Ransom writes as he does here because, for thinkers formed within this very particular structure of feeling, it really is *not quite imaginable* that another thinker in aesthetics, raised within a very different structure of feeling, might set himself the task of questioning the authority of Kant.

So again we observe that the encounter between two very different intellectual formations is resulting in some real confusion – often, at root, of a rather simple kind. For present purposes, the substantive point is simply that, seemingly without knowing it, Ransom effects a complete reversal of the theoretical orientation of the kinds of practice that Richards had initiated: to both the “error” of making literary judgments on the basis of judgments about affective states, and the “error” of
“plain moralism,” Ransom’s response ultimately will be to appeal to the authority of Kant.

Ransom’s Kant authorises the famously radical New Critical attempt to secure the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object: which is to say, an attempt to defend precisely what Richards had critiqued as the “phantom aesthetic state.” “Close reading” was now being set to work as the practical arm of the very kind of aesthetic thinking that it had been built to oppose.

**Consequences for Literary Study**

This reversal in the philosophical orientation of what would go on to become the discipline’s characteristic method had a range of effects on our discipline as it proceeded. We can see one of the immediate consequences of it by returning briefly to Brooks’ reminiscences. There, without false modesty, he tells us that “In my own use I greatly extended Richards’ concepts and pressed their implications.” What might Brooks be thinking of here? A paragraph later, he tells us:

> It was possible, I believed, to set up a kind of scale: at the bottom, poems that relied heavily on the principle of exclusion, left out too much of human experience, and so were thin and over simple. They tended accordingly toward sentimentality and general vapidity. Toward the top of the scale were poems that used successfully a high degree of inclusion.

With something of the air of a discoverer, Brooks here unveils a thought that surely would have seemed evident enough to any of Richards’ more committed readers: the thought that some of Richards’ observations – here, his working distinction between mental states that achieve stability by excluding complexities and contradictions, and those that do so by including and balancing them – could, if one were so inclined, be used to prop up a hierarchy of aesthetic values. Richards himself already had been so inclined: the whole thrust of his project in both *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism* is to try to find a way to assess works of art on the basis of the potential value of the experiences that they could make available to their audiences. At times, it is true, this had even led him to make blanket statements about the superiority of some forms or modes over others: his
championing of tragedy, in the very chapter of *Principles* to which Brooks is referring, being the central example. But the majority of the time Richards can be found running a line quite opposed to this: emphasising instead the great complexity of the question of the value of different mental states, the tenuousness of our grasp of the nature of the relationship between artwork and audience, and thus the provisionality of any kind of aesthetic judgment. He is very chary indeed of any claim to set up once and for all a canon or hierarchy of aesthetic values, even on psychological grounds, and he is explicitly opposed to any attempt to set one up on somehow “intrinsic,” “formal,” or other non-psychological grounds.

Given this, it seems that Brooks is mistaken in his view that he “greatly extended Richards’ concepts and pressed their implications”; rather, the possibility he glimpses is one that Richards himself had thought through, and largely rejected. For our purposes, the more important point is that Brooks here is typical of the movement of which he is a part in his enthusiastic embrace of the idea of a hierarchy, coupled with his rejection of Richards’ attempt to find a more material justification for it in the realm of psychological value. For him, as for the other New Critics, the key move in adopting Richards is to rescue the aesthetic from the realm of practical, material, and instrumental values, where Richards had tried to put it, and instead put it back into the Kantian and idealist realm of transcendental value where it seemed to belong. From this point onwards, “aesthetic value” was to be thought of as residing, not in anything the text could be used to achieve in the mind of the reader, but somehow solely in the text itself.

This shift of emphasis from an incipiently materialist aesthetics to a thoroughly idealist one, and the accompanying shift from “extrinsic” to “intrinsic” criticism, was to have considerable consequences for literary study throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. With it, we have arrived at the largely sterile concern with hierarchy and canonicity that will occupy much of Anglophone
literary studies throughout the Cold War period: a series of ultimately unresolvable debates about the exact constitution of a universal canon, as if one could determine what was “good” art and what was “bad” art without any reference to what the art might be good or bad for. One can only speculate about what literary studies, and literary education more broadly, might have looked like throughout the mid-century if the discipline had instead been able to follow Richards’ more liberal, in the better sense, and certainly more materialist aesthetics: the kind of aesthetics that famously led him to state that “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds.”\(^{17}\) Putting this line side by side with Brooks’ claim to have discovered the possibility of “set[ting] up a kind of scale,” it is hard to avoid coming to the same judgement as Richards’ biographer, John Russo: “In many ways the New Critics sought to cut Richards down to their size.”\(^{18}\)

It is certainly true, and has long been noted, that Richards and Empson on one side of the Atlantic, and the New Critics on the other shared a fundamentally Romantic sense that modernity (and particularly industrial modernity) posed a range of threats to the continuity and richness of cultural life – though to the questions of what those threats were, and what a rich and worthwhile cultural life might look like, they had very different answers. It is true, too, that they shared a sense that the scholarly model of literary studies as a discipline of knowledge production, whether “literary-historical” or “philological,” was a symptom of, rather than a genuine response to, this kind of negative modernity; and, accordingly, both Richards and the New Critics were particularly alive to the dangers of putting too great an emphasis on the importance of a text’s context of production.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Practical Criticism, 327.


\(^{19}\) Empson, with his keen interest in, among other things, historical contexts, literary biography, and even authorial intention, is the exception here.
But surely too much has been made of these similarities. For the Cambridge liberals, the solution to the problem of modernity was education. For the Southern Christians, the solution was piety. The “practical” in Practical Criticism had, in Richards’ usage, meant something like “directed towards the practical end of cultivating readers’ sensibilities”; later, under the New Criticism, it was to mean “directed towards the ‘practical’ end of assessing the value of poems against that of other poems.” Through the latter, spread far and wide by the cultural force of the superpower of which they were a part, the goal of so much critical work in the discipline became, for a long time, not to educate the reader, but to adulate the text.

Richards’ Reception within Britain: F.R. Leavis

So far our story has led us from Richards’ Cambridge in the 1920s to the United States in the 1950s. In order to continue our story into the 1970s and 1980s, we must first return to Britain, for in that later period, too, it was from Britain that the really momentous changes in the nature of Anglophone literary studies were to come. Within Britain, Richards’ setting-up of literary criticism on a disciplinary footing had had its most dramatic effects through the medium of F.R. Leavis and the Scrutiny critics. Despite the evident differences between Leavisism and New Criticism, this reception led to developments that were in many ways analogous to those we have just traced. For Leavis, despite the fact that he never had any explicit commitment to an idealist or Kantian aesthetics, nevertheless managed to effect a crucial shift of emphasis within the discipline in Britain and much of its diaspora, turning criticism away from Richards’ concern with the value to readers of the aesthetic experiences that literature could provide, and towards a more hierarchical concern with evaluating and ranking the relative value of the texts themselves. This was despite his saving emphasis on the deep connection between literature and his key term, “Life.”

For Leavis, of course, the key figure in the history of criticism was Matthew Arnold. Let us then observe him articulating his own account of the task of criticism by way of a parsing of Arnold’s phrase “criticism of life”:

Pressed for an account of the intention behind the famous phrase, we have to say something like this: we make (Arnold insists) our major judgments about poetry by bringing to bear the completest and profoundest sense of relative value that, aided by the work judged, we can focus from our total experience of life (which includes literature), and our judgment has intimate bearings on the most serious choices we have to make thereafter in our living.

(Scrutiny 7, 58)

If Leavis sees a path back to Arnold here, it is because the ground around him has been cleared by Richards – the Richards who insisted that, even within the newly professionalizing world of academic criticism, engaging with questions of “relative value” in literature was important chiefly because it would help us to engage with questions of “relative value” in life. In inheriting that conception of the literary, Leavis inherited a whole position on education and on culture more broadly, though of course he changed the terms of it in ways that were to prove very significant later on. If one really wants to emphasise the continuities between the two projects, one can observe, as crucial instances, that Richards’ placing of literary criticism on a disciplinary footing enabled Leavis’ characteristic insistences on English Literature as a “distinctive discipline of thought” (35); that Richards’ conception of literary study as the primary therapeutic wing of liberal education largely enabled Leavis’ characteristic insistences on the centrality of the literary disciplines to the university as a whole; and, in turn, that Richards’ view of liberal education as one of the primary therapeutic means through which the worst symptoms of negative modernity could be treated in the wider culture did much to prepare the ground for Leavis’ whole position on the central role of literary criticism in society at large.21 On this note it is also worth observing that both thinkers shared a commitment to the view that, in another of Leavis’ famous phrases, the “constitutive function” of

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21 I quote from F.R. Leavis, The Living Principle: English as a Discipline of Thought (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1975)
the university is, or should be “to create and maintain an educated public” (11). Needless to add, this places both thinkers at a significant distance from our modern consensus that the university’s task is “the production of knowledge.”

So, as many have observed, Leavis is an inheritor of Richards’ project. But having observed that, we need to go back and note also the specific ways in which Leavis redistributes Richards’ emphases. “[W]e make... our major judgments about poetry by bringing to bear the completest and profoundest sense of relative value that... we can focus from our total experience of life”; “[O]ur judgment has intimate bearings on the most serious choices we have to make thereafter in our living.” Here, the question of “relative value” has undergone a shift closely analogous to the shift it underwent in the US in the same period. Richards had tried to encourage us to compare the relative value of the different psychological states made available by poems. Leavis here wants us to make a similar comparison, this time between the relative value of the different modes of “Life” that the poems testify to and instantiate, but his new emphasis on the scene of critical judgment threatens to turn this into a comparison simply between different poems. For Richards, it was reading, engaging with, and being acted upon by texts that enabled them to influence our living; for Leavis, it is judging them. “[O]ur judgments... the work judged... our judgment.” Where the emphasis had once been on the value of the reader’s experience, now the emphasis is on the scene of judgment that allows the reader – or rather, ideally, the critic – to assess the relative value of literary works. There is a great risk, then, of losing the initial emphasis on the instrumental value of literary works, their value as means to further ends, and coming to see them instead in idealist terms, as ends in themselves, as repositories of final value. This, in turn, threatens to override the saving emphasis on education.

22 One can of course also note the ways in which these broad similarities in the larger positions play out in the smaller details. One example: a few pages after his parsing of the phrase “criticism of life,” Leavis moves to defend Arnold from T.S. Eliot on grounds that could be taken straight from the pages of Practical Criticism: “It is only by bringing our experience to bear on it that we can judge the new thing, yet the expectations that we bring, more or less unconsciously, may get in the way” (61). The fact that he feels no need to cite Richards on “stock responses” here is evidence of how thoroughly internalised these sorts of considerations had by then become.
Crudely put, the critic’s task, which had once been envisioned as the use of works of literature as instruments of aesthetic education, is all too often reduced simply to the ranking of works.

In Leavis, and in the tradition that followed out of and reacted against him, this emphasis on criticism as a scene of judgment rather than of education can at times become very pronounced. Leavis’ most positive endorsement of Arnold’s work as a critic runs follows:

> What has to be stressed is his relative valuation of the great Romantics: Wordsworth he put first, then Byron (and for the right reasons), then Keats, and last Shelley. It is, in its independence and its soundness, a more remarkable critical achievement than we can easily recognise today.

(63)

What can one say about this reduction of criticism to facile questions of rank? It is awfully tempting to joke that it has some deep relation with the peerage, except that the mid-century

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23 This strange fixation on staging and re-staging the scene of judgment is replayed at the level of Leavis’ treatment of critics, too. Thus his final endorsement of Arnold as a critic is made in the following terms:

> [Arnold’s] actual achievement in producible criticism may not seem a very impressive one. But we had better inquire where a more impressive is to be found. As soon as we start to apply any serious standard of what good criticism should be, we are led towards the conclusion that there is very little. If Arnold is not one of the great critics, who are they? Which do we approach with a greater expectation of profit? Mr Eliot himself- yes; and not only because his preoccupations are of our time; his best critical writing has a higher critical intensity that any of Arnold’s. Coleridge’s pre-eminence we all recognize. Johnson? – that Johnson is a living writer no one will dispute, and his greatness is certainly apparent in his criticism. Yet that he imposes himself there as a more considerable power than Arnold isn’t plain to me, and strictly as a critic – a critic offering critical value – he seems to me to matter a good deal less to us. As for Dryden, important as he is historically, I have always thought the intrinsic interest of his criticism much overrated… (63-4)

And so on. The testy shuffle around precedence, and the essay as a whole, finally ends with: “I can think of no other critic who asks to be considered here, so I will say finally that, whatever his limitations, Arnold seems to me decidedly more of a critic than the Sainte-Beuve to whom he so deferred” (64). Unless we have a particular interest in the re-ordering of tables of precedence, this is a pretty flat note to end on.

I make this somewhat abstruse point at such length not merely to emphasize the distance between Leavis and Richards, but also to note that this sort of thing has had such an influence, not only on mid-century criticisms, but on our own. In this regard it is perhaps worth recording here my sense that much of the best British writing in the world of letters – in the London Review of Books, for instance – defaults to something like this mode even today, when the arguments and conditions that were once thought to underpin and justify it can no longer seriously be defended. Readers of Stefan Collin, for example – a writer whose work I greatly admire – are importantly, I think, being treated to the spectacle of a fair and measured judgment, as if the critic were really a kind of judge whose task, finally, is to come to a fair-minded and lasting assessment of the achievements of various figures, the better to know who is and who is not truly “first-rate.” This is despite the fact that Collini himself would no doubt repudiate the kind of canon-policing that characterizes the
American critics do it too. Certainly this is a particularly egregious example, though it is hardly an isolated one, as anyone who has read much criticism of this period knows. More importantly, the sense of the project of “criticism” being taken for granted here, together with the position in aesthetics implied, make themselves felt throughout Leavis’ work. Responding to critics who approach Wordsworth’s poetry from a biographical perceptive, Leavis tells us that he is “interested in explanation and genetic accounts only insofar as they enable one to appreciate more intelligently and fully the creative achievement and to realise the importance of the poet”; which is to say, he supports biographical accounts of Wordsworth only insofar as they promise to lead us to “a better perception of the nature of his genius and so to a fuller realisation of the value of what he achieved” (25, 30; my italics). These formulations may seem more acceptable, but are really quite akin to his tables of precedence. We are here dangerously close to the kinds of sterile circularities which will come to encumber so much of mid-century humanist criticism, in which the work is important chiefly as a testament to the genius of an author who could write such an important work, and all that is left to the critic is the task of sorting out, on some mysterious basis, which works and authors are really of the highest rank.

Relatively secure in the intellectual space carved out for him by Richards’ aesthetics, Leavis famously refused to enter into debates about philosophy, preferring instead to insist on the autonomy and independence of literary study as a discipline.24 As a result, he nowhere felt the need explicitly to engage with Richards’ claims in aesthetics, and certainly never consciously took up the mantle of Kant in the manner of the New Critics. In the end, though, the effect was not dissimilar: in Britain, as in the United States, Richards’ early attempt to put criticism on something more akin to a

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24 Though there were a few exceptions to this general rule. For a good instance, see The Living Principle: English as a Discipline of Thought (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1975) 19-69, where he engages with, and selectively endorses, an idiosyncratic grouping of philosophers.
materialist basis by way of an aesthetics of instrumental value – an aesthetics of means – is co-opted by a later notion of criticism that largely reverts to an idealist aesthetics of final value – an aesthetics of ends. In Britain as in the United States, “criticism” was to move in a direction precisely opposite to that indicated by Richards’ guiding injunction that “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds.”
Chapter Two: From Williams to the Present

Chapter Two, Part One: Raymond Williams –
The Break with Criticism, the Aesthetic, and “Practical Criticism.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it is not hard to see that once the idea of “criticism” had been taken up by forces of this kind – the idea of criticism, together with the philosophical aesthetics that underpinned it and the “close reading” and “practical criticism” that were its methods – a critique from the left was bound to come. One of the most sophisticated and influential thinkers who came forward with that critique, and certainly the most instructive for our purposes, was the British socialist thinker Raymond Williams. Trained at Cambridge when the influence of Leavis was at its height, his initial positions were labelled, by both admirers and detractors, a “left-Leavisism.” The story of his origins in that particular formation is not well-known in the U.S., where he is remembered mostly for his later work as a founding figure in cultural studies, but this is a pity, since William’s inheritance from Leavis and, through him, from Richards remains a determining one throughout his work, even if he eventually came to critique key elements of it in strong terms.

There are really two stories we need to tell about Williams’ intellectual development out of the Leavis tradition and into the figure who did so much to shape the discipline in our period. The most important is the story of the radical break with that tradition that he effected through his wholesale rejection of the task of “criticism,” his sweeping critique of the category of the “aesthetic,” and his attempt to replace both with a practice of fine-grained historicist/contextualist approaches.

1 For Williams’ demurrals about the applicability of the term “Left-Leavisism” see Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters (London: Verso, 1981) 195. The whole section from 190-195 is of considerable interest with respect to Williams’ sense of the relationship between his own early methods and those of Leavis, and before him, Richards. But see also 65 where he makes the link in the most explicit terms, noting of the editorial board of the Journal “Politics and Letters,” of which he was one of the three founding members: “Our intention was to produce a review that would, approximately, unite radical left politics with Leavisite literary criticism.”
scholarship. For our purposes, the key point here will be that by the time Williams came to make that break, the strident anti-Kantianism of Richards’ aesthetics – what I have called his “incipient materialism” – had been buried under a weight of New Critical Kantianism and Leavisite idealism-in-effect, encouraging Williams to try to sweep the field of aesthetics entirely clear, instead of differentiating between idealist and more materialist forces within it. This allowed an argument against a specific strand of aesthetic thinking – admittedly, the dominant strand since Kant – to pass for an argument against aesthetics tout court, and paved the way for the rejection of criticism and its wholesale replacement by scholarship, leading in turn to the dominance of the scholarly model which we see in the discipline today. But in order to appreciate the subtleties of that story, it is necessary to tell also the rather more complex story of the largely hidden continuities between even William’s later positions and the Richards/Leavis tradition that did so much to form his thinking. Let us begin there.

**Continuities Between Leavis and Williams**

One of the best sources we have for understanding Williams’ intellectual development is *Politics and Letters*, a book-length interview with him conducted by the editorial board of New Left Review in 1979. A brief warning to begin with: the title of the book creates the potential for some confusion, since Williams had also been a co-founder of a journal of the same name in the late 1940s. In *Politics and Letters*, the book, Williams summarised the attraction that Leavis had held for him and for the other founding editors of *Politics and Letters*, the journal, as follows:

> The immense attraction of Leavis lay in his cultural radicalism, quite clearly. That may seem a problematic description today, but not at the time. It was the range of Leavis’ attacks on academicism, on Bloomsbury, on metropolitan literary culture, on the commercial press, on advertising, that first took me. You must also allow for the sheer tone of critical irritation, which was very congenial to our mood.

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Secondly, within literary studies themselves there was the discovery of practical criticism. That was intoxicating, something I cannot describe too strongly…. At the time we thought it was possible to combine this with what we intended to be a clear Socialist cultural position. In a way the idea was ludicrous, since Leavis’ cultural position was being spelt out as precisely not that. But I suppose that was why we started our own review, rather than queuing up to become contributors to *Scrutiny*.

Finally, there was Leavis’ great stress on education. He would always emphasise that there was an enormous educational job to be done. Of course, he defined it in his own terms. But the emphasis itself seemed completely right to me.

Cultural radicalism, practical criticism, stress on education: is it too much to say that this could pass for a description of the key elements of Leavis’ inheritance from Richards? Perhaps. Certainly the “tone of critical irritation” seems distinctive of Leavis: when anticipating opposition, Richards was always more likely to seem by turns earnest, superior, and amused. But it seems fair to observe at least that positions which, in Cambridge in the 1930s, would have seemed the particular innovations and emphases of Richards are now, by the late 1970s, being remembered and responded to as Leavisite. This refiguring was to have significant consequences. “Practical criticism” in particular, and then through it “criticism” generally, came to be seen as marked with Leavis’ distinctive brand.

We can see this clearly later in the same book-length interview, when Williams is describing the influences he was responding to when he wrote his first book, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952).³ Here Williams remarks on a common tendency within and around literary studies simply to equate “practical criticism” with Leavis, on the grounds that Leavis’ work was the “most powerful exemplar” of the method. Williams calls this a “crucial mistake,” and rightly reminds us that the method began with Richards’ work in the 1920s. But we might be forgiven for wondering whether Williams was not, in fact, making a version of the same mistake, and so underestimating the effect of Leavis’ influence in this period, on him as well as on others. “Why do people close-analyse within

³ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952)
the main practical-critical tradition?” he asks himself. “In order to clarify their response *as evaluation*” (193, my italics). The emphasis here is the distinctively Leavisite one on practical criticism as the staging of the scene of aesthetic judgment, and the same emphasis returns whenever he discusses the method.⁴ His provisos notwithstanding, Williams is reading the history of “practical criticism” back through the lens of Leavis.

This is not an isolated case, but a clue to a more general tendency. Moreover, the emphasis applied not just to the particular method of “practical criticism”/”close reading,” but to the project of “criticism” more generally. For in fact throughout so much work in this period references to the project of “criticism,” whether in the mode of praise or blame, carry just this emphasis on aesthetic discrimination and judgment. One of Williams’ interviewers in *Politics and Letters* expresses the common assumption succinctly when he refers to “the process of discrimination and evaluation that has traditionally been thought to be the central function of criticism” (334). No-one demurs from this, yet as we have seen Richards’ initial account of the central function of disciplinary “criticism” had carried a very different emphasis – an emphasis precisely not on “discrimination and

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⁴ For another clear example, see Williams’ very fine paper “Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldman,” and in particular the section entitled “The Limits of Practical Criticism,” in which practical criticism is clearly equated with Leavis, and critiqued accordingly. All the main elements of Leavis’ position appear in Williams’ description of practical criticism here: the appeal to “sincerity” and “vitality” via an invocation of Lawrence; the “informed critical minority”; the attack on “scientism”; the refusal to enter into philosophical debate about key terms. Most importantly, there is the distinctive emphasis on judgment; on making the “distinction of good literature from the mediocre and the bad.” It is interesting to ask whether Williams would be able to dismiss “practical criticism” in this way were it not possible to characterize it in these specifically Leavisite terms.

In this respect it is of some interest to observe that for Williams here “English literary sociology” itself begins with the practical criticism of the *Scrutiny* group:

> English literary sociology began, in effect, from this need of a radical critical group to locate and justify its own activity and identity: the practical distinction of good literature from the mediocre and the bad extending to studies of the cultural conditions underlying these differences of value…

(18)

Apart from noting here once again that practical criticism began, not with Leavis’ and the *Scrutiny* group’s project of distinguishing “good literature from the mediocre and the bad” but with Richards’ project of using both good literature and bad “as a means of ordering our minds,” it is worth thinking back to what we earlier called the diagnostic part of Richards’ project – his proposal for literary studies as, in part, “fieldwork in comparative ideology.” Would it not be more accurate to say that “English literary sociology” within the university really begin there, with Richards, at the start of the discipline? See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005).
evaluation,” if by that we mean learning to distinguish “good” works from “bad,” but instead on education towards “better ordering our minds.” By 1979, though, that earlier project had been effaced: instead, Leavis’ emphasis on the staging of critical judgment is simply accepted as the necessary emphasis of any project of “criticism.” This is to say that the general project of literary “criticism” has become for all intents and purposes fused with Leavis’, and then also the New Critics’, idealist and ultimately conservative emphasis on judging the relative merits of literary works with a drive towards establishing some sort of final hierarchy of aesthetic values. Williams, in his critique of these positions, demonstrably shared the same set of starting assumptions, his typically scrupulous reminder that it was a “crucial mistake” to equate “practical criticism” with Leavis notwithstanding.

**Williams’ Break with Leavis**

Thus the main line of continuity between Williams and the mid-century critics who preceded him was this emphasis on the idea that criticism was necessarily a matter of staging the scene of critical judgment. Observing this emphasis puts us in a better position to understand the real significance of Williams’ break with those critics – the break that was such a turning-point for the discipline as a whole. For in fact it was this particular set of assumptions about the necessary conservatism and idealism of the project of “criticism” that eventually led Williams to feel it was necessary to reject it entirely, together with the whole field of aesthetic thinking on which it had been based.

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5 In this regard, it is worth noting in passing that in accepting this emphasis, thinkers in the discipline whose primary intention was to reject the influence of Leavis were in fact implicitly accepting his retrospective construction of a tradition of criticism-as-judgment that ran behind him all the way back to Arnold. There is much to be said here about the history of the idea of “criticism” before its entry into the university as part of the discipline of English Literature, but that takes us beyond the scope of the chapter.

6 The two territories of the United States and United Kingdom can hardly be considered separately in this regard: Williams himself notes that his opposition to literary criticism as a project built on the assumption that it was possible to make impersonal judgments of works of literature “was really much more [an opposition] to later developments in New Criticism than to Leavis” (*Politics and Letters* 335). At this level of analysis it is important to insist that the Anglo-American intellectual tradition moves as a unit, propelled in part by imbalances in the relative power and sophistication of the various national formations within it.
To see this, we have to turn to Williams’ classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977), one of the most important of the works that we in the discipline today are often, whether knowingly or unknowingly, relying on when we assume that aesthetic justifications for literary study have been discredited as merely ideological. Here we can observe how Williams’ powerful and necessary critique of the idealist strand of aesthetic thinking, dominant since the coining of the term in the late eighteenth century, is marked and even, one might say, deformed by his felt need to respond to the more local history of criticism within the discipline. Or rather – to put the matter perhaps more bluntly than it deserves – we can see that in *Marxism and Literature* Williams purports to make what is really a local critique of the Leavisite and New Critical models of criticism, and of the associated Kantian or neo-Kantian model of the aesthetic, stand as a rejection of “criticism” and “aesthetics” *tout court*.

Overtly, Williams’ was an argument against the concept of the aesthetic in its entirety. The core of the argument is the claim that any attempt to draw a clear distinction between “aesthetic” situations and “other” situations is deeply problematic, since it involves us in the positing of a suspect “aesthetic state,” “aesthetic response,” or “aesthetic function.” For Williams, the positing of any such state or function is an unwarranted abstraction and specialization from the multiplicity and variety of actual social practices. The fact that this idealisation from material practice is ultimately ideological in nature should lead us to reject the term “aesthetic,” and the associated tradition of thinking, entirely:

> [Under capitalism] Art and thinking about art have [had] to separate themselves, by ever more absolute abstraction, from the social processes within which they are contained. Aesthetic theory is the main instrument of this evasion.

(154)

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These are broad terms, so it is worth noting that what Williams really means when he says “aesthetic theory” is *idealist* aesthetic theory – or rather, we might say more precisely that William’s argument is that there can be no other kind. Why does Williams feel the need to reject all aesthetic theory as idealist? We can approach an answer by observing the terms in which Williams articulates the idea of an “aesthetic response”:

Art, including literature, was to be defined by its capacity to evoke this special [aesthetic] response: initially the perception of beauty; then the pure contemplation of an object, for its own sake and without other (‘external’) considerations; then also the perception and contemplation of the ‘making’ of an object: its language, its skill of construction, its ‘aesthetic properties.’

(150)

These are indeed the approximate terms of the idealist mainstream of aesthetics, but the emphasis here is being derived from threats in Williams’ more immediate environment – from New Criticism and cognate movements. This is at its clearest in the case of formulations like “the pure contemplation of an object, for its own sake and without other (‘external’) considerations.” As we shall see, it is with arguments of this kind that Williams takes care of the idealist core of aesthetic thinking – arguments that derive many of their terms, and certainly much of their force, from a local need to reject conservative forces active in the discipline during the period. This local argument is then offered as an argument against aesthetic thinking *per se*, as if the aesthetic could not be thought through in other terms than those the period offered.

Yet as we have seen, the aesthetic can be thought through in other terms, and was in fact thought through in other terms at the origin of the discipline. Further, now that we have traced at least the broad outlines of the early history of the discipline’s treatment of the category of the aesthetic, we are in a position to observe that Williams is repeating an older move here. For though he would not have liked us to say so, what Williams is offering us here is something very much akin to Richards’
critique of the aesthetic, and in particular Richards’ critique of the “phantom aesthetic state.” When
we note the differences between the two projects, we must do so against the background of this
more basic similarity: both figures inaugurate a new period in the history of the discipline by way of
a sweeping rejection of idealist aesthetics. It is only against this background that we can appreciate
the real significance of their coming to very different conclusions about aesthetics in general. For
Richards the critique of idealist aesthetics was to be considered a clearing operation, on the way to a
reconstruction of the aesthetic in other, more materialist, terms. In contrast, for Williams – or at
least for Williams as he has been received in the discipline ever since – the critique of idealist
aesthetics ended with a wholesale rejection of aesthetics, and its replacement with a thoroughgoing
historicism. The political difference between the two thinkers is, of course, very evident: Williams
transposes the terms of the critique of idealist aesthetics from liberalism to socialism, with all the
losses (close attention to the specific contours of individual psychological states) and gains (a more
sophisticated account of the economic and political order in which individual psychologies take their
place) which that shift so often implies. If one is on the left, then once one has noted that political
difference it is perhaps tempting to conclude that Williams’ more complete rejection of the aesthetic
is the more politically advanced. This, I think, would be a mistake. For seen in the context of the
long history of the discipline, Williams’ move to reject the aesthetic in the name of
contextualist/historicist cultural analysis acquires a rather different political significance.

To see what is really at stake in that movement towards a specifically scholarly historicism, we need
to begin by noting that Williams, unlike Richards, encountered the problem of aesthetics, not
essentially as a problem of political praxis, but as a problem of description or analysis. If for

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8 Here it is of interest to observe that in mopping up, as it were, Williams goes on to argue that the term “beauty”
cannot, as the tradition often claims, be used to secure a further specialization of the concept to positive sensory
experiences, since the positive sensory experiences cannot finally be distinguished, in principle, from the negative ones –
precisely the second move in Richards’ argument.
Williams it is a problem that the concept of the aesthetic involves an abstraction from real social processes, then this is because such abstractions make it difficult to perform accurate cultural analyses. Williams’ project has become so thoroughly our own that it is difficult even to remark on this without risking redundancy, but here we should: as a student of literature he is trying, first and foremost, to produce knowledge about culture. This in itself represents a proposal for a fundamental shift in the orientation of the discipline. In many places we must read his moving and characteristic emphasis on the analysis of “actual practices” as an attempt to negotiate this shift.

Few remark on it, but from our present perspective it seems that the insistence on literary study as cultural analysis, in the face of perceived or actual threats from other possible orientations, is one of the central themes of Williams’ later work. Thus, most relevantly for our purposes, Williams concludes his critique of the aesthetic by drawing the principle that:

The key to any analysis, and from analysis back to theory, is then the recognition of precise situations in which what have been isolated, and displaced, as ‘the aesthetic intention’ and ‘the aesthetic response’ have occurred.

(157)

The task is “analysis,” following which one proceeds, not forwards into action – whatever that might mean – but “back to theory.” It is specifically in his capacity as a literary scholar, then – a cultural historian, cultural theorist, and sociologist – that the aesthetic strikes Williams as such a powerful and pernicious source of obfuscations. He rejects idealist aesthetics not in the old way – on the basis of its lack of utility for the purposes of training readers, cultivating sensibility, creating and maintaining an educated public, or similar – but on the basis of its inaccuracy as a tool for cultural analysis. To make the point explicit: his argument for a more thoroughly historicised version of literary studies is primarily an argument for literary scholarship.
With this in mind, we can begin to see that much of Williams’ critique of the whole tradition of philosophical aesthetics is in fact directed towards a target much closer to home: “criticism.”

The replacement of the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric (which speak to the multiplicities of intention and performance) by the discipline of criticism (which speaks of effect, and only through effect to intention and performance) is a central intellectual movement of the bourgeois period.

The charge that “criticism” is complicit in capital is clear enough. It is perhaps less clear exactly what is at stake in Williams’ invocation here of the replaced “disciplines of grammar and rhetoric.” It helps if we realize that, though he would not have used these terms, Williams is calling our attention to these “disciplines” precisely as forms of scholarship – here, forms of inquiry that take as their goal the production of accurate knowledge about language and language-use – and trying to remind us of the losses literary and cultural study sustained when these properly scholarly forms were replaced by criticism, which, by speaking only of “effect,” has tended to obfuscate the conditions (and especially the political conditions) under which the literature was first produced.\footnote{The reader may perhaps excuse a long footnote here, for without wanting to digress too far from the main line of our history, there is also much to be said about Williams’ sense that criticism is at fault for focusing too closely on the \textit{context of reception} (“effect”) and that it therefore needs to be supplemented (or really, replaced) by scholarly methods that can focus more effectively on the \textit{context of production} (“intention and performance”). When we think of the particular forms of criticism he is trying to do battle with we must, I think, agree that he is largely right: there was, in both Leavis and the New Criticism, a programmatic refusal to come seriously to grips with real problems of “intention and performance” in this sense. We could even go further to agree also that the “scholar” model of literary study – literary study as the production of knowledge about culture – has tended to favor approaches like Williams’ that treat the text, finally, as an index to its context of production, whereas in contrast “criticisms” of various kinds, conceiving of literary study as a matter of developing and disseminating certain cultural capabilities through training readers, creating an educated public, and similar, have naturally enough tended to focus their attentions on the context of reception, often with very problematic results.}

But we need to make some finer distinctions here, too, for as we have seen there are “criticisms” and “criticisms.” Can we really say that the Leavisite and New Critical obfuscation of the conditions of textual production was the consequence of their placing too great an emphasis on “effect” – on the context of reception, per se? I think the answer is no: the real error here has mostly been to deny “context” altogether in the name of a spiritualized and autotelic concept of “the text itself.” After all, the New Critics were at pains to excoriate \textit{both} the “Intentional Fallacy” and the “Affective Fallacy” – to exile both the writer and the reader, as it were. Leavis is less explicitly idealist here, but still represents a shift of emphasis, not \textit{onto} questions of “effect,” as Williams seems to think, but away from them, and instead onto the process by which the critic judged the text “itself” – a shift of emphasis that was to become decisive. Noticing this allows us to observe, once again, one of the key differences between criticisms of what I am calling the...
Moreover, his critique of criticism, like his critique of the “aesthetic,” is here being offered as a broad one even though it is really being made in more local terms. Williams critiques “criticism” as a long-standing historical phenomenon (“a central intellectual movement of the bourgeois period”) but he is really thinking about the term in a much more local sense: specifically, he is thinking of criticism of an early-to-mid twentieth century Cambridge kind, with its programmatic insistence on “speak[ing] of effect, and only through effect to intention and performance” – the kind of criticism first and the second periods: what was initially, in Richards and Empson, a deliberate focus on the context of reception becomes, in Leavis and then even more evidently in the New Critics, a rejection of context altogether.

If Williams misses this here it is because of his tendency to feel that the context of production is the only thing that really counts as a context for leftist purposes. In this, he is very much of our period: “context” is now almost invariably used in this way, in reference to the context of production alone. Yet surely this is overly restrictive: the various contexts of reception are at least as important, and there are good reasons to want to distinguish between past contexts of reception and present contexts of reception, too. Williams focuses his analysis on the context of production because for him such an analysis can entail – and indeed, for a Marxist, must entail – an analysis of the conditions of material production more generally. His proximity to Leavis makes him very aware that there were, in criticisms of the second period, ways of focusing on “effect” that amounted to an evasion of this more political, because more material, analysis: that amounted, really, to an ideological obfuscation of the conditions of material production by way of a redirecting of our attention onto consumption. It is this, I think, that sometimes leads him to make too quick an equation between the specific context of textual production and the conditions of material production more broadly.

From our present vantage point, it is perhaps easier for us that it was for Williams to observe that there is no necessary identity between the two. In Williams’ writings, an analysis of the specific context of textual production (the “structure of feeling”) amounted to an analysis of the conditions of material production more broadly, but this is by no means always the case, as is attested by the countless pages of apolitical literary history that the discipline has produced both before and since Williams. Moreover, one might ask, could not an analysis of a text’s relationships to its contexts of reception reveal just as much about the conditions of material production in the society at large? We might even say that, to the extent that for an activist such as Williams useful cultural analysis must finally be a matter of describing the conditions of material production as they stand in the present, rather than as they stood in the past, it seems more promising to try to focus our attention on the present context of reception, rather than on past contexts of production. Yet this would of course still be to think in the mode of the cultural analyst. If we want to move forwards into criticism proper, then we have to begin to see that analyses of contexts of production, and past contexts of reception, can be made to engage with the real, present conditions of material production only in so far as they can be brought to bear on the present context of reception: real, living readers – what I would term the “context of use.” Praxis is only ever in the present, though it is of course essential to bring the past to bear on it as sophisticatedly as we can.

But this takes us into the next two chapters. For present purposes, the historical point is simply that we need to be able to acknowledge the ways in which Williams’ careful insistence on the importance of “intention and performance” offered a valuable corrective to criticisms of the second period, while also acknowledging that he misdiagnosed the real problem with that criticism in such a way as to dismiss also criticisms of the first period – criticisms to which William’s argument ought not, in all rigor, have been applied. As the remainder of this chapter begins to show, the generalization of Williams’ argument against Leavis and the New Critics into an argument against criticism per se did much to pave the way for a wholesale replacement of the “critic” by the “scholar” model, and so inadvertently did much to direct the discipline, as well as his particular branch of thinking on the left, into the respective impasses they have reached today, when our various highly developed practices of cultural analysis fail to bite in the absence of any equally developed practice of cultural intervention.
he was trained in. Williams’ sense that this kind of criticism is characteristic of the whole bourgeois period really derives from Leavis – specifically, Leavis’ backdating of “criticism-as-judgment” to Matthew Arnold.

All these emphases become telling in an oft-overlooked passage in *Marxism and Literature*. Here Williams tells us that potentially liberating creative forces were “specialized” and thus “contained” in the concept of “literature,” and that this process was:

> decisively reinforced by the concept of ‘criticism’: in part the operative procedure of a selecting and containing ‘tradition’; in part also the key shift from creativity and imagination as active productive processes to categorical abstractions demonstrated and ratified by conspicuous humanistic consumption: criticism as ‘cultivation’, ‘discrimination’, or ‘taste’.

Neither the specialization nor the containment has ever been completed.... But each has done significant harm, and in their domination of literary theory have become major obstacles to the understanding of both theory and practice. It is still difficult to prevent any attempt at literary theory from being turned, almost a priori, into critical theory, as if the only major questions about literary production were variations on the question ‘how do we judge?’

(146, emphasis in original)

In light of the previous chapter, it is I hope a little easier to observe that what Williams is most immediately objecting to here are Leavis’ particular emphases: firstly on “tradition”; then on “cultivation,” “discrimination” and “taste”; and lastly on the centrality to literary study of this question “how do we judge?” here taken as the founding question of criticism per se. But we also need to notice, in that second paragraph, the ways in which the basic terms of the inquiry have changed. For what is at stake in Williams’ claim that criticism’s dominance over “literary theory” has become a major obstacle to “to the understanding of both theory and practice”? When we encounter formulations of this kind, it is all too easy for us to note only that Williams, in the face of those who would emphasise “theory” alone, is making a typically careful attempt to give equal weight to both “theory” and “practice.” We think, perhaps, of the figures that appear so often as
targets of critique in Williams’ work – figures like the ideological Oxbridge don, or the airily theoretical academic Marxist, both of whom, for Williams, are divorced from any actual “practice” – and then, depending on our own views on the matter, either we feel the force of the critique or we reject it. But what we need also to notice here is that this careful balancing, which seems an argument for a kind of “practice,” is in fact being performed in the service of a rather different argument: the argument that the work of the cultural scholar is the analysis of, rather than intervention in, culture. For Williams, the task of literary study is “the understanding of both theory and practice” – in other words, precisely not practice, but the understanding of practice, which all too easily reduces to the production of knowledge about practice. This is the crucial break he makes with the tradition that began with Richards, but was then co-opted by Leavis and the New Critics: the break with literary study as a direct intervention in culture; the break towards literary study as the mere analysis of culture. It is Williams’ characteristic and repeated emphasis on the importance of “practice” that allows him to negotiate this difficult turn.

We can observe this argument becoming explicit in the next line, in which Williams warns us that “literary theory” – which for him really means literary study as cultural analysis – is still being threatened by the regressive force of “critical theory” – which for him means the literary study as a training-ground for the faculty of judgment.10 Williams is worried that his attempts to make literary

10 In fact, Williams’ use of the term “literary theory” here is actually a clue to a significant rhetorical shift that took place in the discipline in this period. In the late 1960s, and then even more clearly throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, debates within the discipline began to be framed in terms, not of “critics” versus “scholars,” but of a hazily defined “theory” versus an even more hazily defined “everything else.” We still tend to have the feeling that “theory” was what debates in that period were really about, and yet it is worth considering the possibility that we are mistaken. Could it be that this assumption obscures the real lines of debate within the discipline? That the “theory wars” were really a distraction, a red herring? The extraordinary vagueness of the battle lines drawn by the parties marching under and against the banner of “theory” seems to indicate the plausibility of this. The term “literary theory” could be used, as Williams does here, to refer to historical or cultural analysis of a scholarly kind, and be defended or attacked as such – or it could be used in any number of other different, and often opposed, senses, referring for instance to the newly sophisticated structuralist approaches to poetics that tried to consider literary genres as forming a coherent system in their own right; or else perhaps to deconstructive practices of setting the text to work that had more in common with the project of “criticism” than they did with any “scholarly” historicist approach. Another indication of the plausibility of this view is the fact that the two names that were perhaps the most iconic of “theory,” Derrida and Foucault, would,
study into a practice of cultural diagnosis may even now, at this late stage, be hijacked by those who 
still see literary study in the old way, as a form of cultural treatment. He does not make use of the 
opposition between “scholarship” and “criticism” to understand this, but this is what he means. The key argument in the book, though it never appears as such, is that the whole project of 
criticism, together with its foundation in philosophical aesthetics, needs to be rejected as bourgeois, 
and replaced by a thoroughly scholarly historicist/contextualist model of literary study. The force of 
the argument derives from the assumption, bred into the discipline by long decades of conservatism, 
that neither criticism nor the aesthetic can be thought through in other than idealist terms. The fact 
that Richards had founded the discipline on a criticism and an aesthetics of rather another kind has 
been forgotten. The force of Williams’ critique of conservative forces in his immediate environment 
had the effect of bringing forward into a new period the assumption that the therapeutic, as opposed 
to the merely diagnostic, function of the discipline could only be thought through in idealist terms – 
ultimately, a conservative assumption. The project of “criticism” did not survive it.

if classified according to the older dichotomy, fall on both sides of the “critics versus scholars” debate: Derrida roughly in 
the former camp, Foucault roughly in the latter. I would therefore like to propose, as a historical hypotheses for further 
testing, that the main effect of the shift into these vague terms straddling the traditional dichotomy was to mask the real 
change going on in the period, which was the victory of the “scholar” over the “critic” model. Of course, considering 
Derrida and the Yale school of deconstruction that followed him as “critics” in this sense is also rather misleading; 
though they resemble critics in their commitment to something like “close reading” and their associated determination 
to make use of the text as, in Richards’ terms, “a machine to think with,” rather than as a source of historical knowledge, 
they nevertheless represent a break from criticism towards professionalism in that they sought to use literary texts as 
a way to think high-level specialist theory, rather than as a means by which to cultivate the sensibilities of readers. The 
key difference lies in their dropping of the category of the aesthetic. With apologies to Gayatri Spivak, who has recently 
made a valiant attempt to turn this deconstructive tradition in the direction of the more critical task of “aesthetic 
education,” it is necessary to say that the training that the theory of the “double bind” offers is, I think, primarily 
cognitive – which is not to say that the double bind is not often also emotionally fraught. See Gayatri Chakravorty 
An Unfinished Project of the New Left

Yet it would be misleading to tell the story of the demise of criticism, viewed as the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility with an eye to a more general cultural reform, as if Williams were the villain. It is more accurate to say that Williams, in a genuine attempt to grapple with conservative forces around him, over-emphasised his critique in ways that were then seized upon by later thinkers – seized upon, indeed, by the very political forces that he had done so much to teach us how to understand, if not exactly to confront. This is a key turning point in our story: Williams’ rejection of criticism is both an instance and an emblem of the “scholarly turn” that inaugurated the current period of literary study. For this reason, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the broader intellectual milieu in which Williams’ move towards scholarship took its place. Doing so will help us to read the history that follows – and, indeed, the dissertation as a whole – with a better sense of what is at stake in it. I will suggest that what Williams, and then the “scholarly turn” more generally, really represents for us here is a missed opportunity: an opportunity that arises again today as a result of the crisis of neoliberalism. To see this, we need to set the story of the demise of criticism in a new context: that of the intellectual work of the British New Left.

One of the foundational projects of the New Left, especially as it initially coalesced around the work of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Richard Hoggart, was to bring together the emphasis on the value of human experience developed by the Romantic tradition of revolt against the industrial revolution with the more strictly political and economic insights of Marxism, socialism, and other cognate movements on the left. In many ways, the key figure for this aspect of the project was William Morris, who seemed to represent the point of confluence of these two streams of critique.11

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11 One of the members of the editorial board of the New Left Review put this succinctly during the interview with Williams: “What Morris really represents is the first time that this whole tradition [i.e. the tradition that Williams outlined in Culture and Society] centrally connects with the organised working class and the cause of socialism” (Politics and Letters 128). This seems right. Of the many passages by Morris that confirm his status as the point of confluence between the Romantic revolt and the revolt of the working class, let me just quote one:
But within literary criticism, the more local battle with Leavis and the New Critics – the need to clear the ground of this sort of criticism – led to a change of emphasis and, ultimately, we might say, to a deforming of this project. Williams’ wholesale dismissal of criticism and too-sweeping critique of the aesthetic led, in the work of those who followed him, to a near-complete replacement of criticism by scholarship, with unfortunate results for literary studies and the humanities more generally – and for literary studies on the left, in particular. As we shall see in the last part of this chapter, Williams’ local critique of Leavisite and New Critical versions of the project of criticism and of the aesthetic continues to be repeated by later scholars in rather different situations, long after the threat it was formed to deal with has passed away.

Yet Williams himself was a much subtler thinker than many who came after him. Characteristically, he was far-sighted enough to anticipate, at least to a certain degree, the danger of his critique being taken up in other circumstances in such a way that it would become a hindrance, rather than a help, to the left. “Criticism” was to be offered no quarter, and here I would respectfully fault his foresight, but with respect to the aesthetic he offered two “saving clauses,” as I shall call them – two qualifications, both too often forgotten, to temper the force of his otherwise sweeping critique. The first was this, which opens his chapter on “Aesthetic and Other Situations”:

> Yet it is clear, historically, that the definition of ‘aesthetic’ response is an affirmation, directly comparable with the definition and affirmation of ‘creative imagination,’ of certain human meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced or even tried to exclude. Its history is in large part a protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality (‘utility’), and of all things into commodities. This must be remembered even as we add, necessarily, that the form of this protest, within definite social and historical conditions, led

[There is a revolt on foot against the utilitarianism which threatens to destroy the arts... For myself I do not indeed believe that this revolt can effect much, so long as the present state of society lasts; but as I am sure that great changes which will bring about a new state of society are rapidly advancing upon us, I think it a matter of much importance that these two revolts should join hands, or at least should learn to understand one another.

almost inevitably to new kinds of privileged instrumentality and specialised commodity. The humane response was nevertheless there.

I must say I find this rather a moving passage, and not because I agree with the terms in which it holds up the aesthetic for praise. One cannot read Williams’ early work – particularly his classic *Culture and Society* (1958) – without feeling that he has thought his way very deeply through what one might, as a shorthand, call the tradition of the Romantic revolt: he feels the force of it deeply, “in his living,” as he might have put it, and by a constant effort of thought and feeling he has marshalled and championed it when others would have given it up.¹² Now, with characteristic even-handedness, he celebrates a crucial part of it as a prelude to letting it go. He celebrates the aesthetic, that is, in the Kantian terms offered by the Romantic revolt – as a “protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality” – but now only as a prelude to dismissing it in the same terms.

If there is a certain joy and even exultation in his embrace of something more akin to a traditional Marxism here (in his introduction, he tells us that “this book is the result of [a] period of discussion, in an international context, in which I have had the sense, for the first time in my life, of belonging to a sphere and dimension of work in which I could feel at home” (4-5), there is also, I think, a real ambivalence: he is pushing away a set of beliefs that were once, for him, deeply held. Perhaps this partly explains the force with which he rejects the aesthetic here. At any rate what he does not do – and this was to prove crucial in the subsequent history of the discipline – is to reserve a space for any “protest against the forcing... of all things into commodities” that would see the aesthetic precisely in instrumental terms.

This is unfortunate, because the clues that could have led him to such a view were there to be found. For there had in fact been those who had tried to break with this idea that the aesthetic must always

be only a protest against instrumentality, and for the New Left they were very close to home indeed: William Morris, for example. It would of course take us too far out of our way to examine Morris’ thought in depth here, but it is well worth pausing for a moment to reflect on one of the dominant tendencies in his thought, since doing so will illuminate certain key features of Raymond Williams’ thinking, and thereby illuminate certain key features of literary study in our own period. Morris, like Williams, was certainly not fooled by the grand claims of idealist aesthetic theory: having learned to recognise the importance of the determination of the superstructure by the base, he happily condemned bourgeois aesthetics as “the numerous schemes by which the quasi-artistic of the middle classes hope to make art grow when it has no longer any root.” Yet this rejection of bourgeois approaches to art did not lead him to surrender the field of aesthetics entirely. Instead, it led him to try to construct a new approach to art: one that would take into account the economic realities of working life. For him, this meant rejecting any claim that the aesthetic realm was to be understood as a standing critique of utility and instead insisting on it precisely as a deeper kind of utility – “Nothing can be a work of art which is not useful” (‘The Lesser Arts’ 83). In Morris’ best thinking, this deeper kind of utility would itself be part of the base, since it would be inseparable from the material production of “utilities” normally so called. Thus the society Morris felt he was fighting for was one in which:

we should have so much leisure from the production of what are called ‘utilities,’ that any group of people would have leisure to satisfy its craving for what are usually looked on as superfluities, such as works of art, research into facts, literature, the unspoiled beauty of nature; matters that to my mind are utilities also.14

This argument is so consistent with Raymond Williams’ general emphasis that it is hard, if one forgets for a moment the actual conditions under which his thinking developed, to believe that he did not make it himself. Within Marxism, Williams is most controversial for his critique of the base/superstructure model – famously, he tries again and again to demonstrate the ways in which the highest elements of the superstructure (say, as a very imprecise shorthand, “culture,” and similar) end up underpinning some of the most fundamental elements of the base (say, again very imprecisely, “economy” and similar). With this in mind, could there be a more Williams-esque argument than Morris’ claim here that supposed “superfluities” like “works of art, research into facts, literature, the unspoiled beauty of nature” and so on are all actually “utilities”? It strikes me that this view of the aesthetic is precisely what the New Left’s running together of the Romantic and Marxist streams of revolt ought to have achieved in the field of aesthetics: on the one side, an aesthetic confrontation with the Marxist critique of political economy, which would force it towards a wider and more open engagement with the deepest and richest forms of human life; on the other, a confrontation with bourgeois, idealist aesthetic thinking which would force it to grapple with the fact that processes in the “higher” cultural sphere are largely determined by the blunt facts of material production, and therefore the facts of class. Morris should have been recognised as the clue to the fact that the latter project needed to be carried out, not by dismissing the aesthetic entirely, but by reframing it in instrumental and materialist terms.

That clue had been taken up by others. Across the Atlantic the pragmatist tradition had managed to take up Morris’ emphasis on the instrumentality of art, in a certain fashion.15 And of course we have

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15 Showing how this move comes through the various moments in the history of U.S. “pragmatism” would be a larger project. For now, it will have to suffice if I simply remind the reader of one of the clearest examples, from John Dewey:

Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree – that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life. The story of the
already seen that I.A. Richards, another admirer of Morris, had built disciplinary literary criticism on the basis of an aesthetic theory of something like this kind. But though these thinkers went on to develop aesthetic positions that were much more sophisticated than Morris’ in other respects, both were liberals rather than leftists, and neither would prove capable of addressing the problem of material production as seriously as he had – seriously enough, that is, to break aesthetics from the main line of bourgeois liberalism within which it had originated. Williams, if only he had followed this path, would have been capable of that.

So the clue was there to be taken up – and was, in fact, taken up, but not by socialists. Morris’ breakaway aesthetic insights were re-gathered into the mainstream of bourgeois thought, and the trail he blazed was not followed by any major figure within the socialist tradition. The question then becomes why? Why did the New Left, for which Morris was such a crucial figure, not seize upon this possibility – the possibility of developing an aesthetic theory that emphasised the usefulness, rather than the glorious uselessness, of the work of art? It would have been entirely characteristic of Williams to argue for a version of the aesthetic that posits it, not as a protest against instrumentality, but as a deeper form of instrumentality. Why did he instead feel it was necessary to reject the whole field of aesthetic inquiry, as if the questions posed there could only ever be answered in liberal terms? Why did he not carry through his general emphasis into the field of aesthetics, which was ostensibly the field with which he was most directly concerned?

severance and final sharp opposition of the useful and the fine is the history of that industrial development through which so much of production has become a form of postponed living and so much of consumption a superimposed enjoyment of the fruits of the labor of others.


As so often in Dewey, the language here might well be called vague, but the strength of the thought comes through. Did he learn this from Morris? He doesn’t cite him. But then it is worth noting that in Art as Experience (1934) Dewey only cites Richards once (and disparagingly), yet the influence of Richards on his best thinking is clear.
In the context of the history we have outlined, it seems clear enough that the explanation lies precisely in the fact that aesthetics was the field with which he was most directly concerned. Williams felt so strongly the need to respond to pernicious aesthetic arguments within his immediate purview – which is to say, within disciplinary literary criticism – that he was unable to carry through his general emphasis there, and instead moved to reject the discourse in its entirety. Speaking more broadly, we might say that the felt need to reject the Leavisite and New Critical positions then dominant within the discipline was simply too strong for the New Left to be able to carry its distinctive emphasis through into this crucial area. Instead, the New Left’s general position on aesthetics became deeply marked by the need to respond to that specific threat, and remains so marked even today when the specific threat has long since passed. Putting this differently, one might say that the New Left, and after it the discipline as a whole, learned how to assault idealism in the field of aesthetics, but did so without learning how to occupy the territory so cleared.

There is a final point to be made about Williams, and it is perhaps the most important one. It is that Williams was far-sighted – or should we say ambivalent? – enough to anticipate many of the problems that were bound to arise as a result of his sweeping dismissal of the aesthetic. In Marxism and Literature, and then again more explicitly when pressed in Politics and Letters, he softened his critique by offering a crucial qualification – what I shall call his second saving clause for the aesthetic. His initial version of it runs as follows:

[W]e cannot rule out, theoretically, the possibility of discovering certain invariant combinations of elements within this group [of intentions and responses that have traditionally been clustered around the term “aesthetic”], even while we recognise that such invariant combinations as have hitherto been described depend on evident processes of supra-historical appropriation and selection.

(156)
This is not Williams at his clearest, and indeed the retreat into abstraction might itself be read as a sign of the ambivalence to which I am trying to draw attention. Ambivalently, then, Williams is telling us that even though he rejects the aesthetic in all the terms in which it has so far been articulated – idealist terms – he nevertheless does not rule out the possibility of one day discovering a properly materialist account of it. In *Politics and Letters* he makes the point again in somewhat clearer language, and combines it with a projection of future work. The interviewers have pressed him, questioning his (seeming) argument in *Marxism and Literature* that the allied concepts of “literature” and “the aesthetic” must be abandoned. They suggest instead that in rejecting those, Williams is surrendering too much valuable ground. Williams responds:

Well this is difficult. What I would hope will happen is that after the ground has been cleared of the received idea of literature, it will be possible to find certain new concepts which would allow for special emphases. Otherwise there is obviously a danger of relativism or miscellaneity, of which I am very conscious. That will have to be done – it will be a necessary stage. Even with the category of the aesthetic, I say it is wholly necessary to reject the notion of aesthetics as the special province of a certain kind of response, but we cannot rule out the possibility of discovering certain permanent configurations of a theoretical kind which answer to it – as we certainly don’t rule out conjunctural configurations of a historical kind in which the category effectively obtained.... The mistaken assumptions which lie hidden in the old concepts have to be cleared away for us to be able to begin searching again for a more tenable set of emphases within the range of writing practices.

(325-6)

Williams’ second saving clause for the aesthetic, then – and it is a large one – is that his wholesale critique of it, together with his insistence on tearing down the distinction between the “literary” and the “non-literary,” is ultimately to be considered a clearing operation, and that once the field has been cleared of the influence of Leavis and the New Critics, a new aesthetics, together with a new model of the “literary,” will have to be constructed along more properly materialist lines. This proviso has been forgotten, presumably because it does not sit at all easily within the discipline’s current consensus that “aesthetic” justifications for literature necessarily serve conservative purposes
– indeed, it has presumably been forgotten in large part because *Marxism and Literature* is so often assumed to offer a justification for just that consensus. But Williams was right to offer it, even in the course of a necessary critique of idealist aesthetics, and he was also right to reiterate and confirm it when pressed. He was also, I think, right to foresee that there would come a time when we would again need the thing he was so anxious to reject in the late 1970s.

In making what has proved to be an extremely influential critique of idealist aesthetics, Williams was tearing the “criticism” of his day up by its philosophical roots, and planting in its place the seeds of what would become a whole tradition of historicist and contextualist scholarship. I hope that by this stage in the thesis it is also clear that he was at the same time repeating the very ground-clearing exercise that founded “criticism” in the first place. For once we appreciate Williams’ full position, in which the critique of idealist aesthetics is to be seen as a clearing operation on the way to a more materialist reconstruction of the term, we can see that it is in fact rather startlingly congruent to Richards.’ The differences that remain between the two are those between liberalism and socialism on the one hand, and those between criticism and scholarship on the other – differences that do not necessarily line up in the way that the left of the discipline in recent times has believed. If in Richards’ hands the aesthetic was only partly reconstructed, and then was used as a foundation for a liberal model of criticism, relatively naïve about the broader economic and political determinants that were eventually to make it impossible to achieve even in its own terms – a model that was thus easily recovered by the main tradition of bourgeois aesthetics – we should not therefore dismiss aesthetic criticism entirely. Even that flawed liberal model gave us “close reading,” which is still, in its various forms, the most useful tool in the discipline today. More importantly, what the example of Richards demonstrates, I think, is that contrary to the common assumption that “criticism” and “aesthetics” are necessarily creatures of the right – an assumption bred into the discipline throughout the middle part of the twentieth century – another kind of criticism, based on another
kind of aesthetics, is possible. If Williams’ initial project – to “unite radical left politics with Leavisite literary criticism” was, as he later put it, “ludicrous,” then this was because of Leavis, not because of literary criticism. Realising this opens up the possibility of a left aesthetic criticism today.
Let us then return to our story proper by addressing the third and most recent period in the history of the discipline – our own period. The central point to be made here is that much of the most important work performed within the discipline over the last three decades, particularly by the left, has really amounted to a working-through of the logic of Williams’ initial critique. Observing this brings key features of our present situation into view, chiefly, the character of our present historicist/contextualist paradigm. To the extent that Williams’ critique remains a welcome corrective to idealist tendencies within the discipline, this working-through has been a productive one. Yet if our historicist/contextualist paradigm has neither taken into account Williams’ saving clauses, nor tried to correct for his overlooking of the incipiently materialist aesthetics that lay at the roots of the discipline. Truly to demonstrate the extent of the range over which this generalisation holds would no doubt require a whole new dissertation; I will focus on the work of four key figures/movements on the left of the discipline: Terry Eagleton, the new historicism, Fredric Jameson, and Franco Moretti.

Terry Eagleton

Terry Eagleton, Williams’ student, offers us our first and earliest example of what was quickly to become a general tendency. One may summarise the position he took in the 1980s and 1990s by saying that he critiqued the categories of “literature” and the “aesthetic” as elitist mystifications, rejected the associated practice of “criticism” as necessarily Leavisite or New Critical, and recommended the restructuring of departments of literature around the central goal of “education in the various theories and methods of cultural analysis” (186). In other words, his position was that of Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, without the rider that all of this was to be seen as a provisional

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16 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)
clearing operation on the way to a reconstruction of “literature” and the “aesthetic” in more materialist terms. We might say that Eagleton’s version of the argument was the more successful: today’s departments of literature are indeed structured, not around the old idealist concept of “literature” and the project of its “criticism,” but around the seemingly more materialist concept of “cultural texts” and the project of their analysis, without any general sense that this state should be considered a phase in a longer plan.¹⁷

One sees how thoroughly the story of the origins of “criticism” had become muddled by this point when one reads Eagleton’s chapter on “The Rise of English” in his influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), or his subsequent volume *The Function of Criticism* (1984).¹⁸ In both of these, Eagleton’s discussions of the origins of “practical criticism” and “close reading” assume that we understand Leavis to be the dominant figure, with Richards introduced belatedly as a kind of follower of Leavis, and a “link between Cambridge English and the American New Criticism.”¹⁹ In other words, by this stage in the discipline’s history the refiguring of “criticism” as Leavisite/New Critical in essence had proceeded to such a degree that it amounted to a simple mistake in chronology. The mistake is understandable: as we have seen even Williams, who had been nuanced enough to warn us of the error of conflating “practical criticism” with Leavis, had nevertheless fallen into that error in effect.

Having offered influential restatements of Williams’ arguments against both the concept of “literature” and the project of “criticism,” Eagleton went on to elaborate Williams’ primary

¹⁷ As I noted in the introduction to the dissertation, this appearance of success is somewhat deceptive, since one might fairly have doubts about the extent to which these kinds of arguments actually effected the changes they called for. What has been underestimated here is the extent to which the movement from “critical” to “scholarly” models of literary study – a movement called for and seemingly brought about by the left – was the result of larger political, economic, and cultural forces of a fundamentally conservative nature.


argument against the “aesthetic.” His *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), a commodious work that ranges through a heavy list of aesthetic thinkers from Baumgarten and Kant onwards, might seem to have been offered as a break with Williams – as a kind of *defence* of the aesthetic against sweeping attacks by historical and cultural materialists:

I.... have in my sights those on the political left for whom the aesthetic is simply ‘bourgeois ideology,’ to be worsted and ousted by alternative forms of cultural politics. The aesthetic is indeed, as I hope to show, a bourgeois concept in the most literal historical sense, hatched and nurtured in the Enlightenment; but only for the drastically undialectical thought of a vulgar Marxist or ‘post-Marxist’ trend of thought could this fact be an automatic condemnation.

(8)

Yet the continuity with Williams’ argument soon becomes clear, for Eagleton’s central positive claim for the aesthetic is the same in all its major elements as what I have earlier called Williams’ first saving clause. Eagleton:

This concept of [aesthetic] autonomy is radically double-edged: if on the one hand it provides a central constituent of bourgeois ideology, it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes, in the work of Karl Marx and others, the anthropological foundation of a revolutionary opposition to bourgeois utility. The aesthetic is at once, as I try to show, the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought.

(9)

This is precisely Williams’ account of the aesthetic as that element in bourgeois thought that functions as a “protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality.”

Considered as a

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21 Here I must part ways with many of the writers of what, in Britain as least, has come to be called the “new aestheticism.” Scholars who identify with this category have tended to see Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* as a break with the anti-aesthetic positions developed by the left in the 70s and 80s, and thus as one of the “opening shots of what has become the new aestheticism.” See Dave Beech and John Roberts, “Spectres of the Aesthetic,” p 18, in Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, (London: Verso, 2002) 13-47. To me it seems better to view the work as a continuation of Williams’ anti-aesthetic position. This is a clue to a more general problem. In my view, the writers of the “new aestheticism” have not really been in a position to understand the larger history in which the left’s anti-
defence of the aesthetic, it really only ever amounts to a reminder that, in Eagleton’s words, “From The Communist Manifesto onwards, Marxism has never ceased to sing the praises of the bourgeoisie” (8). One might be forgiven for finding this kind of praise a little underwhelming. What is missing here is any real sense that it might be possible to break with the bourgeois tradition of aesthetics without surrendering the category entirely: to clear away the idealist emphasis on “autonomy,” “self-determination,” and “bourgeois utility,” and rebuild the aesthetic on something more like materialist – which here would mean instrumental – grounds.

In a wider sense, such critiques drew their force from a feeling that the concepts of “literature,” “criticism” and “aesthetic value” were, at root, hierarchical and elitist ones, that serve an important legitimating role for many of the most hierarchical and elitist elements of the bourgeois order. In Britain in 1988, Eagleton could put it as bluntly as this: “Departments of literature in higher education, then, are part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state” (174). This is true, of course, and important to note, but the crucial question is as to the extent to which it is true. For considered as a matter of Left political strategy, it is crucial to know on the one hand when and in what kinds of contexts the disciplines of literature function, on balance, as legitimating institutions for oppressive forces, and on the other hand when and in what kinds of contexts they function, on balance, as the means by which we are able to resist those forces by cultivating the genuinely social. Only rarely has this kind of claim been made with the necessary degree of historical specificity. One might take for example Eagleton’s comments in his 1996 preface to the second edition of Literary Theory.
What is truly elitist in literary studies is the idea that works of literature can only be appreciated by those with a particular sort of cultural breeding. There are those who have ‘literary values’ in their bones, and those who languish in the outer darkness. One important reason for the growth of literary theory since the 1960s was the gradual breakdown of this assumption.

(viii)

It is perhaps too “nice” a critical point to note that here the shift from present to past tense is of considerable interest: what “is” truly elitist today “was” an assumption that began to break down in the 1960s. More important is the question that this observation allows us: were these particular forms of literary elitism, which, we are told, began to break down in the 1960s, really still the most salient target for critique in 1996, when Eagleton was writing? In 1996, was the distinction between the literary and the non-literary, the cultivated and the uncultivated – in effect, the category of the aesthetic – still the chief means by which literary studies served a role in the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state?

I think the answer is no, and here of course there is a great deal to be said that would take us away from our main story. Yet it seems worth at least noting this: that surely if the last three decades have taught literary studies anything about its relation to the capitalist state, it is that the capitalist state in its current phase of development does not want us around. Under a Keynesian funding regime, it was possible to think that literary study was being supported because it served an important legitimating role in the maintenance of liberal capitalist institutions. The steady and now nearly complete withdrawal of state funding during the period of neoliberalism should convince us otherwise. Returning to Eagleton's argument, it seems fair to allow that, specifically within Britain, a certain kind of cultural conservatism still takes refuge behind something like the terms under critique – but decreasingly, and surely any serious analysis would have to conclude that the dominant forms
of legitimation are now elsewhere. At any rate, whatever view we form about the situation either at present or as it stood in 1996, the salient point is that, within the discipline as it stood in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was still possible to feel that these kinds of large-scale assaults on the concept of “literature,” on literary study as “criticism” and the associated methods of “practical criticism” and “close reading,” and on the concept of the “aesthetic” more generally, were being directed at a genuine target on the right – namely, the last vestiges of the Leavisite and New Critical forces of the 1950s, as they continued to spring up in all sorts of less precise forms of humanistic criticism in the decades that followed. In the context of a discipline that continued to feel the influence of these conservative movements, it was easy to feel that the advancing of critiques of this kind was a politically progressive act. But as the critique spread to other times and places, these conditions, such as they were, no longer obtained. If class exploitation in Britain was still, in the 1950s and – residually – in the 1970s and 1980s legitimated in part by pernicious forms of elitism about cultivated and uncultivated tastes, the same could not be said of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, where pretended attacks on “elite” tastes were, as they remain, the very stuff of right-wing discourse. With the turn to finance capitalism and full neoliberalism, the terms of the cultural debate shifted: the dominant classes within capitalism were now being legitimated, not by their pretensions to highbrow taste, but precisely by their miming of a critique of highbrow tastes. In this changed historical context Williams’ critique of the aesthetic, repeated again and again, assumed a very different political character.


Since we are talking here about national formations, this may the moment to note that French conservatism, too, is still able – residually, I think, but still powerfully – to shelter to a certain degree behind aesthetic distinctions. This explains why the other main line of anti-aesthetic critique in our discipline arrived from France. The emblematic figure here would be Bourdieu. A brief survey of this line of thought, which runs in parallel to the line developed by Williams, would move from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) through John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), to, most recently, Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007). This has proven
The New Historicism

It is here that we have to turn to another of Williams’ students, Stephen Greenblatt, the key figure in the “new historicism” that held such sway over the discipline in the late 1980s and 1990s and continues to influence much of what goes on in it under other names today. Without trying to come to an assessment of the whole movement, we can at least trace some of the broad outlines of the ways in which it tended to treat the category of the aesthetic and the larger project of criticism. To begin with, we should observe the ways the new historicists took up Williams’ critique of the aesthetic in a context in which its political effect was bound to be rather different. The best text with which to do show this is probably Greenblatt and Gallagher’s Practicing New Historicism (2000), the closest thing to a manifesto the movement produced. Initially what seems most relevant about the text is the way in which Williams’ critique of aesthetics, developed, really, in the 1950s and 60s, but achieving its most coherent and radical form in the 1970s, comes through into the new historicism of the 80s and 90s in a mediated fashion, as a concern with canonicity; and yet is nevertheless treated as if it were a new historicist innovation. “Having impetuously rushed beyond the confines of the canonical garden, we stand facing extraordinary challenges and perplexing questions” (14). Given the history that we have traced in this chapter, it is tempting to say that the move here to frame the new historicist critique of the canon as a daring escape from a theocratic authority is being made available by the equation between aesthetic approaches to literature and New Criticism that has now, at this stage of U.S. literary studies, become almost reflexive. Indeed,

24 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, Practicing New Historicism (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000)
as we shall see later, in this respect it lines up quite nicely with Moretti’s claim, also made in 2000, that close reading should be rejected because “at bottom, it’s a theological exercise,” and that now “what we really need is a little pact with the devil.” There is a hint of a political claim here, the claim being that, if policing the boundaries of the canon, and insisting on an aesthetic distinction between the literary and the non-literary, makes one a stodgy old Christian conservative, then “rush[ing] beyond the confines of the canonical garden” might be thought properly secularist, liberal, and perhaps even bit progressive.

Yet, when we go on to examine the substance of that claim with respect to the aesthetic, we might be forgiven for wondering whether we have got the politics of it right after all. Greenblatt and Gallagher tell us that New Historicism had led to a “drastic broadening of the field” in which:

Works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored can be treated as major achievements, claiming space in an already crowded curriculum or diminishing the value of established works in a kind of literary stock market.

(10)

Might we not have reasons to be suspicious of this market metaphor? What had begun in Williams as a wholesale rejection of the traditional basis of canonicity – the entire category of the aesthetic, and the whole associated category of a specific aesthetic state or aesthetic value – is here recoded as the promise of a re-shuffling of the canon. This, I think, is a clue to the fact that what we are witnessing here is a rolling-back of what had been, in its time, a profound reform.

At an intellectual level, the difference between the two responses really stems from the difference in their depths of engagement with the history of philosophical aesthetics – a difference that can in turn be traced back to forces operating in the broader political sphere. Williams, because his scholarly work was being put together as a clarifying response to the various pressures of both his vexed disciplinary situation and his vexed national situation, had felt the need to engage seriously
with the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, with results that we have seen. Eagleton, residually, had felt the need to devote a book to continuing that engagement. The fact that nowhere in the key works of new historicism can we find any similar engagement is an indication of the fact that, within the United States by that stage in the history of the discipline, the specific forms of liberal ideology that had traditionally been seen to cluster around the term “aesthetic,” in Britain and elsewhere, were simply no longer being employed by any forceful agent on the right. The dominant forms of legitimation were now elsewhere. The corollary of this within the discipline was that, for United States literary scholars such as Greenblatt and Gallagher, there was no felt need to develop a significant response to the problems posed by idealist philosophical aesthetics – there was no-one to force a deeper engagement. This explains the curious inertness of the new historicist treatment of the term. The force of their critique of the aesthetic, such as it is, was really derived from the spectre of New Criticism:

The risk [of our opening-out of the canon], from a culturally conservative point of view, is that we will lose sight of what is uniquely precious about high art: new historicism, in this account, fosters the weakening of the aesthetic object. There is, we think, some truth to this charge, at least in relation to the extreme claims routinely made by certain literary critics for the uniqueness of literature. Works of art, in the more perfervid moments of celebration, are almost completely detached from semantic necessity and are instead deeply important as signs and embodiments of the freedom of the human imagination. The rest of human life can only gaze longingly at the condition of the art object, which is the manifestation of unalienated labor, the perfect articulation and realization of human energy. The art object, ideally self-enclosed, is freed not only from the necessities of the surrounding world (necessities that it transforms miraculously into play) but also from the intention of the maker. The closest analogy perhaps is the Catholic Eucharist...

(11-12)

The version of the “aesthetic” under critique here assumes an “art object” that is self-enclosed, free from instrumental and contextual concerns, divorced from authorial intention, and cast in religious terms. This is to say that, though a generation has passed, once again the critique of the aesthetic in
general is actually a critique of idealist aesthetics in particular: specifically, the neo-Kantian aesthetics of the New Criticism. If the general form of the critique has remained the same for twenty-five years, though, the historical context in which it is being offered has not: we are a long way from the New Critics here. Where Williams’ critique of the aesthetic had been an attempt to confront powerful conservative forces active in the culture around him, the New Historicists’ “weakening of the aesthetic object” was, in their own words, an attempt to confront “the extreme claims routinely made by certain literary critics... in [their] more perfervid moments of celebration.” It seems fair to observe that by this stage in our history the significance of the target has been rather reduced. “Routinely made” nevertheless seems to imply that, if this target was small, at least it was a live one. But were aesthetic positions of this New Critical or pseudo-New Critical kind still a live target in 2000 – or even in the 1990s, when the influence of the New Historicism was at its height? The answer, I think, is no. In this respect we might compare the chronology offered by Frank Lentricchia twenty years earlier, in his widely influential After the New Criticism (1980): “By about 1957, the moribund condition of the New Criticism and the literary needs it left unfulfilled placed us in a critical void” (4). This may be too early a date for some, and there were, of course, residual formations, but in the main the scientisation of the humanities, at an institutional level, and Williams’ critique and others like it, at an intellectual level, had effected the shift away from such forms of criticism long since. Surely by the mid 1990s, the historicist/contextualist paradigm had been the dominant mode for at least a decade. Whose purposes did the reiteration of Williams’ critique of the aesthetic then serve?

In fact, by this stage the “aesthetic” seemed to pose so little threat to historicist scholarship within the discipline that one could even demonstrate one’s inclusiveness by inviting it back in, albeit in an impoverished sense. To see this, let us observe the phrases in which Greenblatt and Gallagher

deploy the term in their introduction to *Practicing New Historicism*. Most are positive: “aesthetic pleasures,” “aesthetic polish,” “[aesthetic] wonder,” “aesthetic pleasure,” “aesthetically gratifying,” “aesthetic appreciation.” An ungenerous reader might observe that in none of these cases does the phrase mean much more than “pretty.”26 These kinds of formulations are available to thinkers of this calibre only because, in the absence of any engagement with a live enemy using the term, the term “aesthetic” can be deployed in an impoverished way. The contrast with Williams’ sophisticated use of the term makes this seem particularly unfortunate.

Williams’ sweeping critique of the project of “criticism” and of the categories of “literature” and the “aesthetic,” which had been directed, at least in its early stages, at a genuine target on the right, was thus turned to rather different ends when it was taken up in the very different environment of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, at a moment when, for political and economic reasons, neoliberal forces within the university were systematically favouring the scholarly over the critical model of literary studies. In this newly professionalised and scientised context, the scholarly model of intellectual inquiry – intellectual work as knowledge-production, now usually conceived of within the discipline as the production of historical knowledge – was simply assumed to be the central task

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26 Readers may well want to check whether these phrases have any richer meanings in their original contexts, which I here provide:

[S]everal of us particularly wanted to hold on to our aesthetic pleasures (4)

[W]e invited in] texts that have been regarded as altogether non-literary, that is, as lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction that characterize belles lettres (9)

The conjunction [between literary and non-literary texts] can produce almost surrealist wonder at the revelation of an unanticipated aesthetic dimension in objects without pretension to the aesthetic (10)

But the new historicist project is not about “demoting” art of discrediting aesthetic pleasure (12)

[O]ur effort is not to aestheticize an entire culture, but to locate inventive energies more deeply interfused within it. To do so is hardly to endorse as aesthetically gratifying every miserable, oppressive structure and every violent action of the past (12)

To wall off for aesthetic appreciation only a tiny portion of the expressive range of a culture is to diminish its individuality and to limit one’s understanding even of that tiny portion… (13)
of literary study. We can see this effect beginning to take hold by observing that, if it was true that
the new historicism felt no need to engage with the long history of aesthetic thought, it was also true
that it felt no need to produce any sustained critique of the project of “criticism.” As we have seen,
both Williams and Eagleton had found it necessary to attack Leavis and the New Critics as critics, by
way of explicit critiques of the project of criticism itself. These critiques had cleared the ground for
the establishment of a newly historicised, and newly scholarly, model of literary study. But in the
rapidly neoliberalising university system of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, this model of
scholarship as the production of knowledge for specialists no longer needed an explicit defence.
The new historicism could establish itself as the dominant force in the discipline without it.

Returning to our broader history, it is then of much interest to try to register the changes which
occur in the critique of the category of the aesthetic in this period, now that the critique of the
project of criticism no longer needs to be made alongside it. For what begins to occur rather often
is that within our discipline aesthetic thinking is critiqued on the grounds that it treats as universal
things that ought to be treated as particular, and thereby leads to inaccurate, because ideological,
knowledge. In the context of the longer history of the discipline this critique seems curiously to
miss its mark, since the critics who had originally maintained a commitment to the aesthetic had
never seen their task primarily as one of knowledge production. The fact that the critique is
nevertheless advanced as if they had is a new and intriguing development, and one that cannot
finally be separated from changes in the institutional conditions under which the disciplinary work is
taking place.
Fredric Jameson

This is an appropriate moment to turn our attention to the dominant figure of the discipline’s more thoroughly politicized wing in this period: Fredric Jameson. Unlike the new historicists, he certainly registered the need to engage with philosophical aesthetics – or the need, at least, to justify refusing the engagement. Yet the pressures of his situation were never such as to require from him a critique of the project of criticism. In this sense he is typical of our period. There is a great deal to be said about the utility and intelligence of Jameson’s particular analyses, the most central of which are his methodological innovations in the field of ideology hermeneutics and his identification of the postmodern as the cultural logic of late capitalism, but I will not be able to do justice to either of these here: our story requires a different emphasis. For while Jameson’s major analyses gain much of their force and interest from having been developed in explicit opposition to much other work within the discipline in our period, his critique of philosophical aesthetics is of most interest to us precisely because it articulates so precisely the set of assumptions on which the discipline in this period was able to proceed. In this sense Jameson’s critique of the aesthetic is no less central to his work for being left implicit. On the contrary, it is central just as one of the most important enabling assumptions, common to all the major contemporary figures within the discipline, that allowed even work as radically iconoclastic as Jameson’s easily to be recognisable as disciplinary.

What follows are perhaps his clearest and most succinct comments on the issue of philosophical aesthetics, made in the context of a lecture on the concept of “World Literature”:

One of the problems that misleads us [in our attempt to understand the idea of “World Literature”] is the philosophical problem of aesthetic value – in my opinion, a false problem. It masks, indeed, a far more thorny philosophical problem – a real one this time – which turns on the opposition between the universal and the particular. For when humanist critics raise the question of ‘value,’ what they really have in mind is ‘universal value,’ and it’s out of the notion of ‘universal value’ that an antiquated and unserviceable notion of ‘World Literature’ has always come. I think this emphasis on universal value is wrong, and
misguided; it is unproductive even within the Western Canon, giving rise to all kinds of false questions and problems, like the following: is Faulkner greater than Halldór Laxness, or vice versa? Is either greater than Tolstoy? Which is more universal, I Promessi Sposi or Red Chamber Dream?

I won’t pursue these silly questions any further... The question of value is itself a historical one, which arises only after the fact, and does not involve classification according to a priori categories.**

Here, casually put, we have the critique of neo-Kantian aesthetics, idealist modes of criticism, and empty humanist pieties that has been one of the most valuable contributions of radical leftist thought to disciplinary literary criticism, side by side with the reflexive turn to the project of analysis, description, and classification that again and again has crippled it. As should be clear by now, this is Williams’ critique – his critique of Leavis and the New Critics, whose repeated restaging of the scene of critical judgment had taught the discipline its obsession with hierarchy and canonicity, and thereby hobbled so much of its mid-century work. It is therefore also in a certain sense Richards’ critique, as well as Eagleton’s critique: this critique of idealist aesthetics that the discipline keeps repeating and repeating, though each time for different purposes. Williams’ version of the critique is the most directly relevant to Jameson’s here. As we have seen, that version had first taken shape in the 1950s and 1960s, and had achieved its most developed form in 1977 with Marxism and Literature. Three decades later – Jameson made these comments in 2008 – it has become reflexive. Notably, both of Williams’ saving clauses have now been dropped. There is little sense here that the aesthetic has been an important element in the bourgeois protest against the turning of all things into commodities; nor, more importantly, is there any sense that for the left the critique of that aesthetic should be considered a clearing operation, on the way to a materialist reconstruction of the term.

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27 From “World Literature,” a lecture given as an acceptance speech for the Holberg International Memorial Prize, University of Bergen, Norway, November 25, 2008. For comments to the same effect in his written work, see, for example, Archaeologies of the Future (New York: Verso, 2005) p18, note 11, where “traditional aesthetics” is said to be “obsolete” on the grounds, really, that its “standard aim” is simply to “identify the specifics of the aesthetics as such.”
Williams’ critique of the aesthetic had been made in the context of a critique of the project of criticism, and had done much to allow its replacement by cultural analysis. To understand the terms in which Jameson is now making the critique, we need to see that for him, at a later time and in another national context, literary study is cultural analysis – there is no longer any live question of literary studies as criticism in the older sense. Jameson proceeds as most of us do today: by assuming that his task as a scholar within the discipline of literary study is cultural analysis, by which is meant the production of accurate knowledge about our cultural history and present cultural situation, together with the development of methods and theories to aid in the production of that knowledge. It is in part a mark of his disciplinary affiliation that he thinks of his role as an intellectual of the left in the same terms: the role of the Marxist theorist of culture is, for him, a diagnostic one, and the actual treatment, if or when it comes, must take the form of political praxis guided by, but not itself a part of, the more strictly academic endeavour. We see this readily enough when we ask ourselves what sense of the term “value” Jameson is employing to make his contrast with the rejected “universal value” of the humanists. His positive claim is that “the question of value is itself a historical one, which arises only after the fact, and does not involve classification according to \textit{a priori} categories.” This is to say that “value,” for Jameson, is diagnostic value; speaking loosely, evidentiary value – value for the purposes of accurate analysis. In other words, value to scholarship in the special sense in which I am using that term here.

Armed with this observation, we can then return to his critique of the old aesthetics to ask: \textit{is} the “problem of aesthetic value” really reducible to the “opposition between the universal and the particular”? What would this mean? To understand this argument, we need to take into account

the fact that, when Jameson looks at the earlier humanist critics’ model of “universal aesthetic value,” he is really thinking of “value” in this new, specifically scholarly sense. Against the background of this new set of disciplinary assumptions, the materialist critique of the aesthetic now runs as follows: “aesthetic value” must mean “universal value,” because that is what it meant to mid-century humanist critics; and in turn “universal value” is unacceptable because it elides historical particularities, and thereby obstructs the production of accurate knowledge about culture. But were the critics who invoked the “aesthetic” as the grounds for their conception of literary study really trying to produce knowledge? The answer is largely no: at least as the position was formulated initially, the goal was not to produce knowledge but to train readers. From this perspective, the “problem of aesthetic value” is not a false problem but a real one, and one that cannot in fact be reduced to an “opposition between universal and particular” since in principle it would be possible to develop an aesthetics, for instrumental purposes, that had no commitment at all to the idea of “universal aesthetic value.” Part of what is being missed here is something Williams knew, in his projection of an eventual reconstruction of aesthetic thinking on a materialist basis. The other part is something that even Williams overlooked: the fact that there exists no necessary connection between the project of aesthetic criticism and idealist universalisms – in fact, as we have seen, Richards launched the former precisely as a critique of the latter. When Jameson rightly excoriates the old humanist line of questioning (“is Faulkner greater than Halldór Laxness, or vice versa? Is either greater than Tolstoy? Which is more universal, I Promessi Sposi or Red Chamber Dream?”) it is easy enough to agree, for he is really excoriating the idealist, mid-century aesthetic criticisms that follow out of Leavis and the New Critics, with their obsession with staging the scene of critical judgment. But it is quite wrong to reject the whole project of aesthetic criticism as if it is reducible, in principle, to exercises in establishing the relative rank of various canonical figures. Disciplinary criticism was founded on the basis of a much better response to these kinds of aesthetic questions.
To see this, we need only recall again Richards’ line: “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds” (327). Could one not see this as another, much more satisfactory answer to the humanist line of questioning rejected by Jameson?

**What About Close Reading?**

Our history, then, has led us to a stage where two of our three lines of thinking are in disarray. The project of criticism, initially left-liberal, was co-opted by conservatism, and then dismissed as irretrievably conservative by the left. As our story stands it has been largely forgotten: as we have seen, even defunct critics are now assessed as if they had been simply bad scholars. In its place, we have a broad consensus built around the idea that the proper project of literary studies is the scholarly one – a consensus so influential as to remain generally unremarked upon.

The aesthetic, too, has been dismissed, if not entirely forgotten. First appearing within the discipline as a radical break with idealism, it was soon re-gathered into the mainstream of idealist thought, and then critiqued as irredeemably idealist by the left. At present the critique of it, where it appears, has become reflexive. Richards’ early version has been effaced; Williams’ two saving clauses – particularly the second, which specified that the critique of the aesthetic was to be considered a clearing operation on the way to an eventual reconstruction of it in materialist terms – have been lost.

What, then, of the third line we are tracking – what of the methodologies that were developed as the practical arm of the project of criticism: “close reading” and “practical criticism”? We have seen that they began, in our first period, as methods for the practical training of the aesthetic faculties of readers. We have seen, too, that the early reversal that took place in the philosophical and political orientation of the project of criticism led to a significant change in these methodologies: where once
they had been intended as tools for helping us to “better order our minds” as opposed to learning to judge works “good” and “bad,” in the second period they instead became theatres in which to stage the scene of critical judgment. What about the third period? If this period really did begin with an epochal shift from literary-studies-as-criticism-and-scholarship to literary-studies-as-scholarship-alone, has this not led to some fundamental methodological change?

I have two answers to this question, both of them, though in different ways, amounting to a “yes.” The first “yes” runs as follows. As we have seen, the new consensus on scholarship has made for a profound change in the orientation of our reading: a change from reading for the purposes of aesthetic education, in whatever meaning of the term aesthetic we might choose, to reading for the purposes of historical and cultural analysis. In the light of this, it interesting to note the different fates of the two terms we have been tracking. If the term “practical criticism” has been generally abandoned outside of the exceptional, not to say odd, enclave of Cambridge, this is presumably at least in part because of the ease with which it can be associated with “criticism” in its now objectionable mid-century sense, as the staging of expert aesthetic judgment. In contrast, the term “close reading,” which is easier to dissociate from “criticism” in the old sense, has been retained. Yet just this severing of the association between “close reading” and “criticism” has led to an impoverishing generalisation of the term, which is now most often used to designate any reading practice that attempts to derive non-trivial meanings from small units of text. This does much to mask the fact that what early and mid-century critics called “close reading” and what we call “close reading” are in many ways rather different practices: broadly speaking, earlier modes of criticism saw “close reading” as a focus on small units of text as a way to put readers in some productive relation to the text as an aesthetic object, whereas for us “close reading” usually means a focus on small units of text in an attempt to reach an understanding of histories and cultures. It may help to make the point if we observe, perhaps too schematically, that for us close reading is a way to focus our
attention on small units of text, whereas for Richards close reading was a way to use small units of text to focus our attention. Of course, having said this one would need to go on to observe also that for Richards, aesthetic education meant the cultivation of much more than mere “attention”: even a basic account would have to include the cultivation of affect, of self-awareness, psychological insight, of capabilities relating to value, and so on. The retaining of the old term to designate a substantially new practice has done much to mask the scale of the shift that inaugurated our period.

Observing this helps us to notice that, of all the interesting moves made in the course of recent debates about “close reading,” one of the most useful has been Jonathan Culler’s call for us to think more deeply about the range of different reading practices that shelter under the name. The periodisation I offer here adds something to this debate by suggesting that, historically, we may want to distinguish between three main types of close reading: the initial form, posited, though never fully developed, as a tool through which to cultivate readers’ aesthetic sensibilities in something approaching a materialist sense; the second form, in which the emphasis passed onto the making of critical judgments about the “final” aesthetic value of the thing being read; and a third form, where the goal has been to use small units of text as diagnostic tools for the analysis of historical and cultural phenomena, in the absence of any aesthetic discourse – or even indeed in implicit

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29 For recent instantiations of the debate, see for instance the papers collected in Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois, Close Reading: The Reader (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), as well as the three papers by Jonathan Culler, Jane Gallop, and John Guillory in the ADE Bulletin 149, 2010. As I observe above, Culler’s paper seems particularly helpful in its attempt to get us thinking about the many things that “closeness” here might mean. He concludes by calling for us to “reflect on the varieties of close reading and even to propose explicit models.” He explains:

We would be better equipped to value and to promote close reading if we had a more finely differentiated sense of its modes and a more vivid account of all the types of nonclose reading with which it contrasts and that give it salience, making it more than something desirable that is taken for granted.

(24)

Culler’s quick, suggestive catalogue of various typologies of reading practices seems a good place to start this kind of project. Generally, his call for us to try to specify different modes of reading within the general category “close reading” seems to me very helpful – and even more his suggestion that this may involve the proposing of “explicit models.” I attempt something akin to this latter task in the final chapter, with mixed success.
opposition to such discourse. In each case careful attention is being paid to small units of text, but that is about as far as the similarity goes.

One could make a different point to similar effect by observing that if “close reading” involves focussing on small units of text at least partly in order to practice paying certain kinds of attention, then we need to go on to ask, in each case, what kind of “focus” is being directed onto the text, and therefore what specific kind of “attention” is being practiced. To note just one fairly obvious

30 Taking this next step would allow us to build on the position outlined by Jane Gallop, for example, in her paper “The Historicization of Literary Study and the Fate of Close Reading,” Profession 2007:181-5, and reiterated in “Close Reading in 2009” ADE Bulletin 149, 2010. I am in sympathy with Gallop’s defense of close reading here, as well as with her sense that the greatest threat to it over the last three decades has been the ongoing historicization of literary studies. In fact, I cheer when she observes, dolefully, that close reading “has been… tarred with the elitist brush applied in our rejection of the New Critics’ canon, and… thrown out with the dirty bathwater of timeless universals.” I also very much like her turn to the question of radical pedagogy in the last section of the paper, and her claim there that it is because of our practice of close reading that the “literature classroom has represented a real alternative to the banking model” of education, in which the teacher simply deposits knowledge in the mind of the student.

Having acknowledged the perceptiveness and power of all of this, we need then to go further to try to re-think many of the elements of Gallop’s position, which seems marked in important ways by the institutional forces she is trying to critique. This is where it helps us to think the method of close reading through its central relationships with the project of criticism and the category of the aesthetic. Gallop shares the foundational third-period assumption that the project of criticism and the category of the aesthetic need to be rejected, but tries nevertheless to defend the method that was their working edge. Yet it is the rejection of the first two that has led to the rejection of the last; one cannot, I think, have “close reading” in any sophisticated form without some version of the others. When Gallop tells us that “my point here is not to argue about the relative merits of historicism and close reading as methods for studying literature; I have no doubt that both produce worthwhile knowledge,” it seems telling that the defense of close reading, even against the “historicisation” of literary studies, needs now to be made in these specifically scholarly, rather than critical, terms (183, my italics). Yet if we accept the production of knowledge as our goal, how are we to have close reading in its capacity as an alternative to the “banking” or knowledge-transfer model of education? Responding that close reading allows the students to produce their own knowledge only gets us half-way there; it strikes me as better to say that close reading is a practice of cultivation rather than knowledge production per se, and proceed on that basis.

Similarly, Gallop’s argument for the value of close reading is in sympathy with the tendencies she is trying to critique in that it, too, rests on a thorough rejection of any kind of aesthetic justification for literary study. Gallop offers us close reading as a defense and a justification for literary studies, but she justifies close reading in turn by appealing to its usefulness as a way of approaching political, historical, and theoretical texts, rather than literary ones. Is it too naïve, given our investigation of Williams’ cunning critique of the category of the literary, to object that surely the justification for literary studies has to rest, at some stage, on the concept of literature? In saying this I do not mean to defend the category of the literary in its traditional form. Rather I am simply observing, at a more basic level, that we need to be able to justify our object of study, not just our method of studying it, or else even among those who are convinced of the value of close reading, the correct institutional response would, and surely will, be to say that the students in Law, Political Science, Philosophy, and so forth should simply be taught to read more closely in their own disciplines. One can imagine the kind of ideological reading practices that will result. Responding to this kind of argument means going back to ask what we really mean by “close reading” beyond paying attention to small units of any kind of text. Our questions are then of the kind: what ranges of capabilities and sensitivities is the reading practice being used to cultivate? What kinds of texts are most suited to cultivating those ranges? Again, putting the issue naïvely for the moment, my view here is that the method of close reading cannot serve as a justification for the disciplines of literary study until we are able to show that there is something about literary texts that make them especially rewarding training-grounds for the
example, the New Critical version of the practice sought to train readers to pay a particular kind of attention to the text as a unified whole in a way that our contemporary historicist/contextualist versions usually do not; the latter sometimes claim to be training us to pay attention to the ideological content of texts in a way that the New Critical practice did not; and so on. One could easily multiply these distinctions. Again, the retaining of a single term for these very different practices masks not only the variety of methods potentially on offer, but also the real historical changes that have taken place in the discipline in our period, chief among them the shift from a model of literary study that includes both literary scholarship and literary criticism to a model that tends to limit literary study to literary scholarship alone.

So yes, the scholarly turn that inaugurated the current period of literary studies has led to a rather fundamental reorientation of our methodology: “close reading” is now a scholarly practice, rather than a critical one. That much for my first “yes”; now for my second. For it might be noted, and fairly, that this account, in which “close reading” becomes quite a new thing in practice, but is nevertheless proudly retained in principle, rather troubles the symmetry of my model of the discipline’s history. If the shift to scholarship in this period has really been as important as I claim, then should not “close reading” have gone the way of “practical criticism,” “criticism,” and the “aesthetic”? The story of the demise of criticism and the aesthetic in our period should lead us to expect that the method that was originally developed as their working edge would also come under critique from the left on the grounds that it is irredeemably compromised by its purported origin in New Criticism, and that this should in turn lead to calls for its rejection and replacement by more properly scholarly methods. Why has this not happened? In fact it is happening right now, though kinds of aptitudes we are claiming to train. For this, a notion of the aesthetic is indispensable, for in fact literary and other aesthetic texts are particularly rich training-grounds for all sorts of capabilities and sensitivities: aesthetic capabilities, in the materialist and instrumental sense of aesthetic I try to develop in the later chapters.
somewhat belatedly. For of course Franco Moretti, one of the most interesting and iconoclastic of contemporary literary scholars, has famously been making an argument of just this kind.

Franco Moretti

Moretti’s work, like Jameson’s, has led to more specific innovations than can easily be named. For present purposes, it is enough to note that Moretti’s most famous and challenging innovation has been a methodological one: his critique of “close reading” in favor of what he has called “distant reading.” In the context of the longer history of the discipline, it is of some interest that this critique and rejection of “close reading” has been made in the name of a more general commitment to reforming the discipline by making it a more objective, quantitative, and therefore properly “scientific” one.

Moretti first made his claim for “distant reading” in the paper “Conjectures on World Literature,” which first appeared in 2000 in the New Left Review. There, his argument was that the only way literary studies would be able to cope with the massive increase in jurisdiction, as it were, required by its new commitment to the study of “World Literature” would be to eschew close reading in favor of “distant reading.” Moretti starts by posing the problem as follows:

What does it mean, studying world literature? How do we do it? I work on West European narrative between 1790 and 1930, and I already feel like a charlatan outside of Britain or France. World literature? Many people have read more and better than I have, of course, but still, we are talking of hundreds of languages and literatures here. Reading ‘more’ seems hardly to be the solution. Especially because we’ve just started rediscovering what Margaret Cohen calls the ‘great unread’: I work on West European narrative, etc., etc. . . . not really, I work on its canonical fraction, which is not even one per cent of published literature. And again, some people have read more, but the point is that there are thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand – no-one really

31 Moretti subsequently developed this methodological argument in a series of further papers, which have now been conveniently collected in a single volume entitled Distant Reading (London: Verso, 2013). I will cite from this edition.
knows, no-one has read them, no one ever will. And then there are French novels, Chinese, Argentinian, American . . . Reading ‘more’ is always a good thing, but not the solution.

(45-46)

The problem is that there are too many texts to read, and Moretti’s bold solution is to give up reading and do something else instead. Noting this helps us to see from the outset that the term “distant reading,” when it later appears, will prove to be something of a misnomer, since the method it describes is not really reading at all: rather, it is a method that, when it appears elsewhere as the uncontroversial stock-in-trade of many scientific or social-scientific disciplines, is unproblematically labeled things like “data analysis,” “data mining” (if using specialized search engines), or similar. But then, if one can say this politely, when we call it by its ordinary name it starts to sound a bit less novel, and a bit less like what many of us feel, if vaguely, that we came to the humanities to do. Once we have noticed this, it becomes interesting to ask why exactly the term “distant reading” has been chosen.

In his new preface to this essay in the Distant Reading volume, Moretti claims (or rather, claims without claiming, as it were) that the term arose as an accident or a joke:

That fatal formula had been a late addition to the paper, where it was initially specified, in an allusion to the basic procedure of quantitative history, by the words ‘serial reading’. Then, somehow, ‘serial’ disappeared, and ‘distant’ remained. Partly, it was meant as a joke; a moment of relief in a rather relentless argument. But no one seems to have taken it as a joke, and they were probably right.

(44)

The phrase arose “somehow,” he tells us. To the extent that he is willing to speculate about the intentions of its author, he tells us that it was partly meant as a joke, though no-one seems to have taken it as such. “They were probably right,” Moretti concedes, and yet one cannot help but feel that a suspicion has been raised that certain of Moretti’s critics rather lack a sense of humour. I trust that this unfortunate series of misunderstandings has now come to an end, and that Moretti will no
longer to have cause to complain of our dourness. Certainly this new protestation of innocence is a little difficult to take seriously, in a fresh volume not entitled, for example, “Quantitative Literary Studies” or “Franco Moretti: Collected Essays on Method,” but, inevitably, “Distant Reading.”

Returning to the original essay, we find that the offending phrase is repeated many times, and at key moments, and indeed that it is provocative in just that mode characteristic of Moretti when he makes arguments that are seriously intended. The author’s attempts to deflect the question then give it a new urgency: what is at stake in the coining of this phrase “distant reading”? Why decide on it, highlight it, and then keep using it again and again? Why has the phrase caught on so readily? Whose interests does it serve?

The phrase seems to be offered as a kind of antonym to “close reading,” but as Jonathan Culler has noted the two terms are not opposites at all, because they do not refer to the same order of thing: the real opposition here is that between data analysis and reading per se. Our question then becomes: what is gained by framing an argument against reading-in-general as an argument against “close reading” in particular? To find out, let us look closely at Moretti’s famous critique of “close reading”:

[T]he trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. This may have become an unconscious and invisible premise by now, but is an iron one nonetheless: you invest so much in individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise, it doesn’t make sense. And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course world literature will do so – it would be absurd if it didn’t) close reading will not do it. It’s not designed to do it, it’s designed to do the opposite. At bottom, it’s a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously – whereas what we really need is a little pact with the Devil; we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge.

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This phrase “close reading (in all its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction)” certainly sums up the received view of the history of the method. By this stage in our history it should be simple enough to observe that this received view is quite misleading, since it both misdiagnoses the origin and unduly limits the range of the practice. As we have seen, the method was developed well before the New Critics, for ends that were in important ways opposed to those later pursued by them; and the method continues to be used even today, albeit in a radically different form, by historicist scholars who have little or no relation to either “new criticism” or “deconstruction.” So we need to think rather more carefully than this about what “close reading” has been and could be.

But by now all this should be clear enough. What matters more here is that, though Moretti’s emphasis rests squarely on the methodological insufficiencies of close reading, his argument seems in many respects to be a residual version of what was originally a political one. Moretti tells us, of close reading, that “[a]t bottom, it’s a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously – whereas what we really need is a little pact with the Devil.” Once again what we are really talking about here is the New Criticism, and much of the force of the argument derives from our presumed opposition to that old “theological exercise” – an opposition which, as we have seen, has always had a political rather than strictly methodological cast. Here we can observe that much of the persuasiveness of Moretti’s argument derives from our residual sense that positions of a New Critical kind are still somehow a potential political threat to the discipline, and are thus still worth reacting against. This is a big part of what is gained by framing a critique of reading-in-general as a critique of “close reading” in particular: it gives what is really a turn to a scientific model of scholarship something of aleftist political valence, as a critique of the old idealisms.33 If the

33 But perhaps we harbour doubts. In what sense are these seemingly methodological arguments “really” political ones? As we have seen, the main assumptions that ground the current scholarly model of literary studies were, in their original
argument for data analysis is an argument against close reading, and close reading is, “at bottom,” New Critical and hence idealist, then data analysis comes to seem the proper materialist method. This kind of move should make us uncomfortable, given the fact that the New Criticism is long dead as a significant force in literary studies, and the further fact that the particular economic, political, and cultural situation that allowed it to function as a significant form of conservatism has long been replaced by a situation of a very different, and in many ways, quite opposite, kind.

Here we can start to see how much of Moretti’s position is actually laid out for us, not by Moretti, but by the system of assumptions that gained ground with the scholarly turn of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and is now the discipline’s paradigmatic mode. For surely it is the discipline’s earlier rejection of criticism that enables Moretti to assume that his task is to use literary texts as a route to knowledge about larger social and historical forces, and surely it is the discipline’s earlier rejection of the aesthetic that enables Moretti to assume that his task is to deal, not just with the “canonical fraction,” but with the whole of the “great unread.” Another way to see this is to ask: what account of the project and value of literary study is being assumed by thinkers who can write, or read, the following sentences, without a profound sense of disjunction? Close reading, Moretti tells us, is insufficient as a methodology because:

it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. This may have become an unconscious and invisible premise by now, but is an iron one nonetheless: you invest so much in

forms, political arguments from the left. One can still see the residue of these political arguments in Moretti’s rejection of close reading as “theological.” One can see it, too, in his use of Margaret Cohen’s phrase the “great unread,” which seems to imply that the drawing of aesthetic distinctions automatically involves us in the drawing of class distinctions, and in an elitist way. Both of these were, in their day, good political arguments: the critique of idealist criticism and idealist aesthetics, respectively. It is, I think, characteristic of the contemporary scene in literary studies that these political arguments appear here only, but precisely, in residual form. It is worth asking, then, what has happened to these arguments, and others of this kind; why they are no longer being made in explicit terms, but instead must be left to remain as implications beneath the surface of a debate that seems to concern itself with methodology in some more politically neutral sense; and whether, were they to become explicit, they would still seem politically desirable to us in our very different situation today.

34 Here it is worth asking again what happens to this kind of argument when we realize that close reading was in fact invented by secular – in Empson’s case, radically atheist – left-liberals, precisely as a critique of “theological” idealisms of a New Critical kind.
individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise it doesn’t make sense.

(48; emphasis in original)

In critique of this, would it not now be undisciplinary, as it were, to bring up the example of – reading? Even “having a favorite book”? If we are prepared to think in these kinds of non-professionalised terms for a moment, Moretti’s claim here starts to seem rather remarkable, for it is obvious enough that people invest a great deal in individual texts all the time, without feeling it at all necessary to claim that those texts are the only ones that “really matter.” To say otherwise is to fail to imagine that people may come to literature for reasons other than mastery of the entire literary field. Or rather, to put it more precisely, in saying otherwise here Moretti is proceeding on the basis of an “unconscious and invisible premise” of his own: that the only way in which literature can “matter” for disciplinary purposes is as a total system, which in turn matters as a diagnostic instrument for the analysis of the total system of historical and cultural forces. By this stage in the discipline’s history, any other approach just “doesn’t make sense.”

This is the kind of disciplinary logic that Moretti’s work so brilliantly extends. Specifically, it is the logic of Williams’ initial critique of “criticism” and the “aesthetic,” and Moretti extends it by pointing out to us, in effect, that once we have jettisoned both of these on the grounds that they are irredeemably Kantian, idealist, and New Critical, we have little reason to hang on to close reading – or even reading per se – at all. He sees, in a way that many others have not, that criticism, the aesthetic, and close reading must be thought through – and thus must be defended or critiqued – together. The whole project of “quantitative literary studies” is really founded on this insight: that the three lines of thinking we have been tracing cannot be untangled; and that severing the first two commits us to severing the third. When we read his claim that the study of World Literature will “of course” look beyond the canon, because “it would be absurd if it didn’t!” we must, I think, detect
the exasperation of a vibrant thinker who has wholeheartedly accepted the scholarly ideal of literary
study as a discipline of knowledge production, ideally of a “scientific” kind, but who nevertheless
continues to find himself in a discipline which has not yet realized what a truly thoroughgoing
commitment to that ideal would entail. It is, if you like, the problem of the little boy in the story of
the Emperor’s New Clothes: Moretti is the only one who has been willing to point out the
“absurdity” of our situation, in which we justify literary study by appealing to standards of
 scholarship – the production of knowledge, ideally of a scientific kind, about history and culture –
but continue to use tools and concepts – close reading, as well as, residually, the aesthetic distinction
between the canonical and the non-canonical – that were originally built for the very different task
of criticism.

Thus if Moretti’s argument against close reading has seemed controversial, it is only because we are
not used to seeing anyone so enthusiastically follow to its natural conclusion the central logic that
has dictated so much of the last three decades of literary study: the rejection of the project of
criticism – aesthetic education for something resembling, in aspiration if not in fact, a general
audience – and the embrace of the project of scholarship – the production of cultural and historical
knowledge for an audience of specialists. In fact one might be tempted to say that the iconoclasm
of Moretti’s argument lies precisely in the lack of hesitation with which he commits himself to the
current orthodoxy. One cannot but admire this commitment to embracing the full consequences of
a position, this refusal to be held back by disciplinary inertia, which is surely here the mark of a
genuine thinker at work. Yet, having acknowledged this, we need then to go on to ask whether
something rather crucial has not been missed – whether, in fact, the position being committed to is
not one designed to respond to a situation very different from our own.
Moretti’s seminal work *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005) takes as its epigraph the following lines from Robert Musil:

> A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?

(1)

Moretti’s answer is “quantitative literary history,” and it is an answer that is very much in line with the central logic of literary studies in our period.35 But it is possible to answer Musil’s question rather differently. For instance, we could proceed from our attempt to document the history of subjectivity rigorously and scientifically, and into a more active attempt to develop rigorous and scientific methods for the cultivation of subjectivities. To establish such a project within literary studies, we would need a philosophical account of how subjectivities come to be cultivated, and a rigorous methodology of reading. But then here we are with I.A. Richards, back at the start of our story.

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Chapter Three:
Useful Works, Useful Work - Aesthetics, Education, Criticism

Nothing can be a work of art which is not useful.

What is [art] but the expression of man’s pleasure in successful labour?

- William Morris

Introduction
The goal of the present chapter is to mark out some of the ground on which a renewed project of criticism might come to be built. This chapter has two parts. Since each part has its own substantial introduction, I will be brief here. In “Part One: Towards a Materialist Aesthetics,” I attempt to sketch the first elements of a philosophical basis for criticism by rethinking the category of the aesthetic along materialist lines. In “Part Two: Against ‘Liberal’ Education,” I critique the institutional site of criticism in order to make way for a new conceptualization of that site. In doing so, I am attempting to address the three key terms of the title of the dissertation: Criticism, Aesthetics, and Education.

Part One: Towards a Materialist Aesthetics

Introduction

No doubt there are many ways to go about trying to construct a materialist account of the aesthetic. Three spring readily to mind. One could go directly to the idealist tradition that springs out of Baumgarten, Kant, and Schiller and argue the matter out from there, following and critiquing mainstream aesthetics as it develops, noting the places at which one would want to part ways with it, and proposing alternatives. One might think of this as starting from the idealist foundation of aesthetics and trying to work towards a materialism from there. Or one could start at the other end of the debate, as it were, and turn instead to the para-disciplinary tradition of historical materialism, trying to show how already in Marx and Engels, and then still more evidently in, for instance, Lenin, Brecht, and Gramsci, the “philosophy of praxis” (in Gramsci’s terms) is itself, and necessarily, a philosophy of aesthetic praxis, though this has never sufficiently been acknowledged; and thus that certain crucial areas of leftist thinking have always implicitly required, without often being able to acknowledge or provide explicitly, a practice of aesthetic education, in a specifically materialist sense of the phrase. In the process, one would try to show how even the best thinkers on aesthetics in the historical materialist tradition (I am thinking here in particular of Lukács, Adorno, and Jameson) have tended to respond to this call by treating the category of the aesthetic merely as a diagnostic tool for historical and political analysis, when in fact what has been needed is a conceptualisation of the aesthetic as a tool for political praxis – a tool for active intervention in culture, rather than simply for making diagnoses about the state of culture. One would then track this impasse through the most influential forms of leftist thought that have followed, showing the ways in which the missing term in the theory has had to have been made up for at the level of practice in specific forms of organizing tactics, consciousness raising methods, and so on. This would be the opposite of the first method in the sense that, instead of starting with idealist aesthetics and trying to move it
out towards materialism, one would be starting instead with a certain carefully thought materialist tradition, and then trying to demonstrate the necessity to it of a project of aesthetic praxis.

In trying to choose between these first two approaches we encounter once again the problem of disciplinarity, and the associated problem of the professionalization of thought. Neither would fit within our discipline. For if one were to choose the former, the subsequent work of thought would of course invite evaluation by the standards of a discipline and profession – philosophy – the protocols of which a literary thinker can neither accept nor take the time to dispute; and if one were to choose the latter, the subsequent thinking would be marked as marginal, at best, to any presently existing discipline or profession. So the decision to be made here is not without its stakes: intellectual, institutional, and personal.

Happily, however, there is a third option, and one that belongs centrally within our own discipline – though its disciplinarity is perhaps not so easily recognized. It is an approach that arises out of the history I tried to trace in chapters one and two: the history of the changes in our disciplinary norms, as those changes have related to the changing conditions of intellectual labor. In those chapters, I sought to show that the critical side of our discipline was at its inception already something like a materialist intervention in idealist aesthetics, in that Richards first developed the discipline’s characteristics methodologies of “close reading” and “practical criticism” on the basis of a practical insistence on the instrumentality of the aesthetic with respect to the larger field of culture. In a sense, then, those chapters were an attempt to show that through its history the discipline’s central strands of thinking have already represented an encounter, even a confluence, between philosophical aesthetics on the one hand and a certain kind of materialism – even, if you are willing to come with me here, a “historical” materialism – on the other. As we have seen, the discipline at present has largely rejected the category of the aesthetic, and yet if we are in search of a materialist account of
the aesthetic, the history we have just reviewed should lead us to the rather odd thought that the best place to start looking may be our own existing disciplinary practices.

And in fact when one does think to look, one finds that the discipline’s practice has often known well what its theory of itself has repeatedly failed to recognize. It is then a matter of discovering what kind of materialist aesthetics it is that has been implied in our best critical practices, despite our theories to the contrary, trying first to make that version of the aesthetic explicit, second to elaborate it conceptually, and last to use it as a guide or marker to help us further refine our practice. Thus in this first part of the chapter my method will be to unearth the implicitly materialist account of the aesthetic on which our best practices have been based, and to separate it out from both the idealist modes of aesthetic thinking and the wholesale rejection of aesthetics that have concealed it. If this move shows us something about what lies at the foundation of the discipline, then that is welcome but also secondary: the primary goal is to refine our present practice by clarifying its ends. Throughout, our key question will be: would a materialist aesthetics need to maintain the idealist emphasis on aesthetic autonomy by defining it, in the traditional way, against the moral, the social, the political, the historical, and the practical? If not, how can we conceptualize it in other terms?
Raymond Williams and the Materialist Aesthetic

Let us start in what might seem the most challenging place for such a project: in the work of Raymond Williams, the great enemy of the “aesthetic” and of “criticism” within the discipline. Recall that in the argument so far we have seen Williams in two rather different lights. We first saw Williams presenting what was perhaps the most persuasive and influential version of the argument for the turn to scholarship: the argument, in effect, that the discipline now relies upon when it assumes that the criticism, and the associated category of the aesthetic, are to be rejected on what are ultimately political grounds. Secondly, though, we saw Williams presenting some rather important qualifications to this position – qualifications that have since been overlooked. For, rather than rejecting the category of the aesthetic entirely, as is usually assumed, Williams in fact posited his critique of idealist aesthetics as a clearing operation, a preliminary movement designed to sweep away the conservative forces of Leavis-ism, New Criticism, and cognate universalizing movements in mid-century humanism, on the way to a materialist reconstruction of the term. Now I would like see the figure of Williams in yet a third light, as someone who, without knowing it, had already begun the reconstruction that he called for. I will therefore seek to show that though Williams was unable or unwilling explicitly to develop a materialist account of the aesthetic at a theoretical level, he nevertheless offers us the first elements of one in some of the most powerful moments of his actual critical practice. What Williams cannot articulate as theory, his practice already knows.

My case study here will be an important passage in one of Williams’ most influential works, *The Country and the City* (1973). I am going to have rather a lot to say about this passage, and our discussion of it will necessarily move off into other territory before returning, so it is worth fixing it in the mind now. Williams has been writing at length about British “country-house poems” in their

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relationship to ongoing historical processes of enclosure and exploitation. Now, in one of book’s most powerful moments, he turns for the first time to speak about the “country houses” themselves:

It is fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses: the extended manors, the neo-classical mansions, that lie so close in rural Britain. People still pass from village to village, guidebook in hand, to see the next and yet the next example, to look at the stones and the furniture. But stand at any point and look at that land. Think it through as labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that many houses, on that scale. See by contrast what any ancient isolated farm, in uncounted generations of labour, has managed to become, by the efforts of any single real family, however prolonged. Then turn and look back at what these other “families”, these systematic owners, have accumulated and arrogantly declared. It isn’t only that you know, looking at the land and then at the house, how much robbery and fraud there must have been, for so long, to produce that degree of disparity, that barbarous disproportion of scale. The working farms and cottages are so small beside them: what men really realise, by their own efforts or by such portion as is left to them, in the ordinary scale of human achievement. What these “great” houses do is to break that scale, by an act of will corresponding to their real and systematic exploitation of others.

(105-6)

This is a mode of feeling that few of us would accuse of being ahistorical or depoliticized, whether or not we agree with Williams’ particular reading of the historical and political forces at work.³ What I would like us then to ask is whether it might be available to us to describe Williams’ movement of feeling and thought here, not just as sensitive to matters historical and political, but also to matters aesthetic – and what would be at stake if we did so. For it is clear enough that Williams here is writing not just about ongoing processes of political domination and economic exploitation, but also about how these matters strike the senses, as it were: the attractions and repulsions of them as they appear. It thus seems possible to say that the aesthetic is at issue, at least in some preliminary sense of the term. But can we be more precise? What would be at stake if we were willing to say that Williams’ thought here is being carried out by means of the idea of the aesthetic in some more carefully developed sense?

³ Regarding the latter, one cannot help but note that “people” rather than “men” would have been better here.
One could of course answer these questions by saying that Williams here is describing a tension between, on the one hand, an aesthetic response (an appreciation of the formal beauty of the country houses) and, on the other, a historical and political response (an appreciation of the political history of exploitation that produced them). If an answer of this kind comes easily enough, then this is because it is just this distinction between aesthetic responses and moral, social and political responses that underpins so much of the received body of idealist aesthetic thinking, from Kant onwards. As it happens, others have offered just this answer: one of Williams’ interviewers in Politics and Letters (1981) cites this passage, together with another like it, in the course of a broader discussion of the possibility of developing a “materialist aesthetic theory,” and then suggests the passages show that:

> The category of the aesthetic has to be retained as something separate from what would otherwise be a moral, social, or political response to a work, and that there may even be a tension between them – which is where the real rub occurs[.]

This is the aesthetic in just the sense that Williams wanted to reject it in Marxism and Literature (1977), though without yet being able to put anything in its place. Williams’ interviewer is thus asking him to admit the failure, or at least the limit, of the whole ground-clearing operation he undertook in that book: asking him to recognize that the aesthetic in the idealist sense cannot be gotten rid of after all. Putting it differently, we might say that the interviewer is encouraging Williams to recognize that once the ground has been cleared of Leavis-ism, New Criticism, and other similar modes of literary study, the new, more materialist aesthetics that one might hope to construct in their place will necessarily have at least this in common with the mainstream idealist aesthetics it is replacing: the aesthetic realm will still have be considered autonomous with respect to whatever realm or realms we take to govern the moral, the social, and the political.

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5 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1977)
Williams’ response to his interviewer is then of some interest. I will give it here in full, and then spend some time tracking through it more carefully piece by piece, before returning to our initial passage from the *Country and the City*. Williams’ response:

> The tension is certainly where the difficulty occurs. I don’t at all want to deny the experiences you call aesthetic. It is a major human gain to attend with complete precision, often without any other consideration, to the way someone has shaped a stone or uttered a musical note. To deny that would be to cancel so much of human culture that it would be comical. But I think we need a much more specific analysis of the situations, the occasions, the signals which release that response, that kind of attention. I am absolutely unwilling to concede to any predetermined class of objects an unworked priority or to take all the signals as equally valid. We need a very complex typology of occasions and cues, which I think is quite practicable, although it will inevitably be partial. One would then have to look at the situations and occasions in which those signals and cues conflict with other systems which it is really very important not to cede. It is crucial that we resist the categorical predetermination of them as a reserved area, and the extreme training against taking these experiences back out and putting them in relation to other value systems. No doubt in various judgments one will be caught out saying – I really do find this working on me, although I hate the fact that it does so. By really exploring that contradiction, I may find out something about myself and others. That’s probably as far as I can tell.

(348-9)

This is the complex and ambiguous response of someone who is speaking off the cuff, in answer to a highly informed question, and who has not yet quite clarified his thoughts. We will therefore find that it is less interesting to try to resolve Williams’ response here into a single coherent proposition, and more interesting to try to track the movement of his thought as he proceeds. We will find that Williams’ thought process here rehearses in miniature the general shape of the discipline’s past...
thinking in aesthetics as we saw it outlined in the previous chapters. But then Williams also moves beyond that history, towards a newly materialist model of the aesthetic, as we shall see.

Williams begins his response by seeming to agree with his interviewer:

> The tension is certainly where the difficulty occurs. I don’t at all want to deny the experiences you call aesthetic. It is a major human gain to attend with complete precision, often without any other consideration, to the way someone has shaped a stone or uttered a musical note. To deny that would be to cancel so much of human culture that it would be comical.

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An aesthetic “without any other consideration,” in “tension” with other kinds of considerations: at this point, it looks as if Williams has conceded the whole of his strongly posed argument against the aesthetic in Marxism and Literature. Now the aesthetic must be retained in such a way that aesthetic responses, on the one hand, and moral, social, and political responses on the other are to be considered separately from one another. But in fact Williams does not feel comfortable resting here – there is still, he feels, something unsatisfactory about this view of the aesthetic, and so he wants to keep thinking. Accordingly, he introduces a potential complication:

> But I think we need a much more specific analysis of the situations, the occasions, the signals which release that response, that kind of attention. I am absolutely unwilling to concede to any predetermined class of objects an unworked priority or to take all the signals as equally valid. We need a very complex typology of occasions and cues, which I think is quite practicable, although it will inevitably be partial.

(348)

If you will allow me to elaborate on it a little, the thought being passed through here is as follows: even if one concedes that the aesthetic has to be retained as a category distinct from the moral, the social, and the political, then one cannot simply leap, as thinkers in aesthetics so often do, to the assumption that these newly purified categories are going be of any immediate use to us in critical or scholarly practice. One may have to face the fact that these categories are so rarified that no actual
examples of them can be found. If this turns out to be the case, then one would need to be very careful to avoid the trap of acting as if certain “predetermined class[es] of objects” (for instance, works of art) or certain predetermined classes of real experiences (for instance, those traditionally thought of as “aesthetic” experiences) were somehow exemplars or representatives of any of these pure categories. One would need instead to develop sophisticated methods (“a very complex typology of occasions and cues”) for distinguishing these “pure” strands from one another as they exist in all the complexity of the field: methods for separating them out from the tangled state which is the only way they seem to exist in real life.

Once we have parsed William’s thought here, I hope it starts to become apparent that in his attempt to muster a defense of his sweeping rejection of the whole tradition of idealist aesthetics, Williams is thinking, not just of an argument, but of a figure: specifically, he is thinking of I.A. Richards. This should not be too surprising, given the history we traced in the first two chapters. As we have seen, Williams’ own rejection of the aesthetic in Marxism and Literature had repeated many of Richards’ moves in Principles of Literary Criticism, though obviously with rather different results. And in fact, if we turn back for a moment to read Williams’ response to the question immediately preceding this one, our sense that he is thinking specifically of Richards here is confirmed:

So far as the country houses are concerned, one would have to be quite sure that one is able, in a way that Richards showed to be very difficult with sounds in poetry, to isolate purely physical features of the building – qualities of proportion, character of the stone, geographical position – from not just its own original intention and function, but also what your eyes are quite aware of when you’re looking at it: the social impulses which people bring to saying that this is a beautiful building. I really do feel confident in replying, most of them are not beautiful houses – you’re looking at them as beautiful houses as a way of being deferential to them as mansions.

(347-8; emphasis in original)

This is where the train of thought begins: the thought being that if we are going to retain the aesthetic as something distinct from the moral, social, and political, then we will at least need to
confront the problem of sorting these things out from one another in practice, and this problem is likely to prove a very considerable one – much more considerable than is usually assumed. The figure of Richards is the placeholder for this thought in Williams’ memory. Williams is by no means remembering Richards in his entirety, whatever that would mean; but he is nevertheless calling Richards to mind quite accurately as someone who raised certain practical problems for the idealist view of the aesthetic that the interviewer has just proposed. If I might be allowed to say so, Williams thus has at his disposal, though necessarily somewhat vaguely, much the reading of Richards I tried to outline in the first two chapters.

The line of thinking we explored in those chapters can now be pressed into service to do some theoretical, rather than simply historical, work. Here, Williams is certainly right to note that Richards had shown it was “very difficult” to distinguish the “purely physical” features of poetry from the “social impulses” one brings to it. Yet this phrase “very difficult” threatens to allow us to evade the real challenge of this line of thinking. As we saw in chapter one, Richards, further back down the line, had rather emphatically proclaimed that there was no such thing as a purely aesthetic response, if by that we mean a response purified of willing, inquiring, and desiring. Nor was he thinking just of “poetry,” as Williams implies (“in a way that Richards showed to be very difficult with sounds in poetry”) – rather, Richards’ term, like Williams’, was “experience,” intended in a very broad sense. If we take seriously Richards’ thought about the inextricability of so-called “aesthetic” experiences from the vast range of experiences of everyday, practical kinds, then we might also begin to harbor misgivings about any attempt to draw a hard distinction between the “physical,” “material,” or “formal” elements of experiences and the “social impulses” we bring to them – moral and political impulses being critical examples. This is not to say that the distinction might not be useful heuristically at certain levels; it is just to say that if we begin to think in this way, then it seems
likely that we will find the distinction misleading at many stages of any kind of sophisticated practice, as well as in the kind of theory that tries to connect up with that practice.

It is evident enough that nowhere in his published work does Williams articulate just this view. Yet at this moment in the interview he seems to be standing right on the threshold of it. For is he not in fact formulating something rather like this view when he describes the moral, social, and political signals that one responds to when engaging with the country houses – “the social impulses that bring people to saying that this is a beautiful building” – via the formulation: “what your eyes are quite aware of when you’re looking at it”? In this kind of formulation, which really does seem to be drawing our attention to something worth noticing, the “social impulses” are right there in the senses. If we accept this proposal, then the task of separating out the “social impulses” from the physical, material, or formal features of the aesthetic experience becomes, at the least, very difficult indeed. If we take them seriously, formulations of this kind might lead us to concur with Richards that such a task would be, not just very difficult in practice, but impossible in principle.

We may have our doubts. If this is right, and Williams at this moment really is heading in the direction of what we might call a Richardsian insight into the materiality and instrumentality of the aesthetic, why does he not follow the line of thinking through? The answer becomes clear if we return to tracking the movement of his thought during the interview. He has just remembered Richards. Watch the next thought follow:

… We need a very complex typology of occasions and cues, which I think is quite practicable, although it will inevitably be partial. One would then have to look at the situations and occasions in which those signals and cues conflict with other systems which it is really very important not to cede. It is crucial that we resist the categorical predetermination of them as a reserved area, and the extreme training against taking these experiences back out and putting them in relation to other value systems.
The thought here is that if we are going to retain the category of the aesthetic, then we will need to be very sure that this does not prevent us from relating our systems of aesthetic value to “other [value] systems which it is really very important not to cede”: for Williams here, most pressingly, systems of moral, social and political value. Williams fears that once one accepts the category of the aesthetic, one may well be heading down the road to depoliticisation. What is Williams thinking of? Once again, he is thinking not just of an argument but of a figure: this time, it is the figure of Leavis, remembered as a placeholder for the “extreme training” in practical criticism that one might have acquired around Cambridge throughout many parts of the mid-century. As we saw in chapter two, Williams’ thinking had to a large extent been formed by this kind of training, but he had also come to consider it chiefly as an ideological training, “extreme” in the sense that it was designed to develop rich aesthetic responses only at the cost of confining them to a “reserved area,” defined precisely by its separation from “other value systems” of a more political timbre – the category of the aesthetic, in its idealist sense, being the main philosophical tool by which this confinement was secured.

What we are seeing here is thus a rapid rehearsal in Williams’ mind of the history I tried to outline in chapters one and two. First we have the problem of an idealist aesthetics of the kind offered by the mainstream Kantian tradition; second, Richards’ proposed solution, which rejects the Kantian claim and instead tries to put the aesthetic back into direct contact with the material concerns of life; third the threat of that solution being co-opted and depoliticized by Leavis and cognate thinkers; and last Williams’ own rejection of aesthetic thinking in its entirety, seen now, because of Leavis and others, as depoliticizing in essence. Summing it up rather schematically, we might say that Williams is prevented by the memory of Leavis from recovering the Richards he needs to. This is why Williams does not proceed to articulate a materialist theory of the aesthetic: the incipiently materialist aesthetics that lie at the root of the discipline are veiled by the remembered threat of Leavis-ism.
Yet Williams is not finished. As we also observed in chapter two, of all the thinkers within literary studies who rejected the aesthetic in this way, Williams was virtually unique in his ability also to see the need for an eventual counter-move, and he therefore framed his rejection of the aesthetic as a clearing operation, to be followed in time by a reconstruction of it in materialist terms. If we follow the movement of his thought in this interview to its conclusion, we see him making the same move again. For once again it turns out that Williams is not, after all, wholly content to reject the aesthetic as depoliticizing, though he still thinks the critique of Leavis is important; rather he wants to retain both his rejection of an idealist aesthetics of the kind the interviewer is proposing and his sense that an aesthetics of a rather different kind might be possible, and even necessary. He therefore concludes his response as follows:

… the extreme training against taking these experiences back out and putting them in relation to other value systems. No doubt in various judgments one will be caught out saying – I really do find this working on me, although I hate the fact that it does so. By really exploring that contradiction, I may find out something about myself and others. That’s probably as far as I can tell.

(349)

Despite everything, Williams still thinks there is something of value to be had in the aesthetic – “By really exploring that contradiction, I may find out something about myself and others.” On the whole, this might be thought something of a lame conclusion: a retreat into broad and general terms, petering out with “that’s probably as far as I can tell.” I would prefer to say that it is an honest and even a generous conclusion, for he is keeping open the possibility of some other thinking yet to come. Williams feels that the aesthetic needs to be thought through more carefully, neither rejected outright nor accepted in the idealist terms that his interviewer has offered him, but he does not know how to begin that thinking-through. As such, he makes a gesture towards the future, inviting it to think a little further than he has been able – a gesture towards, in a loose sense, us. Today,
indeed, the threats of Leavis, on the one side of the Atlantic, and of the New Criticism, on the other, are long since past, and the real threat to a politically effective form of literary study comes not from idealist aesthetics but from the politically inert forms of professionalized knowledge-production that surround us. Are we now in a position to think our way past this impasse – to open up the siding, as it were, and run forward onto a new track?

“By really exploring that contradiction, I may be able to find out more about myself and others. That’s probably as far as I can tell.” But this is already something. Let us see if we can build this something up into something more. We can begin by asking whether the “contradiction” Williams is talking about here, at the end of his off-the-cuff response, is to be read in the same way as that word “tension” at the start of it – the word that he adopted from his interviewer, and at first seemed to accept. At the end of his response, is Williams still willing to accept that there is a “tension” between purely aesthetic responses, on the one hand, and moral, social, and political responses, on the other? If so, then he is accepting that the category of the aesthetic must be retained as something separate from the moral, social, and political, and the argument in *Marxism and Literature* has been abandoned. Reading the lines in this way, we would treat his phrase “I really do find this working on me” as a reference to a purely aesthetic response “without any other consideration” (say, one’s attraction to the formal beauty of the country houses); we would treat his phrase “although I hate the fact that it does so” as a reference to a separate moral, social, or political response (one’s repudiation of the history of oppression that produced the country houses); and we would be back in the realm of idealist or autonomous aesthetics, where we started. On this reading of that important word “contradiction,” Williams ends his response by simply repeating the concession with which he began.
This reading seems plausible enough. Yet as we have seen there are various reasons that one might want to hold open the possibility of another reading here, not least because at other moments in his thought, Williams had strenuously resisted just this distinction, and indeed still seems less than enthusiastic about it here. To this we must add that no matter how we determine the reading we risk trampling the fact that Williams is speaking off-the-cuff, and is thus not at his most certain: he is, perhaps, using the word “contradiction” here without himself being entirely clear about what it refers to. One would like to press him on it. Indeed – to break out of the analysis for a moment and make my own reading practice here explicit by way of a point that one might call, with provisos, “deconstructive” – if we are to follow him faithfully here, then we will have to press him on it in his absence, as it were: we will have to determine the reading in a way that he did not, and our attempt to follow him faithfully will then lead us to make claims that he may or may not of have approved of; claims that one feels he would have had, precisely, mixed feelings about – and perhaps even to make them in his name. Here this is a necessary rather than contingent feature of a faithful reading.

Returning to the analysis itself, I would like to ask what we might be able to make of Williams’ remarks here if we were willing to say that his thinking does not simply circle back on itself and concede, but instead moves forward and covers new ground. What if we were willing to read “contradiction” here as indicating something rather different from the particular “tension” with which he began? What if we took this word “contradiction” to indicate a “tension,” not between an aesthetic response on the one hand and a moral, social, or political response on the other, but between two “aesthetico-moral,” “aesthetico-social,” or “aesthetico-political” responses – or even, if
you are willing to come even further with me here, simply a tension within a single aesthetic response?  

If we are willing to read these lines in this sense we have, I think, something like a marking post, if not quite yet a foundation-stone, for a materialist account of the aesthetic. Running a line between this and Williams’ earlier thought that “Your eyes are quite aware of [the relevant social impulses] when you’re looking,” we would mark out formulations of something like the following kind: if our senses are quite aware of a range of “social impulses” in the very process of aesthetic sensing, then a practice of “exploring the contradictions” within our aesthetic responses would in fact be a way of “exploring the contradictions” within our moral, social, or political sensibilities, which would in turn be a very rich way to “find out more about [ourselves] and others,” in a heavily value-laden sense of the phrase. The aesthetic would then be quite thoroughly historical, quite thoroughly moral, social, and political. This is not the aesthetic according to Leavis, leading to a depoliticized “practical criticism”; still less is it the aesthetic according to New Criticism, leading to a depoliticized “close reading”: the political is right there at the heart of it. It is not even the aesthetic according to Richards, for it has been radicalized. It is, if you like, Raymond Williams, the thinker most responsible for clearing idealist aesthetics from the ground of the discipline, marking out the foundation for a new materialist aesthetics praxis for the left. If that’s “as far as [he] can tell,” then it is far enough.  

We are thus on our way to specifying something like the more precise definition of the aesthetic we were looking for at the start of the present chapter, when we wondered what would be at stake if we were to say that Williams’ passage on the country houses is a passage in aesthetics as well as a  

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7 Those interested in tracing the genealogy of this method of reading, by which contradictions “between” are re-inscribed as contradictions “within,” should see Barbara Johnson’s The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), as well as Johnson’s The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998).
passage in history and politics. This might then be the right moment to propose, in a provisional or heuristic way, a few additional formulations, in the hope that they might help us to see the rough shape of the structure as we proceed. Formulations such as:

- The aesthetic response is the aggregate or synthesis of the subject’s whole array of incipient moral, social, and political responses.
- The aesthetic response is the means through which the subject accesses and develops practical, instrumental responses.
- The aesthetic is the means through which experience strikes us as valuable and disvaluable.
- The aesthetic is the realm of initial intuitions as to value.

I place no great confidence in these loose formulations, all the major terms of which cry out for elaboration: they are still just nets cast out into the dark. But even in this loose form they are suggestive. Williams was not willing to frame them in theory, for the reasons I have just noted, but as we saw in chapter two, he called for something like them to be framed. This, I think, is something like the account of the aesthetic that sits inside our best critical methods, as a hidden potential. Let us then take these thoughts about the aesthetic with us as we return to the passage from *The Country and the City* with which we began. Once we read it in this way, we can see much in the passage that our previous formulations would have led us to miss. Since we have come this far, I will take the liberty of asking you to re-read the passage with our new sense of its significance in mind. It bears re-reading. As you read, observe the ways in which Williams’ aesthetic response to the rural scene – to the country houses, to the farms, and to the land itself – includes and indeed is composed of a whole range of incipient moral, social, and political responses:

- It is fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses: the extended manors, the neo-classical mansions, that lie so close in rural Britain. People still pass from village to village, guidebook in hand, to see the next and yet the next example, to look at the stones and the furniture. But stand at any point and look at that land. Think it through as labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that
many houses, on that scale. See by contrast what any ancient isolated farm, in uncounted
generations of labour, has managed to become, by the efforts of any single real family,
however prolonged. Then turn and look back at what these other “families”, these
systematic owners, have accumulated and arrogantly declared. It isn’t only that you know,
looking at the land and then at the house, how much robbery and fraud there must have
been, for so long, to produce that degree of disparity, that barbarous disproportion of scale.
The working farms and cottages are so small beside them: what men really realise, by their
own efforts or by such portion as is left to them, in the ordinary scale of human
achievement. What these “great” houses do is to break that scale, by an act of will
corresponding to their real and systematic exploitation of others.

I think it is now possible for us to see more clearly that Williams’ insistence is precisely not that the
country houses are on the one hand formally beautiful, but on the other hand politically culpable –
they are not, for him, “guilty pleasures” in what I think he might like to call a liberal sense. One sees
how wrong this formulation is when one considers the absurdity of the obverse: the idea that
Williams would ever encourage us to feel that the “ancient isolated farms” are on the one hand
formally ugly, but on the other politically commendable. No, we must say this differently: we must
say instead that for Williams the country houses are, speaking quite precisely, morally ugly, socially
ugly, politically ugly. If our habits of perception, our habits of moral, social, and political evaluation
are such that these rural mansions strike us as beautiful, then Williams wants us to try on a different
mode of perception, a different habit of evaluation, and see if perhaps they now begin to strike us
another way. And lest we think that this is just a matter of political censure, of moralizing, of
destroying pleasures, of making-ugly, we should note that this attempt to shake up our sensibilities is
just as much an attempt to open us up to new pleasures; new modes, tones, and spectrums of value:
specifically here the real human value of the “ancient isolated farm,” or the same thing seen in a less
Wordsworthian and more Morrissian mode, the “working farms and cottages.” Williams offers us a
deeper way to appreciate these as sources of aesthetic and political value. Specifically, he offers us a
new way to appreciate their scale: he wants us to see their small size, relative to that of the country
houses, as an aesthetic virtue: a social and historical sign of what each of them, “in uncounted generations of labour, has managed to become.” He is trying to give us an opportunity to cultivate a new aesthetic sensibility, by virtue of which the working farms, in concert with our appreciation of their history, will be able to strike us, right there in the senses, as the bearers of a particular kind of moral, social, and political value.

Indeed, we can now see a little more of what it means to say that the passage is aesthetic, for Williams’ critique of the country houses really calls into question not simply their history or the politics of that history, but their “scale,” even in the most formalist sense of the term. The contrast between the scale of the mansions and the scale of the working farms is an aesthetic effect that works on our moral, social, political, and historical sensibilities. On the part of the owners of the mansions and their class, an effect of this kind is consciously intended: the effect is intended to re-arrange our social sensibilities such that we encounter their domination as beautiful. They certainly encounter it in that way themselves; why should not we? Against this, Williams is trying to show us how to feel the formal “disproportion of scale” as “that degree of disparity,” where “disparity” is material in the full sense, formal and moral, social, political, historical. He thereby shows us what it means to perceive, between the country houses and the working farms, “a barbarous disproportion of scale.” Formulations of this kind are powerful precisely to the extent that they insist on the continuity between our aesthetic and our social responses. To this changed sensibility, the formal “disproportion of scale” itself is the sign of a historical and political barbarism. Williams wants to show us that, if we commit to feeling the scene all the way through, then our habits of aesthetic response may be altered and enriched, and he does not treat this as a separate process from the alteration and enrichment of our other habits of value. We are being taught that we already encounter the seemingly material or formal aspects of our experience as the bearers of social value, and that it is open to us to try to encounter them differently. By drawing our attention to what
might seem one of the most purely formalistic aspects of our experience – “disproportion of scale” – Williams teaches us something about how to perceive, feel, and value more deeply – which here means with a richer, fuller sense of the ongoing process of history; of the politics of that history; of the weight of living effort, living pain, living pleasure that the political history of a place or people bears and represents.

Thus we start to see that what Williams cannot quite articulate as theory, his practice in its most powerful moments already knows: that it is through the aesthetic, considered in this instrumental and material sense, that our whole practical sense of the social value of experience comes to be configured in new ways. Not through the aesthetic alone, of course – that was William’s main critique of Richards, when he turned his mind to him directly – but certainly never without it. This, then, is what Williams almost said, but that his specific place in the intellectual history of the discipline prevented him from thinking and saying; or again this is what I would like Williams to have said, and that I am now going to say both against him and in his name: that the idealist tradition in aesthetics is, precisely, a process of enclosure brought into the field of theory – a habit of enclosure, through which certain kinds of valuable responses are fenced off, again and again, as reserved areas, and thereby kept away from the real stuff of our common life. In contrast, the practices of a materialist aesthetics, as they could be developed, and indeed as to a certain extent they already sit hidden within our central disciplinary practices of “close reading” and “practical criticism,” would help us consistently to feel the inextricability of formal and social modes of value; they would be a way of teaching ourselves to be struck by the value of experiences in the full sense of value, which includes the moral, the social, the political, the historical. Criticism would then be a process of deepening one’s responses in all these fields by “exploring the contradictions” within them, and so “coming to find out more about [oneself] and others.”
Once we begin to look, we see that so often the most powerful moments in Williams are of this kind: moments of aesthetic education, certainly not by way of simple propaganda (nor simply by “moralizing,” as E.P. Thompson once noted of him) but by encouraging us to open our social sensibilities. It is a practice that seeks to allow us to feel what we see; in Shelley’s terms, to imagine what we know. Williams’ practice in these moments is not the practice of a literary scholar, in the sense of the phrase that the history of our discipline offers us: these moments of practice are directed neither at the production of knowledge, whether cultural or historical, nor the elaboration of theory, whether we take that to mean the development of new models for cultural and historical processes, new paradigms for knowledge, or new methods for the production of such knowledge. We might instead call them a cultivation of sensibility as an active intervention in the broader culture; an active attempt to make use of aesthetic texts, aesthetic experiences, aesthetic instances, to help to transform our habits of value. This is the practice of criticism as aesthetic education that Williams had sought to destroy.

For Williams really to be able to live these kinds of value-practices, to have felt his way towards them as both a conscious and unconscious process of self-transformation, is a significant achievement, whether we call that achievement aesthetic, moral, social, political, or something else. What we need then to see is that though the practice of criticism in this specifically materialist sense comes to Williams “independently,” as it were, as an individual political and aesthetic insight, it also comes to him collectively as part of his disciplinary training, and thus through the medium of the history we have just traced. For it is just this confluence of the aesthetic and the materialist that the best of our discipline has struggled to represent. The central value-practices of the discipline – “close reading,” “practical criticism” – bear the marks of a long historical struggle to define the relationship between the aesthetic and the material: a struggle, really, over the extent to which some of the key institutions of liberal capitalism – specifically, the university and the “civil society” – will
be willing to offer us the opportunity to develop deeper forms of social life. In the twentieth century, we can track this confluence back through to Richards and his role in the entry of criticism into the disciplinary structures of the university, as we have seen. If we seek to trace it back further, beyond the history of the discipline as it has taken place in the academy, it would I think be quite wrong to rely on Williams’ word “barbarism” as a justification for tracing it back to an Arnoldian “criticism of life” if by that we mean, as we often do, something that really derives from Leavis. It would be better, I think, to trace it back to the confluence of social tendencies of which William Morris has often served as the emblem: to the aesthetic revolt of Romanticism on one hand, and to the materialist revolt of the oppressed, as traced for example by Christopher Hill and E.P. Thompson, on the other.8

If we find this line of thinking at all promising, then we might begin to see the possibilities for leftist recommitments to our specific disciplinary tradition today. The task of criticism, in this view, would be to do something like what Williams takes as his task when he re-arranges our views of the country houses, albeit without yet being able to recognize and articulate it as such: to reform our sense of aesthetic value, and thereby our sense of moral, social, political, historical value. This would be to take up once again the central struggle of the discipline by trying to carve out, within the larger social order, a space for the collective cultivation of sensibility, as part of the broader struggle to secure a deeper form of life.

Further Questions

At this point many questions arise – philosophical; political; methodological – and one could spend many further chapters attending to them. In this second part of the chapter, though, I would like instead to take a different tack. For as the history of the discipline should remind us, intellectual arguments of this kind make little difference in the absence of larger institutional forces to support them – indeed, the latter do much to determine the former in the first place. If one feels the importance of criticism in this sense, then the most pressing questions are really those of an institutional kind. What tendencies within the discipline could one make use of in an attempt to bring about a new commitment to a project of criticism? What would be at stake in such a move, not only for the discipline, but for the humanities generally, and even for the university as a whole? What institutional forces in the wider university would be bound, by the logic of their own development, to resist the attempt? If the “scholarly turn” away from the project of the cultivation of subjectivity and towards increased professionalization, specialization, and historicist/contextualist knowledge-production was brought about by neoliberal forces in the wider political, economic, and cultural realms, what forces of a comparable kind might one rely on to bring about a turn to criticism? In the absence of some larger movement against neoliberalism, is not the call for criticism in this particular sense bound to fail? How then should the project of criticism relate to the existing movements against neoliberalism, in their diversity? What changes in the structure and function of the discipline, of the humanities, and of the university as a whole, would we need to try to secure in order to connect meaningfully with those movements?

The next part of the chapter will address itself to these concerns. As I noted in the introduction to the dissertation, the project of criticism within the discipline was in large part the result of the welfare state’s commitment to the broader project of cultivating subjectivities – or, if you like,
capitalism’s commitment, in its Keynesian phase, to supporting the reproduction of the labor power via the mechanism of the state. The “scholarly turn” that Williams championed in our discipline was then in important respects the result of the neoliberal university’s withdrawal of support for this project, as part of its broader dismantling of the welfare state; or, if you like, as part of capitalism’s withdrawal of support for those institutions that allow the reproduction of the labor-power; capitalism’s (desperate?) attempt to access short-term profit more directly by making workers pay for their own reproduction, thus transforming the sites of reproduction into sites of direct accumulation. The various resulting crises have brought us to a new situation, from which the shape of the next phase of capitalist development is not clear. Within our discipline, it seems obvious enough that we cannot now return to the Keynesian model. Nor, I think, would we want to – even were it possible, there would be little to recommend a return to criticism in the idealist mid-century sense. Instead, it is necessary to move forwards, trying to develop a new mode by which to cultivate sensibilities, which I take to be our role in the more general task of cultivating deeper subjectivities and collectivities. The Keynesian university’s broader project of cultivating subjectivities was brought to bear both inside the university, via the university’s “teaching” function, often using the formulas like “the humanities” or “liberal education”; and outside the university, via the intervention of the “public intellectual” into the “public sphere.” How could we conceptualize comparable sites of operation for criticism? Under what names would it be possible to inhabit those two sites, or something like them, today?

In part two of the chapter, I will try to work towards an answer to this question as it relates to the first site: the site of the cultivation of subjectivity within the university. If we are looking to build a new project of criticism on this institutional site, we will need first to clear the ground of old assumptions. Accordingly, I will proceed to a critique of the category of “liberal education,” and argue that we need instead to commit to a reconceptualization of the institutional site of criticism in
order to allow for new opportunities and emphases. Finally, in the conclusion I will offer a gesture towards an answer to this question as it relates to the second site: the site of the cultivation of subjectivity outside the university. This will involve moving beyond the Habermasian formulas of the “public intellectual” and in the “public sphere” towards a model of criticism as a practice of organic intellectuals at the site of the commons.
Chapter Three, Part Two: Against “Liberal” Education

The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond [the] antithesis between itself and [the] romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end.

- Karl Marx

It is this system, therefore, which we must be resolute in getting rid of, if we are to attain to happy and useful work for all.

- William Morris

Introduction

Three decades of near-global neoliberalism have dismantled state-funded systems of education worldwide, so that everywhere educational programs that once spoke in terms of cultivating the broader human capabilities said to be necessary for democratic citizenship now speak openly of serving the market, and the owners of the market. In this situation, where does hope for deeper forms of education lie? What chance do we really stand of securing an institutional site for the critical task of cultivating aesthetic sensibilities? For many on the liberal left, it would seem that our best hope lies in re-committing ourselves to “liberal education,” by which is meant education, not for the sake of the market, but for its own sake – or rather, education for the sake of cultivating in students, and in the wider society, the greatest possible range of positive human capabilities.

It is hard not to be sympathetic to such calls. Particularly for those of us who value the humanities, it seems natural to be sympathetic to any call made in the name of broader human capabilities, amidst the more numerous calls made in the name of market values – and certainly the mid-century project of criticism was housed, as it were, by the concept of “liberal education” and its associated institutional framework. Yet at the same time it may seem odd that many of those who see the need to criticize neoliberalism and even liberalism itself in the political and the economic realms have not

seen the need to think their way past liberalism in the realm of education. To put the issue a bit more bluntly than it perhaps deserves, have we forgotten that liberal education is an innovation of liberalism more generally – the same political philosophy that “frees” the markets? Should we not be troubled by the fact that in the long historical view “liberal education” and neoliberalism spring from the same root? What do they now have in common? What might calls for a re-commitment to “liberal education” really signify today?

In this second part of the chapter I try to work towards an answer to questions of this kind by looking closely at John Stuart Mill’s “Inaugural Address at St Andrews” (1867), which in the Anglophone world is a kind of *locus classicus* for discussions about the origins and goals of liberal education.\(^{11}\) Here Mill makes the case for liberal education in the strongest terms: terms that are also very revealing in that they show that the limits which the project of liberal education has kept encountering throughout its history – centrally, its inability to mount any serious challenge to the values of the market – were built into it right at its inception. For there is an important tension in Mill’s idea of liberal education: a tension that the subsequent liberal tradition inherits, and that proponents of liberal education still seem unable to resolve today. Mill sees that a society based entirely on the values of the market is bound to be an impoverished one in broader human terms. It is a great strength of Mill’s brand of compassionate liberalism that, having seen this problem, he goes on to devote a great deal of serious thought to it – thought that does much to produce our modern idea of “liberal education.” Mill’s solution to this problem is to try to set up institutions that will extend the humanising influence of “culture,” broadly conceived, to reform the worst elements of the market society. The idea of a liberal education plays a key role here: liberal education conceived of as a cultivation of higher human capabilities and values – “higher,” because

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more than simply practical, vocational, or economic; which is to say, higher than those capabilities and values which are likely to be produced in people by a society built around a market alone. For Mill, this cultivation of the broadest human capabilities begins in the shelter of the university, which thus needs to be a place relatively insulated from vocational and professional demands, yet its real promise lies in its ability to advance outwards from that shelter, extending its humanising influence to reform the most troubling aspects of the market society as a whole. This is where the tension arises. On the one hand, Mill gives us a very optimistic picture of liberal education: it promises to reform the most troubling aspects of the market society that the economic half of liberalism in turn requires. On the other hand, at key moments Mill gives us a much darker, and in many ways more accurate, picture of liberal education as something that will have to bow to the demands of the market wherever those demands appear. Liberal education is justified by its ability to reform a society built on the values of the market, but it is defined in such a way that it cannot.

One might even go so far as to say that from the outset Mill defines liberal education precisely as “that kind of education which cannot confront market forces.” We see this most clearly in the founding distinction between “liberal” and “vocational” education. Once we notice it, we might start to have some misgivings about the category. In particular, we might start to doubt whether recommitting to liberal education is ever going to be an adequate response to the marketization of education – whether the category of liberal education will ever be able achieve what keeps being promised for it. What if, considered as an attempt to work towards a general cultural reform, liberal education was, as it were, set up to fail from the start? What if liberal education is a kind of fig leaf for liberalism, allowing it to claim to be a just and humane system in the cultural realm while actually moving to reform the economic realm in oppressive ways? Once we start to suspect this, then left-liberal calls for a re-commitment to liberal education today begin to seem rather misguided.
Where then does hope for deeper forms of education lie? I argue that for those who see reasons to be suspicious of liberalism as an ideology, hope in the sphere of education must lie in “radical,” rather than “liberal,” education. I do not presume to give a full account of a radical education practice, whatever that might mean: the problem is a large one, only really accessible to collective effort over time. Having said that, in this next section of the chapter I do offer one preliminary thought which seems to me to be important. I suggest that any account of radical, rather than liberal, education must rethink the opposition on which liberal education has been founded: the opposition between the cultivation of “higher” capabilities on the one hand and the training of “lower,” practical, vocational capabilities on the other. Broadly speaking, the conservative position has been that we should remake all education in the higher capabilities into education for the market; the liberal position has been that we should seek to preserve a balance between the two separate spheres, with liberal education on the one hand and vocational or market-based education on the other. Surely then a genuinely radical theory of education would seek to remake the vocations themselves so that they can accommodate the cultivation of the higher capabilities. This would involve connecting education in the broadest range of human capabilities directly to struggles within and against the market itself: in particular, connecting such education to the daily practices of work, recovery, and play; production, reproduction, and consumption.

For many readers, this phrase “radical education” will raise red flags, so to speak. Keep your politics out of the classroom! Leave the students to think for themselves! As this debate normally proceeds, the radical then responds that of course one wants a pedagogy in which students can “think for themselves”; that indeed it is precisely in the name of a deepened commitment to this principle that so much of “radical education” proceeds. Rather than rehearsing that debate here, it seems better to step back and ask why it is this particular debate that always seems to arise. Why does the phrase “radical education” so often encounter this form of opposition, where the phrase “liberal education” often does not? What other ways of thinking about the relationship between the terms “politics” and “education” are forestalled by our leap into this particular debate? In the pages that follow, I have thought it better to ask, not “what place is there for our politics in education?” but “what place is there for education in our politics?” or else “What kinds of politics are assumed in our accounts of how education should normally proceed? Politics in this sense no longer refers narrowly to the kinds of activities we engage in when proselytizing for one view or another, but instead refers more broadly to the system of views about how society operates we are relying upon when we feel that some educational practices are more likely than others to lead to a better world. For people who hold different views about politics in this sense will hold different views about the way education should proceed, too, and none of those views can be ruled out of court, simply
This then returns us to the issue of “criticism” by way of the question with which we began the chapter: the question of a materialist account of the aesthetic. In the final part of this section, I will suggest that to the extent that a radical model of education necessarily must seek to develop our aesthetic sensibilities, it will need a practice of “criticism.” My claim will therefore be that today the project of criticism – the project of the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility – must be seen as necessarily, and not just contingently, linked to explicit political struggles against the market in our daily lives. It strikes me that it is there, if anywhere, that the hope for literary criticism lies.

on that basis, as more “political” than the others. As I am going to suggest, this is the sense of the political that is already at stake whenever we refer to a “liberal” education, and it is also the sense in which one might propose, for example, a “conservative” or a “radical” education without thereby immediately laying oneself open to the charge of “politicizing the classroom.” Thus at this level it is I think quite wrong to encounter the formula “radical education” as “too political,” as if every other model of education were not equally political in just this sense.

The fact that the phrase “radical education” draws responses of this kind is, I think, partly testament to the success of the conservative campaign in the “culture wars,” in which the figure of the “tenured radical” has served primarily as a smokescreen behind which to hide the transformation of the universities from a Keynesian vehicle of social mobility to a direct producer of private profit. See Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault in the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008). Yet it is not just conservatives who bridle at the phrase, and here one must add that there has been in fact something of a consensus effort from those across the whole liberal range, from “neoliberal” to “liberal” in the U.S. sense, to turn any debate about the relationship between politics and education into a debate about “politicizing the classroom,” in an effort to avoid the larger debate about the role of education in our politics. Since we are talking about the aesthetic, it is worth noting in passing that this second campaign has had, inevitably, its aesthetic elements: one encounters the phrase “radical education” and one objects straight away, as a matter of taste; only in a second move does one go in search of reasons. A particular aesthetic and political sensibility has been trained.

Finally, it must also be noted that there are of course other, deeper senses of “political” in which a radical education practice of the kind I am proposing would aspire to be “politicizing,” though they are not at the level at which the debate usually proceeds. I will confine myself to gesturing towards them here by noting that where liberal education characteristically encourages students to “think for themselves” about everything except how they might form collectivities in order to act for themselves in the plural, a radical education practice of the kind I am proposing would seek to clear space for students to think and act, both for themselves and for each other. Hopefully what I mean by this will become clearer as we proceed.
I

Though it has been long in coming, I take it that there is now within the Anglo-American humanities some agreement – not quite yet a consensus, but certainly a fairly widespread conviction – that the major threat facing the kinds of educational practices we value is that posed by the market in its various forms. Over the last thirty years, the educational institutions of the welfare state have been progressively (some may prefer to say “regressively”) marketized at a range of levels. Partly this has entailed the embedding of the profit motive into the practices of teaching and research, resulting in a “shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime.” Partly it has involved a dramatic increase in the inequality of labor conditions within the university, where a marked increase in administrative salaries, and indeed in the total size of the administration, has been bought at the cost of the leveling off of staff and faculty wages, the “adjunctification” of academic labor, the cancelling of tenure lines, and the imposition of an ever-growing burden of student debt. The overall picture has been one in which the state divests itself of the financial responsibility for education, and instead shifts that burden onto individuals, whether students, teachers, or staff, in the interests of a small group at the top of the pile. Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, all of this has entailed a marked movement away from forms of education directed at cultivating in students those cultural capabilities said to be necessary for democratic citizenship, and towards forms of education that explicitly take as their

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14 For a good recent account of effects of neoliberalism on the conditions of academic labor in the U.S., see Marc Bousquet, *How The University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York UP, 2008). Student debt is now the largest class of consumer debt in the United States, with the sole exception of mortgage debt – eclipsing even credit card debt, which has also of course increased dramatically in the same period. This has been the sign of a broader shift in the relationship between students and the market: from a doctrine of “youthful exemption” from market pressures to a doctrine quite properly called “market conscription.” These two phrases are from Jeffrey Williams, “Debt Education: Bad for the Young, Bad for America.” *Dissent* 53:3 (Summer 2006): 53-9.
dual aim the use of students as direct sources of private profit, and the training of students as better subjects for production and consumption.\textsuperscript{15}

In response to this situation, many of those on what we might call the moderate left of the academy have called for a recommitment to “liberal education.” What precisely this has meant has of course depended on the specific thinker or occasion, but broadly it has tended to mean a type of education defined in direct opposition to “vocational,” “applied,” or “professional” training: an education that instead speaks the language of higher human capabilities.\textsuperscript{16} But what is liberal education more exactly, and what is at stake in our commitment to it, if we have one? A skeptical onlooker might be forgiven for observing firstly that we have been committing to liberal education in the face of the market for a long time now (much rests on the question of exactly how long we think this “long time” is), and secondly that this tactic does not seem to be working. Putting it somewhat bluntly, why do we keep recommitting to something that is not working? Might there be a case for committing to something else?

These are questions of strategy and, ultimately, of politics. In order to answer them, we will need to ask whether “liberal education” as the formula is usually deployed has any particular political character, and if so of what kind. What kind of political views lead us to a commitment to liberal education? Here it may help to give some thought to the phrase itself. In discussions of this order it is customary to begin by noting that the phrase has its origins in the medieval phrase *artes liberales*,


\textsuperscript{16} On the Anglo-American scene, perhaps the two most influential examples of this discourse are those offered by Stefan Collini and Martha Nussbaum in the United Kingdom and United States, respectively. Collini’s *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012) offers a broad set of reflections on this theme, and well as conveniently collecting many of the numerous essays on this and related issues that he has previously published in venues such as the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*. For Nussbaum’s work in this area, see her *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) as well as her more recent *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010). There are of course also many writers who encourage us to accept or even embrace the effects of the market on humanities education: see for example Louis Menand’s *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).
or “liberal arts,” and certainly this is true enough. Yet like many etymological claims it can point us in the wrong direction: it is of course interesting to learn the “origin” of a term or phrase (though what “origin” really means here is by no means clear, since language development is both overdetermined and continuous) but in fact it tells us little about what really ought to be at issue, which is the long subsequent history that has determined the current range of meanings. For the history of language development is full of struggles, many of them political in nature. Once one sees the matter in this light one begins to wonder what particular history of linguistic struggle has led to us having the phrase we have today, and it is then interesting to observe how frequently, when thinking about liberal education, we overlook the term “liberal,” which in other contexts has had a range of deeply political valences since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, in many areas of discourse “liberal education” is used more or less interchangeably with “general education” or even “humanities education.” Is there then no politics here? Or, asking the same question differently, what has so conditioned us to ignore the word?

“Liberal” is a word with a very wide range of meanings, and in the interests of brevity I will distinguish between just two of them here. The first meaning, which is very common in the U.S. although not so common elsewhere, is of “liberal” as a synonym for something like “progressive” or “left wing,” the implicit opposition being with “conservative,” which here means something like “right wing.” Readers of the dissertation as a whole will be aware that this is not generally how I use the term. Yet it seems important to note it here since, to the extent that we feel that the word “liberal” in “liberal education” carries political weight, this is, I think, the valence we tend to give it. The fact that the word has this valence makes it easier for “liberal education” to take its place in a certain cultural imaginary as the practice of “progressives.” If we interpret “liberal” in this sense,

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17 For a brief history of the struggle that has determined the current meaning of the word “liberal,” see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 179-181.
then it seems possible to cheer “liberal education” on as a practice of the left. Yet things start to look rather different if we are prepared to give “liberal” here its more specific meaning, as a reference to “liberalism,” the native political philosophy of capitalism.  

18 For a history of liberalism taken in this sense, see Immanuel Wallerstein, The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant 1789-1914 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). My use of the term, though broadly similar to Wallerstein’s, differs from it in a number of respects, of which I will note only the most important here. I apologize to the reader for the length of this footnote: the matter is of some importance, though, since much rests for the project as a whole on the question of how one is, or is not, willing to define liberalism historically, and I take Wallerstein to be a key thinker on this issue. Wallerstein distinguishes between “conservative,” “liberal,” and “socialist” positions at one level of analysis, while also using the term “liberal” at another level to refer to the common ground shared by all three of these positions. At Wallerstein’s first level, one can say that the “liberal” and “conservative” positions sprang into being around 1789, first being defined, roughly, as the camps for and against the French revolution, and that the “socialist” position then appeared somewhat later, first being clearly distinguished from the “liberal” position in relation to the events of 1848. In contrast, at Wallerstein’s second level it is possible to conclude that “since 1789 there had only been one true ideology – liberalism – which has displayed its colors in three major versions,” the key marker of this being that the revolution created a new common horizon of thought in which history was encountered as a constant process of change, indeed of “progress” (1). This helps to explain the various transformations that the three ideologies undergo throughout the century, such that, for example, the conservative position gradually takes on the trappings discarded by the liberal position as it proceeds. In contrast to Wallerstein, my use of the term “liberal” tends to be by way of comparison, implicit or explicit, with “radicalism,” which in turn I use to signify something like the ideology of what Wallerstein elsewhere terms “anti-systemic movements.” This is similar to Wallerstein’s first sense of the term, yet it also has sympathies with the second since I am largely in agreement with him on the question of the eventual assimilation into liberalism of “progressive” positions of a Burkean kind. Wallerstein’s second way of using the term “liberalism” has the advantage of shedding fresh light on key movements of nineteenth century history, but has the disadvantage of making it difficult to draw distinctions between liberal and radical positions when we enter the twentieth.

More broadly, Wallerstein’s particular use of the term “liberalism” is enabled by his somewhat idiosyncratic conception of “ideology,” which is to say that at stake here is the larger question of Wallerstein’s model of the social order as a whole. Wallerstein uses “ideology” to signify “political metastrategies” of a kind that are “required only in a world where political change is considered normal and not aberrant”: ideology thus designates the level of more or less explicit political programs, whether “conservative,” “liberal,” or “radical,” adopted in response to the new horizon of thought, which is the “liberal,” in the second sense, assumption that history is an ongoing process of change, perhaps amounting to “progress.” This use of the term “ideology” is in certain respects very close to its common meaning in everyday discourse, where it generally signifies an explicit political program (and, one might note in passing, where it also functions as an insult by virtue of the “liberal,” in my sense, structure of feeling that encounters any political commitment as suspect, judged against a purportedly apolitical conception of higher human values). Yet if Wallerstein’s sense of “ideology” is in this respect immediately comprehensible, there is nevertheless something idiosyncratic about it: if “political metastrategies” are “required only in a world where political change is considered normal and not aberrant,” then there can be no “ideology” before the French revolution; it would be quite wrong, for instance, to talk of an “ideology” of feudalism. Here Wallerstein differs from a long line of radical thinkers who have distinguished “ideology” from mere doctrine or belief, and instead used the term as a descriptor for the system of practices, present in any society, that mediate between people’s material conditions and their lived reality, and that are beneath the level of explicit political programs. Perhaps the key example here is Althusser, for whom “ideology” is as broad as “the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” p109, in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001). One can then observe that Wallerstein’s first sense of “liberal,” in which “liberalism” is distinguished from “conservatism” and “radicalism” as differing responses to the new horizon of thought, allows us to distinguish between “ideologies” in his own sense of the term, whereas his second sense of “liberal,” in which it is the name for that broader horizon of thought itself, allows us to distinguish between “ideologies” in something like Althusser’s sense. For a basic discussion of “ideology,” see Terry Eagleton, Ideology: An Introduction (London: Verso, 1981). A fuller engagement with Wallerstein’s position on liberalism, and indeed on the nature of the social order more generally, will have to await another occasion.
use it here refers to the political philosophy developed by the bourgeoisie when, after its long
struggle against the aristocracy, it finally comes fully into its own. It springs into being in nineteenth
century Europe, both as part of and in response to the bourgeois revolutions of the Romantic
period, and by the early twentieth century it has become the dominant form of political life. In this
sense all our mainstream political discourses today are “liberal.” This is the sense of the word
“liberal” I usually intend.19 All of this seems simple enough – even elementary. Yet if we are
prepared to give the “liberal” in liberal education this broader historical and political valence, then it
begins to look less like a practice of the left. Indeed, it begins to seem as if, by calling for a
recommitment to liberal education, we are trying to defend ourselves against the effects of the
market by appealing to the very political philosophy responsible for “freeing” it. It comes to seem
as if our “liberal” response to market forces in education actually springs from the same root as the
“neoliberal” market forces themselves.

From a certain angle, the question here is one of periodisation: when we try to assess what is at stake
in today’s calls for a recommitment to liberal education, how long a historical view are we prepared
to take? Sadly many of those who propose the return to liberal education are somewhat vague about
the timeframe their argument posits, which has the side effect of allowing them to avoid having to
specify the particular economic and political forces they are trying to resist.20 Some are more

19 Since I am submitting this work for a degree in the United States, it may be worth noting that in many other nations
this second meaning of “liberal” is somewhat more accessible to public discourse. If the reader will forgive me for
referring, in a naïve way, to the electoral politics of my own nation of origin, in Australia the major centre-right party is
called the “Liberal” party, because they are committed to liberalism in this broad historical sense, whereas the major
centre-left party is called the “Labor” party because they derive, at least nominally and via many subsequent mediations,
from a tradition that sought to disrupt the dominant liberalism in the interests of the working class. Similar use of these
terms can be found in many other countries, particularly in Europe. I hasten to add that the majority of these “labor”
parties were assimilated into the liberal consensus in the early twentieth century at the latest – even in the mid-nineteenth
century, if one follows Wallerstein – and are of course openly “neoliberal” today.

20 See for example Martha Nussbaum’s See Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education
will have more to say about Nussbaum below. In this category one would also have to include Louis Menand’s The
Perhaps the best way to get an indication of the character of the latter text is to note that here, as in Nussbaum,
precise, but too narrow, envisioning the threat to which liberal education professes to be a response as simply whichever round of state cutbacks or austerity measures are currently being imposed – at present, the cuts said to be necessary as a result of the 2008 financial crisis. Somewhat rarer, and more welcome, are those who are prepared to put these successive rounds of austerity measures, and the associated transformations of our systems of education, in the broader historical context of the last three decades of neoliberalism. 21 Yet it strikes me that in order to do justice to the history of the phenomenon we need to go further than this: we need, as the old slogan had it, to “name the system.” The pressure of the market on education has certainly intensified in the last thirty years of neoliberalism, but surely there is a case to be made for the idea that what we are really dealing with here is a long-standing debate within capitalism: a debate between those liberals (now “neoliberals”) who propose to make education serve the market directly and those liberals who believe that a market-based society can only be called humane if it reserves within it special sites for the cultivation of broader human values. To think about liberal education at all, we really need to be able to think about it over this longer timeframe.

21 Stefan Collini’s various occasional pieces generally fall into the former category, defending the broad tradition of liberal education by critiquing whichever particular round of cutbacks are topical at the time, rather than focusing on connecting up the various rounds of austerity into a larger historical picture. Of course, in large part this is excused by the form, the occasional essay: certainly the first part of What are Universities For? (London: Penguin, 2012) makes many of these connections in a more thoroughly historical way – and also, I might add, very engagingly. Nevertheless it does not seem unreasonable to ask for more on this point, which is after all a crucial one: though neoliberalism is, I think, clearly the issue, the term and the political and economic critique that should accompany it rarely appears. More broadly, Collini is willing to refer to a “pre-capitalist” period, but the period that comes after pre-capitalism remains unnamed (54).
II

One can make this point more precisely by turning to John Stuart Mill’s “Inaugural Address at St Andrews.” Mill stands as a key figure in both the history of liberalism and the history of liberal education, and if we are prepared for a moment to reflect on the significance of the obvious, perhaps this fact will already suggest something of the truth of the claim that the “liberal” in “liberal education” should be taken to mean liberalism. This in turn gives us a preliminary indication of how much may rest for liberalism generally on arguments for liberal education. Indeed, as we shall see in certain respects our whole conception of liberalism as a humane and generous system on which to found a society rests on the arguments for it. In turning to Mill here I am trying to entertain those arguments at their strongest: I take it that he represents liberalism at its best and most humane. Mill’s argument for liberal education is, I think, a compelling and even rather inspiring one, but one with serious flaws. Mill promises that liberal education will advance to reform the worst parts of the economic realm, yet right from the start he defines it in such a way that it can only ever retreat from the economic realm. This is a symptom of a larger flaw in his thinking, and one that continues to mark liberalisms in the present: as many on the left have noted, Mill was optimistically committing himself to unleashing economic forces that were bound to leave in tatters the more humane elements of his position.

In this lecture from 1876, Mill is addressing the students of the University of St Andrews, with the aim of teaching them how they should relate to their own education. In stirring and powerful

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22 Here it seems worth drawing a connection to Sheldon Rothblatt’s *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) which I take to be one of the best existing histories of the idea of “liberal education” in Britain. Rothblatt is at his best when documenting the ways in which the idea of “liberal education” was reconfigured in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Though Rothblatt would no doubt repudiate many of Wallerstein’s conclusions, his account confirms Wallerstein’s in so far as he identifies the key shift in the history of “liberal education” as the move from an eighteenth century conception of society as static to a nineteenth century conception of it as dynamic. Putting the two together, we are in a position to observe that it is with the rise of liberalism proper in the nineteenth century that “liberal education” begins to take its modern form, the watershed being the new “liberal” horizon of thought within which history is experienced as an ongoing process of change.
language, he makes one of the strongest cases for a truly liberal education at the university level. I will quote at length and then return to examine specific moments:

The proper function of a University in national education is tolerably well understood. At least there is a tolerably general agreement about what a University is not. It is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings. It is very right that there should be public facilities for the study of professions. It is well that there should be schools of Law, and of Medicine, and it would be well if there were schools of engineering, and the industrial arts. The countries which have such institutions are greatly the better for them; and there is something to be said for having them in the same localities, and under the same general superintendence, as the establishments devoted to education properly so called. But these things are no part of what every generation owes the next, as that on which its civilization and worth will principally depend. They are needed only by a comparatively few, who are under the strongest private inducements to acquire them by their own efforts; and even those few do not require them until after their education, in the ordinary sense, has been completed. Whether those whose speciality they are, will learn them as a branch of intelligence or as a mere trade, and whether, having learned them, they will make a wise and conscientious use of them or the reverse, depends less on the manner in which they are taught their professions, than upon what sort of minds the general system of education has developed in them. Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians. What professional men should carry away with them from a University, is not professional knowledge, but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge, and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit. Men may be competent lawyers without general education, but it depends on general education to make them philosophic lawyers – who demand, and are capable of apprehending, principles, instead of merely cramming their memory with details. And so of all other useful pursuits, mechanical included. Education makes a man a more intelligent shoemaker, if that be his occupation, but not by teaching him how to make shoes; it does so by the mental exercise it gives, and the habits it impresses.

This, then, is what a mathematician would call the higher limit of University education: its province ends where education, ceasing to be general, branches off into departments adapted to the individual’s destination in life.  

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This deeply felt affirmation of the value of an education that is more than narrowly vocational – which is to say, an insistence on “cultivation” and “culture” in the sense examined in Raymond Williams’ classic *Culture and Society* (1958) – remains tremendously valuable to us today. Its value, though, has changed in kind: since Mill’s time, the advance of the economic side of liberalism – capitalism – has meant that this more humane part of the liberal position on education, and on culture generally, can no longer seriously be maintained. For of course you will have noticed the disjuncture between our present and this past as you read: liberalisms today happily accept that universities should be largely in the business of providing a professional and vocational education, which is to say that since Mill’s time the seeming extension of a “liberal education” on a tertiary level to the members of a broader range of economic classes has also involved the rolling back of its more ambitious goals. As bourgeois society has developed, education has become more generally available to those of different classes, it is true; but what we have really seen in practice has been the development of ever more specialized forms of vocational education. Yet the better liberal appeal is still ultimately to the model of education Mill here proposes.

The great insight of the more humane forms of liberalism has been their strong sense of the discrepancy between the narrowness of the life offered to us by the existing economic order – in Mill’s phrasing, a life of “mere trade” – and the breadth and capaciousness of the lives potentially available to us as human beings. Their response has been to try to carve out a space within the economic order, materially supported by it but insulated from its values, in the shelter of which our best capabilities can be developed, and from which the worst elements of the economic order can then be reformed. Here, for Mill, the space is liberal education, but elsewhere, in differing ways, it has been “the aesthetic” or “the arts”; “the feminine” or “the family”; “the ethical” or “the

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religious”; or else, more broadly, “the private sphere.” The hope is that these parts of society and of life, which together make up the humane realm of what Mill, somewhat pre-emptively, calls general culture, will eventually prove determinative, extending their reforming influence throughout society, and thereby making a humane liberal culture truly general.

This is a rich and persuasive view, particularly if you are trying to resist a constant pressure to make education merely vocational – which is to say, primarily a matter of enabling and encouraging a “self-interest” thoroughly determined by the economic – and for those on the left it has in particular the great advantage of not requiring us to choose between, on the one hand, a deeply imperfect and exploitative social and economic order, and on the other a problematic commitment to a complete overturning of that order. If one accepts the argument, then it certainly does much to make palatable the demonstrably exploitative elements involved in the market society: yes, there is exploitation today, but a general cultural reform of the economic realm is underway, and we will all be able to benefit tomorrow. Nevertheless, there are some deep problems with the view, and chief among them is the fact that even on the best liberal versions of it “general” or “liberal” culture is never really going to be allowed to become truly general, if by this we mean that the cultural part of life is going to be carried through to reform the economic part in any deeply transformative way.

The first sign of this is that Mill’s cultural reforms are always intended as leaving intact the basic structure of the social order – “lawyers” will still be “lawyers,” “manufacturers” will still be “manufacturers,” and “shoemakers” will still be “shoemakers” – and it is within these fundamentally economic limits that any extension of “general culture” will be confined. Within those limits, to the extent that it does seek to reform the economic part of our lives, the project of liberal education is to teach people to “bring the light of general culture to illuminate” their professional labor. By itself, this is by no means to be scoffed at. Certainly many intelligent people
have felt that making lawyers – to follow the example Mill gives us – “philosophic” rather than merely “competent” is something that would carry with it real benefits, both for the lawyers themselves and for the societies in which they work; and some of us may even be disposed to follow Mill in thinking that a liberal education might make “merchants” and “manufacturers” “philosophic” too. But liberalism’s unwillingness to extend culture to reform the economic part of our lives in any deeper way raises real questions here, and even a reader who is prepared to accept the idea of a philosophic manufacturer might wonder how Mill thinks this is really going to work in relation to forms of labor further down the economic scale.

For when he leaves the professions and arrives at the “mechanical pursuits,” he is already tempering his language a little – even Mill, with all his humanity, cannot quite manage talking to us of “philosophic shoemakers”: liberal education promises to make his shoemaker merely “intelligent,” which is not quite so lofty – and when we come to consider what would have to be the real counterpart to Mill’s implied “philosophic manufacturer” – the, in liberal terms, even less convincing position of “philosophic factory worker” – we might in all fairness begin to feel that, contrary to Mill’s hopes about the deep reforming power of “general” culture, for a great many people the limits that the economic realities of one’s life place on one’s opportunities for the exercise and development of one’s higher faculties are going to turn out to be determinative after all. It is simply very hard to see what opportunities even the most “liberal” of capitalisms will ever offer less privileged workers for the useful exercise of their broader human capabilities.25

25 Of course, socialist figures of the period such as Morris put together what amounted to a whole theory of the “philosophic shoemaker,” and indeed the “philosophic factory worker,” by posing the harder political and economic question of how to ensure that all people have the opportunity for unalienated forms of labor. There is much more to be said about Morris in this regard, but I cannot do it here: for now it may suffice simply to draw attention to the two maxims that serve as my epigraph to this chapter, the first being “Nothing can be a work of art which is not useful,” which adumbrates a whole theory of the materialist aesthetic, and the second being that art is “the expression of man’s pleasure in successful labour,” which makes the link between a materialist account of the aesthetic and the political goal of an unalienated form of labor. See William Morris, “The Lesser Arts” p 82, in Useless Work Versus Useless Toil (London: Penguin, 2008) 56-87. On another note, having mentioned the figure of the “philosophical shoemaker” it is impossible
But the basic problem with the view goes much deeper than this, for liberalism’s refusal to countenance extending the humanising influence of general culture down into the basic structure of the economic order makes the project of reform impossible even where it seems most plausible: in reforming the productive lives of professionals and capitalists. Mill gives us the figure of the “philosophic lawyer,” and various kinds of enlightened engineers, physicians, merchants, manufacturers and so forth, in order to illustrate his basic hope that liberal education can reform, without overturning, the economic order. Liberal education will be one of the key means by which the humane realm of general culture will be extended to reform the otherwise more or less debased life of professionalized labor and capitalist production and exchange (“mere trade”). But speaking as he is from within the best values of the middle classes, he does not seem able to see that the economic realities of life have a very large part to play in determining the cultural realities of life for the people of the middle classes, too.

One crucial element he leaves out here is the impact of the economic part of life on people’s upbringing. Mill sees that “men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers,” but he seems unwilling to see they are also the sons of lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers, before they are men. Removing the gendered terms for a moment, this is to say that people are brought up, not just as people, but as members of social classes, and this means that the roles that those around them play in the economic order do a great deal to determine their views and values, not to mention also the general background of consciousness and experience against which their views and values stand out and mean. This is a crucial – and I think in the end crippling – limit on the liberal hope that the advance of “general culture” by itself will, in

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not to refer readers to Jacques Ranciere’s engaging account of the figure of the “shoemaker” as it has appeared in philosophy since Plato – an account that features, among other things, a shoemaker who philosophized with Descartes. See Jacques Ranciere, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).
the long run, have the power to provoke significant and humane reforms in the economic parts of life.

Mill sees something like this limit, but characteristically leaves out its economic elements. Later in the Address, he tells us:

We must keep in view the inevitable limitations of what schools and Universities can do. It is beyond their power to educate morally or religiously. Moral and religious education consist in training the feelings and the daily habit; and these are, in the main, beyond the sphere and inaccessible to the control of public education. It is the home, the family, which gives us the moral or religious education we really receive; and this is completed, and modified, sometimes for the better, often for the worse, by society, and the opinions and feelings with which we are there surrounded.

(247-8)

There is much to be said here, particularly about the closely related issues of the securing of gender distinctions and the status of the aesthetic, but for present purposes it is enough if we notice that for Mill at this different point in the same address it is now the private realm of homes and families, rather than the public institutions of liberal education, which is necessarily to be entrusted with the role of being the bearer of the values of general culture. This in turn makes it much harder to claim that general culture is determinative of, but not determined by, the economic realm. For even if there is a certain plausibility to the way in which the best liberal imaginations posit “liberal” or “general” education as a special space in which matters of economy and class can be temporarily suspended – and, once again, we see this positing everywhere, most fundamentally in the founding contrast between liberal and vocational education, and in the humane insistence on liberal education as something for all – then this temporary suspension of the economic is secured only by a form of public – in this case, parliamentary – control which liberalisms have traditionally seen themselves as very reluctant indeed to extend into “the family” or “the home.”
For liberalism, the family – and particularly the middle-class family – is meant to be a place of refuge from all these political and economic things. It needs to be a refuge from the values of the economic part of life, in particular, if it is to be relied upon, finally, as the primary site of moral education, from which the values of the economic realm will be reformed. But if the liberal state will not attempt to intervene in the values of the middle-class family, then the family’s status as a refuge from the economic realm is secured by nothing. And of course the values of the middle class family are in fact to a large degree produced by the very economic forces that Mill would rely upon them to reform. At the risk of tautology, we might say here that middle class families tend, in the main, to hold values typical of the middle classes, and that to a large extent these views arise out of the economic interests of the middle class. If the middle-class family is going to be the site at which we are educated in moral values, then we are going to be educated in the kinds of values that arise directly out of the life of “mere trade” that Mill is trying to reform.

Many contemporary left-liberal responses to this problem have emphasized the importance of “social mobility,” and have seen education – at times even liberal education – as its key mechanism. Sometimes social mobility is merely being invoked in a conservative fashion, on the assumption that society should be a race in which those fit for economic competition are rewarded, again economically, at the cost of the rest; but at other times it is made to bear more progressive hopes: namely, that if the ruling classes are not necessarily also the children of the ruling classes, then we may not be condemned to an ever-deepening entrenchment of the political values, and mode of general consciousness, of the ruling class. This latter is a welcome emphasis only in so far as we refuse to pretend that social mobility will, by itself, solve the problem. For of course the determining of one’s views and values by the economic realities of one’s life is not solely a matter of upbringing: there is also the important matter of one’s own place in the economic order, one’s anticipated place, and even simply the place to which, with whatever level of realism, one aspires.
This is another important limit on the power of liberal education, and Mill is once again aware of something like it while being very unwilling to articulate it in economic terms. He tells us that “moral education” is “completed, and modified… by society, and the opinions and feelings with which we are there surrounded”; what he does not tell us is that the opinions and feelings of society are in large part those that arise out of its economic concerns. But, taking labour alone as an example of the economic, one does not have to be cynical, or accuse others of cynicism, to observe that people tend to adopt the kinds of views and values that allow them to get on more easily in their work. Most of us spend most of our waking time working in one capacity or another, or preparing for work, or recovering from work, and as a result we understandably find it very hard to develop capabilities and sensibilities that promise to bring us into tension or conflict in this crucial realm. This is a simple but important point – as simple, indeed, as Upton Sinclair’s famous aphorism “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.” To hope that people can reform their values without reforming their way of working is fundamentally to underestimate the effect that a form of labor has on a life.

Clearly, this is not true only of the poor. The manufacturer has more leisure time than the factory worker, it is true, and a greater freedom of action within their time of “leisure,” but anyone who has observed manufacturers as a group must acknowledge that to a large extent their values are those convenient to their economic interests. Here I would go so far as to say that those who would have us believe that manufacturers can be made “philosophic” and yet remain manufacturers understand neither term. Yet if not “merchants” and “manufacturers,” perhaps professionals? Certain sectors of the middle classes have always found Mill’s argument more persuasive with respect to the professions than with respect to the capitalists: thus, to some, the figure of the “philosophic lawyer” has had more plausibility than that of the “philosophic manufacturer.” At the very least, it has certainly proved persuasive enough in legal circles, and many lawyers who have received something
like the kind of liberal education Mill is proposing have come to consider themselves in just this light. But again, one does not have to look very far beneath the surface of, say, the cultural production that comes from lawyers to see that the vast majority of it, far from speaking from the position of any “general” culture, simply reproduces the specific values of the professional classes. It therefore seems to me that the figure of the “philosophic lawyer,” together with its counterparts in the other professions, is no more convincing than our implied “philosophic factory worker,” and is in fact in many respects less so, since the factory worker at least has more to gain, in purely economic terms, from genuine reform. This makes it very hard to share Mill’s hope that liberal education, in the anti-economic form that he construes it, will be able to achieve its fundamental goals.

This is taking the argument at its strongest, where Mill acknowledges the real human poverty of a life of “mere trade” and tries to show us, via figures like that of the “philosophic lawyer,” what a successful move by “general culture” to humanize and enrich the economic realm would look like. Yet in fact liberalism is rarely so strong as this. Much more typically, even where life is not affirmed as a matter of “mere trade” after all, the move will be to ignore the question of humane reform in the economic realm, and instead simply to affirm the ability of the cultural and the economic to exist side by side in separate spheres (often defined as “private” and “public”), thereby masking the real power of the economic forces that determine so much of most people’s lives. Mill himself ends the address by doing this, when he tells the students, who are just beginning their time in liberal education:

Now is your opportunity for gaining a degree of insight into subjects larger and far more ennobling than the minutiae of a business or a profession, and for acquiring a facility of using your minds on all that concerns the higher interests of man, which you will carry with you into the occupations of active life, and which will prevent even the short intervals of time which that may leave you, from being altogether lost for noble purposes.  

(256)
Hearing those last few clauses, the poor students might be forgiven for feeling that the claims Mill has been making about the virtues of a liberal education are starting to ring a bit hollow. It appears that, far from seeing the cultural part of life as destined to reform the economic part of life, ultimately for liberalism the economic part of life will be allowed to take precedence wherever it finds it necessary to do so. For it is clear here that the exercise of the higher faculties is really to be confined, for the most part, to the realm of “leisure” – the “short intervals of time” which your work “may” leave you – rather than carried through to reform the more directly economic realm of one’s labour. Not “philosophic lawyers,” then, but lawyers who “may” find an opportunity to be philosophic on their own limited time, if they wish; with no sense that the daily retraining of capabilities and re-structuring of desires and attitudes that the workplace demands will eventually cease to allow all but the most vestigial forms even of this. If this is to be true for the future upper-middle-class or gentleman professionals Mill is addressing, how much more so for the vast majority, whose work offers them even less scope for the useful exercise of the higher faculties, and affords them less leisure to exercise them in other ways. Mill starts his address by justifying liberal education on the grounds that it will by its very nature advance, but by the end of his address it is already in retreat. Mill knows without knowing, as it were, that his broad claims for the reforming power of liberal education cannot be sustained.
III

If one were to track the history of claims for “liberal education” since Mill’s time, I think one would find that it is chiefly the story of the continuation of this retreat in the face of an ever-expanding range of demands from the market. Writing such a history is obviously beyond the scope of the present chapter, yet as the issue is an important one, it is perhaps best to give at least a broad overview. Let us then look briefly at three moments at which the claim for liberal education surfaces. Each time, it arises from a position just beside the period’s central site of cultural capital. Indeed, historically speaking, it is from these kinds of positions that the argument for liberal education tends to arise, and here our friend from earlier, the skeptical onlooker, might observe that the argument for liberal education is of such a kind as to arise very naturally in the minds of those who endorse the existing order it in its essentials, since they are so well placed to see its benefits, but whose slight marginality allows them to see something of the inhumanity of its results.

The first moment is the one we have just examined. In 1867, Mill speaks from a position just beside the heart of the world power: one sign of his slight marginality here is his choice to address a university in Scotland rather than the traditional English Oxbridge centers. Yet he speaks from a position of strength relative to those who will make the argument in the later phases of capitalism. This allows him to take his argument right to the very definition of “education,” distinguishing vocational and professional training from “education properly so called.” He is therefore able to claim that the whole of university education should be considered a liberal, general, cultural trunk which only later, after university, “branches off into departments adapted to the individual’s destination in life.”
Compare a second moment. In 1945, the authors of the Harvard Red Book, I.A. Richards among them, seek to insist again on liberal, non-vocational education in just Mill’s sense. They are speaking of course from Harvard, one of the central sites of symbolic capital for the new world power, yet they can claim a certain marginality as educators rather than businessmen. Though their basic claim for “liberal education” is the same as Mill’s – which is to say, it is defined chiefly against vocational training – in this newly hostile environment the term “education” itself can no longer be held, and is instead contested ground: “Taken as a whole, education seeks to do two things: help young persons fulfill the unique, particular functions in life which it is in them to fulfill, and fit them so far as it can for those common spheres which, as citizens and heirs of a joint culture, they will share with others” (4). The market has expanded, and the argument for liberal education must now define education “properly so called” as both general and vocational. Tellingly, they repeat Mill’s metaphor of a liberal, general, cultural trunk branching off into the vocational, specialized, and economic, though with an important difference: there will now be classes of people for whom the branching off occurs much earlier. “General education can be compared to the trunk of a tree from which branches, representing specialisms, go off at different heights, at high school or junior college or graduate school – the points, that is, at which various groups end their formal schooling” (102). General education was supposed to be general – but for many, now, the tree has been stunted. Why? Mill had promised that the “general culture” would be the trunk from which the economic parts of life “branch off,” thus treating the economic as if it were susceptible to cultural reform, but he had failed to see that the whole tree was rooted in a deeper – and as it happens quite barren – material ground.

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Compare a third and final moment. In 2010, Martha Nussbaum defends liberal education, very much in Mill’s terms, as “Not For Profit.”\textsuperscript{27} She speaks proudly from the University of Chicago, the university most closely associated with the dominant free-market ideologies of the neoliberal period, while claiming a certain marginality in that she speaks for a multicultural, U.S.-led, market-driven cosmopolitanism—from-above, associated with figures like Kwame Anthony Appiah, rather than a blank U.S imperialism.\textsuperscript{28} By this stage in the history the definition, not just of “education,” but even of “liberal education” itself must welcome the market: Nussbaum defends liberal education from the market on the grounds that “we are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship” (10). The reason such a choice is not required of us is that, happily, “one of the distinctive features of American economic strength is the fact that we have relied on a general liberal arts education… rather than focusing more narrowly on applied skills” (53).\textsuperscript{29} As the symbolic centre of capitalist power moves, the argument for liberal education moves with it, each time claiming that there is room within capitalism

\textsuperscript{27} Martha Nussbaum, \textit{Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities} (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).
\textsuperscript{28} For this general position of imperial cosmopolitanism, see Appiah’s \textit{Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers} (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); for Appiah’s thoughts on education, see his article “Education For Global Citizenship,” \textit{Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education}. Volume 107, Issue 1 (April 2008): 83-99.
\textsuperscript{29} Nicholas Dames observes this point when he notes, in the course of a very insightful review of Nussbaum’s book: “One part of \textit{Not for Profit}, centering on an ethics of sympathy and alterity, suggests that the humanities contest the notion of “profit”; another part, centering on “skills,” suggests that even those things putatively not for profit are ultimately, for smart business managers, highly profitable.” He therefore concludes that it is “possible that she has restated, rather than resolved, the contemporary quandary of humanists.” If I may say so, this hits the nail on the head. I wonder, though, whether it might not behoove us to hit this particular nail a little harder. Dames is characteristically generous here in giving Nussbaum the benefit of the doubt (“This may be less a conceptual confusion than an audience problem…. It might be a tactical effort to outflank the enemy, to sell ethics to humanists and skills to gatekeepers of budgets. It is, I think, entirely possible that Nussbaum is being remarkably canny.”) Yet, without wanting to underrate the importance of intellectual generosity, here it seems worth making the case for the prosecution somewhat more forcefully, for once one considers the rest of Nussbaum’s position it is, I think, rather difficult to feel that her argument for the profitability of the humanities is simply tactical: throughout her work, “sympathy,” which paradigmatically promises to extend gradually, in expanding circles, from the imperial center, really functions as a moral justification for the advance of the market. With what I hope reads as a friendly grin, then, I will record here that when confronted with positions of the kind Nussbaum offers I am tempted to go all the way back to Althusser: “this bourgeois ideology is actually, in its deepest essence, constituted by the ideological pair economism/humanism…. For no one (at least, no revolutionary Marxist) can fail to see that when, in the midst of the class struggle, the litanies of humanism hold the theoretical and ideological stage, it is economism which is quietly winning” (122-3; emphasis in original). We may or may not consider ourselves “revolutionary Marxists” in Althusser’s sense, but here he is right. See Nicholas Dames, “Why Bother?” \textit{n+1}, Issue 11, (April 13, 2001) and Louis Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis,” in \textit{On Ideology} (London: Verso, 1971).
for a place devoted to the cultivation of values higher than the economic, from which place the larger economic order will then be reformed; each time in fact bowing to the power of the economic. The bow becomes deeper and deeper as capitalism proceeds.

In its best forms, liberal education creates a space relatively sheltered from the narrowly economic concerns of the wider society, in which, in theory, we can learn to exercise the broadest range of fulfilling capabilities available to us as human beings. Even as it does so, however, the economic order in which we live and work informs us that we must train ourselves as workers and consumers, not only at the shallow level of learning certain technical or functional “skills,” but also deeply at the level of habits of mind, modes of consciousness, and values. These two goals are in deep conflict, even for those students headed for the most privileged kinds of labor. It is not cynical to observe that most people involved as students in liberal education feel they have a fair basic idea of the kinds of things that it will one day prove useful to them to have learned. If a system of education tries to develop in them capabilities that they suspect will simply be left to atrophy in their working lives, or else be consigned as “leisure” to the ever-narrowing margins of working life, they will for the most part do little to learn them. Work being what it is, either the broader human capabilities or the form of labor itself will have to give way. For most people, considered as individuals rather than as members of a collective capable of changing the nature of the labor required of us, the second is not an option. This failure of liberalism to acknowledge how determinative the economic part of life can be, and to respond accordingly, is a real problem for anyone who would work in the name of liberal education, and it is therefore also a real problem for those of us who believe in the crucial importance of general training of something like the “higher faculties,” but who must nevertheless continue to work largely within institutions, professions, and disciplines that, even at their rare best, tend only to go so far as to see “liberal” education as their task. With its right hand, liberalism “liberates” the market, in the name of (middle class) prosperity and wealth; with its left hand, it tries
to bring up “general culture” to stop the corrosive effect that a free market economy has on all our better notions of society and value. But again and again, the right hand sweeps what the left hand has offered away.

What would be a better response to this situation? What must education look like in order to have a real chance of being able to secure a general development of broader human capabilities in the longer term? It seems to me that we have to face squarely the fact that, for the vast majority of us, the sorts of capabilities we are able to cultivate through liberal education are never going to be of much practical use to us in our daily lives. Yet this cripples the project of cultivation itself: for that project to have any deep meaning, it needs to be a cultivation of the kinds of capabilities that will be of use to us in our daily lives, which for most of us means, crucially but problematically, of use to us in our work. Those on the right, and now the centre, have been happy to accept this, and have accordingly argued that we should give up on “liberal education” and replace it with training for the market. Our response should instead be to fight for a reform of the vocations themselves. This would involve challenging the founding distinction between “vocational’ and “non-vocational” education. If we are really committed to the kinds of broader human capabilities that Mill and other proponents of liberal education seek to champion, then we are necessarily also committed to a larger fight to change our forms of labor until they allow us to put those broader human capabilities to use in practical ways. This would of course bring us into real conflict with the market. The idea of a liberal, non-vocational education has its negative uses in defending against capital, but it is ultimately a defense that secures its own undoing, and we affirm it so strongly only because we cannot really imagine reforming the vocations.

We are now in a position to unite, under the general heading of culture, our earlier question of a materialist account of the aesthetic with our new question of a radical commitment to education in
broader human capabilities. If capitalist society seeks everywhere to reduce the realm of culture to the merely economic, insisting that art should pay, education should be narrowly vocational, and so forth, then our response should not be to seek to preserve culture in an illusory shelter, as if it is distinct from and undetermined by the economic: using the Kantian idea of the aesthetic to confine art to the galleries; using the concept of “liberal education” to confine deep education to the elite schools; and confining both, ultimately, to the ever-decreasing realm of “leisure” as privileges, accomplishments, and ornaments, far from what is held to be the real stuff of life. For in response to neoliberalism, it will not do to call for a return to neoliberalism’s root. No: in this situation, surely the humane response available to us is to seek to enrich the vocations so that they can themselves be the sites for the exercise of our broadest human capabilities, our aesthetic sensibilities among them. For all the difficulty of imagining it, we are then talking about criticism’s relationship to modes of labor. This question of the cultivation of our aesthetic sensibilities outside the university will be the subject of the conclusion to the chapter.
Conclusion: Criticism as a Practice of the Commons

Recall that the larger aim of the dissertation is to map, if not actually yet to lay, the foundations for a renewed project of criticism on the left. The present chapter has sought to contribute to this in two ways. In the first part of the chapter I addressed the question of a philosophical basis for criticism, attempting a preliminary rethinking of the aesthetic in materialist terms. In the second part of the chapter I addressed the question of the institutional site of such a criticism, critiquing one of the key categories under which the university’s project of enculturation once proceeded – “liberal education” – in an attempt to clear space for new thought. Without, I hope, making too hard a demand on the reader’s patience, I would like to use this brief conclusion as an opportunity to gesture to the important question of the other site of criticism: the site outside the formal institution. For as I noted in the introduction to the thesis as a whole, the lost mid-century project of criticism and the broader mission of enculturation of which it was a part had in fact two sites: a site within the teaching function of the university, for which I have let the concept of “liberal education” stand, and also a site outside the university, usually conceptualized as the “civil society” or the “public sphere.” It is at this latter site that the broader ideology of mid-century liberalism posited the figure of the “public intellectual,” whom we might define here as the intellectual whose role it was to carry the liberal enculturation mission of the university out into the broader public sphere. Within that larger category of public intellectuals, the figure of the literary critic was central, carrying into the public sphere the specific critical project of the cultivation of sensibilities. The fact that the “public intellectual” has famously been in decline in our period, and that those who mourn this generally look back to a golden age before the 1980s, is a clear sign of its connection to the wider historical shift we have been tracing.
At this point in the dissertation, the general shape of my argument in relation to this site should, I think, come as no surprise. Before the 1980s, both the figure of the “public intellectual” and that figure’s site of operation, the “public sphere,” were supported (always, of course, more-or-less) by the Keynesian regimes. With the neoliberal turn that support has been withdrawn, as part of the larger effort to refit sites of reproduction of labor-power as sites of production and accumulation. Calls for a revival of the public intellectual in the mid-century sense are therefore somewhat beside the point, since even if we wanted to we cannot now revive the mid-century conditions which made the figure possible. The same, I think, can be said for the Habermasian “public sphere”: capitalism has passed through a whole phase since that category seemed viable, and is now entering yet another. Once one thinks in this way, two parallel questions become pressing for our project of criticism. First, if the category of the “public intellectual” is no longer viable, how can we now conceptualize a critic’s role in relation to the wider society? Second, if the category of the “public sphere” is no longer viable, how can we now conceptualize the extra-institutional site at which criticism would seek to do its work?

Both of these questions are complex ones, and in this conclusion I cannot do much more than raise them and point in a direction in which further thinking might proceed. In relation to the first question I will simply say that what seems to me to be required is a movement from the Habermasian concept of the “public intellectual” to something like the Gramscian concept of the “organic intellectual,” the most salient point of difference being that the former belongs to an “intellectual” class fraction of their own, whereas the latter is thoroughly a member of a broader class and takes on “active participation in practical life, as constructor, as organizer, ‘permanent persuader,’” within it.\(^{30}\) In this matter as in so many others, Gramsci resembles no-one

so much as Leavis. The large matter of the definition of class itself under present conditions I must leave to another time.

The second of these questions – the question of how to move beyond the concept of the “public sphere” – leads us back to the opening of this chapter. In the first section of the chapter, I claimed in Raymond Williams’ name that the traditions and institutions of idealist aesthetics have represented something like a process of enclosure in the field of theory: a process by which common modes of value and sensitivities to value are abstracted out of the general process of our common life. This is not merely a convenient metaphor – for better or worse, I mean it quite historically. Without here being able to retrace the history of idealist aesthetic thought in its relation to the history of more obviously material enclosures, I offer this formulation as a kind of shorthand, a reminder of the more general historicity, which here is really to say the materiality, of thought.

Our question then becomes: if idealist aesthetics is a set of conceptual tools for effecting and justifying an ongoing historical process of enclosure, what precisely is being enclosed? An aesthetic “commons,” presumably – but how can we make sense of such a category? And even once we have secured some general idea of what it might be, further questions would arise. How would we defend an aesthetic commons against future enclosures, as part of our more general struggle to defend our common resources against those who would appropriate them for private gain? How would we contribute to an aesthetic commons, enrich it, indeed cultivate it? It strikes me that if we could think this through, then we would be on our way to grasping the possibility of a leftist criticism in this new era, beyond the scholarly turn.
Chapter Four: *Mrs Dalloway* and Political Feeling

I

From the opening lines of *Mrs Dalloway*, the twenty-first century reader encounters something like the question of class politics, albeit in an archaic form.¹ “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” As opposed to…? As opposed to having her servants do it, of course:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when…

It is a start – but as we shall see, only a start – to observe that the famous first line is already a carefully drawn portrait of a particular ruling-class attitude. For what is it to declare that one will buy one’s flowers oneself? One is making a show of being generous to one’s servants; at the same time, one is confirming one’s power as master by making a show of one’s independence of them. This in response, presumably, to a not inconsiderable, if usually buried, anxiety about the real nature of the master-servant relationship. Is that relationship necessarily inhumane, the master wonders? Is it somehow exploitative? Is there, as one has heard certain others say, a sense in which one is actually dependent on the labor of one’s servants? Surely no! In the face of this kind of anxiety, and in an effort to bury it again, one insists loudly and with a certain rapture that one is a kind and generous master, which is to say that the role of the master is compatible with kindness and

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generosity in human relations; and at the same time one insists that, at a pinch, one has one’s own capabilities – that the servant class is dispensable after all.

The question then arises of to whom all this is being insisted, a question which another novel might have felt the need explicitly to answer, but to which this novel will respond with a very particular vagueness. To whom did Mrs Dalloway say that “she would buy the flowers herself”? No doubt we have something of a sense that her declaration is being delivered to the relevant servants “off-stage,” as it were, and indeed the figure of Lucy appears quickly enough. But this “off-stage-ness” is itself worthy of remark. “On stage,” in front of that implied scene between master and servant, and indeed almost instead of it, the novel presents us with a rather different scene: that of Mrs Dalloway declaring, feeling, worrying, reconfirming to herself. What the novel seems to posit as significant here is not so much the effect on Lucy of Mrs Dalloway’s declaration, with all it implies, but instead the effect on Mrs Dalloway herself. The reader is put in a position to feel that the most relevant part of Mrs Dalloway’s declaration is that part which is self-directed; indeed perhaps we even come to feel that she is, after all, the more important addressee, the addressee about whom the text would prefer us to be concerned. In this first line, as throughout so much of the novel, it is Clarissa who fills us with extraordinary exci-
tation, for there she is: Clarissa, listening to her own tone as she makes her famous declaration, hoping to hear both her generosity and her independence confirmed. If we read this without suspecting any irony, then we are left with the sense that even here, where the issue seems to be the decency or indecency of existing class relations, the novel is going to posit this as the proper kind of relationship with which to be concerned: not the relationship of the master to her servants, still less the relationship of the servants to their master, but the master’s relationship to herself.
Already, then, we can see that Mrs Dalloway’s mode of attention is a kind of narcissism, and not merely of a personal kind: it is the narcissism of a specific ruling class. But as readers we cannot stop with this observation, for the particular vagueness with which that mode of attention is presented to us really does raise the possibility of an ironic reading. Are we meant to register Mrs Dalloway’s attitude as “narcissism” as such, which would imply critique; or are we being asked to try on this mode of attention, this mode of being struck by value, as our own? This returns us to the question we asked in relation to our first observations: are we meant to embrace the system of value-habits implied in Mrs Dalloway’s opening declaration, or are we meant to critique it? Are we really expected to take Clarissa straight – Clarissa herself, as well as the whole tone and style, the whole mode of relating the world, that she brings with her – or are we meant to be sitting at some ironic distance from her, critiquing her, and critiquing this tone and style?

If we are willing to decide that Woolf is being ironic about the declaration itself, then we face the further challenge of the matter of the addressee. For if, as we read this opening line, we feel less interested in any inferred scene of address between Mrs Dalloway and her servant, and more interested in the question of how Mrs Dalloway is relating to herself, then it is not at all clear whether we are reading the novel as its author might, or whether we have in fact been too quick to adopt the main character’s particular way of parceling out attention. Does Woolf’s irony, if we have decided that she is being ironic, extend this far, to disturb even our sense, which is also often Mrs Dalloway’s sense, that Mrs Dalloway herself should be the key figure in the story – or is that simply demanding too much, or the wrong thing, of Woolf, and in turn of her readers? Is this Mrs Dalloway’s mode of attention, Mrs Dalloway’s ruling-class narcissism, only – or is it also the narrator’s mode of attention, the narrator’s ruling-class narcissism? Is it, in fact, Woolf’s? Is the novel we have just begun reading going to turn out to be a satirical portrait of the structure of
feeling of the ruling classes, or an instance of it? Is Mrs Woolf going to turn out to be a snob after all?

These are the kinds of questions that the novel’s first line works to raise, while refusing to answer; the sum of them tending to call up, but also then refusing really to embrace, feelings that we might think of as political. The ambiguity which brings these feelings into play is the central ambiguity of free indirect style: when and to what extent are we in the narrator’s mind, and when and to what extent are we in the character’s? A large part of the interest of these opening lines derives from the liveliness with which this question is raised and then evaded, the stake, ultimately, being one’s sense of the implied author’s position on class. To see this clearly we need only read back through the first few lines a little more carefully. In the first line the use of the third person (“Mrs Dalloway…”) initially seems to indicate that the voice we are hearing is that of the narrator, even the author; but then what follows (“…said she would buy the flowers herself”) seems to raise the suspicion that we are hearing, not just the narrator reporting the speech of the character, which would be simple enough, but also, more complicatedly, something of the tone of the character herself. One wonders: was that Woolf’s voice, or her character’s? Has Woolf just endorsed the structure of feeling implied?

When we come to the second and third lines we find the portrait deepening, and the central ambiguity of the style confirmed. First we have the belated arrival into consciousness of the servant to whom certain kinds of labor are perfectly suited (“For Lucy had her work cut out for her”); then once again the pushing off-stage of the servant class, who are fit to appear only via the mysteriously causeless effects of their labor (“The doors would be taken off their hinges”); then again the belated arrival into consciousness of those who labor, combined now with their characteristic subsumption into the name of their employer (“Rumpelmayer’s men were coming”). All of this leads up to and is confirmed again by the flurry of anxious feeling that opens the third paragraph. Rapturously to declare that what for others would be work will, for oneself, be “a lark, a plunge”: not so far under
the surface of this there is surely something of the suggestion that they too should perhaps learn to consider such things a lark, a plunge. The master thinks: is the servants’ work so hard after all? Should it not rather be a joy to them? Has their work not in fact been “cut out” just for them; is it not just the sort of work that fits them perfectly, and that they would be ungrateful for failing to be happy with? Why then do they keep returning to the mind, as a continual worry? Why can the servants not simply be happy with their labor – and disappear? The opening passage dares us to wonder in what spirit the author intends us to take this tone; this show of gaiety with one’s servants; this blithe snobbery; this minutely reproduced class attitude. This, I take it, is the significance of the sudden interruption of “…thought Clarissa Dalloway…” in the second paragraph, an interruption that we really have to find quite funny: it confirms, as if by the author’s secret nod, that we are playing her game, but does not lift us out of it; it assures us that we have been wondering about the right things, but does not stop us wondering. By giving one kind of answer (“Ah, clever reader, I know you were wondering, and yes, I can now reveal that this is Clarissa’s tone; this style of being, this range of values that you might find rather objectionable, belongs after all to the character”), it forestalls another (“But, still, you wonder: where am I? How do I, the author, feel about all this, about Clarissa’s tone, style, values? About the values of her whole type and class? I will not say”).

2 In passing, it is worth noting that this particular move is characteristic of Woolf’s style in this period. Compare, for example, this section from the opening of To The Lighthouse (London: Harcourt, 1927):

> Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with…

(4)

The initial description of Mr Ramsay establishes the speaking voice as that of the classic heterodiegetic third-person narrator, whose statements are in a certain sense objective by definition, since they establish the world of the fiction. If such a narrator says that Mr Ramsay excited extremes of emotions in his children, then that is what Mr Ramsay did, case closed. Having established this, Woolf begins to play: from “lean as a knife” onwards she introduces a series of ever less objective statements about Mr Ramsay, without telling us whether the voice she is channelling still speaks with the objectivity of the narrator, or if it has now assumed the subjectivity of a character. As the shift takes place, we wonder: is this the narrator establishing that, objectively speaking, Mr Ramsay is like a “knife,” that he is someone who “grin[s] sarcastically” at his children, that he is someone who takes “pleasure” in “disillusioning his son and casting ridicule on
So by the time we begin the novel’s third paragraph – the first of Clarissa’s tangled memories of her past, and the first of the novel’s long, self-consciously modernist meditations on the significance of the past *per se* – we have already been taught everywhere to wonder where the class politics of the author lie. At what points, and to what extent, do we attribute this ruling-class tone to the author, and at what points, and to what extent, to the character? It is not too much to say that a large part of the debate about Woolf and her work has depended on the various answers that have been offered to this question.

**II**

Here, because the primary interest of the thesis as a whole is methodological, it may be worth stepping back for a moment to examine what is at stake in this question, and in the line of inquiry that it would seem to demand. For once we have asked the question of Woolf’s own position with respect to matters of class, and of the politics of class, it would seem desirable to bring into consideration evidence from places other than the work of literature itself. This move to relate the work to the context in which it was produced is now so common in the discipline as to be almost entirely unremarkable; and perhaps this is especially true in the case of Woolf studies, where the real richness of the available contextual material (and of Woolf’s diaries in particular) has often meant that the move is performed almost automatically, with little discussion of the broader methodological issues that are at stake.\(^3\) This makes remarking on it all the more important here, his wife”… or is this now just James’ hostile feeling? It is only when Woolf has pushed this to a very un-narrator-like extreme (“who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was”) that the punch line comes, and she assures us that the voice we are hearing is, after all, just that of a character (“James thought”). We are then presented with the puzzle of working out when, exactly, the line was crossed.

\(^3\) In Woolf studies, as in the rest of the discipline, it is difficult to find exceptions to this general rule: contemporary scholars approach the literary work primarily in order to understand something about the context in which it was produced, or (less often) the contexts in which it has subsequently circulated. To give an idea of the range over which this generalisation holds, it may be helpful here to cite the self-descriptions of a number of projects in different areas of Woolf studies or Modernist studies, all published in 2012. In each case the point is simply that the task of literary study is articulated in scholarly historicist/contextualist terms. Thus:
when I am trying to perform the move a little differently, and claiming that something depends on that difference.

Here it will help to recall the larger methodological stake of the dissertation. I am trying to show the viability, and indeed the desirability, of a critical, as distinct from scholarly, approach to literary texts, by which I mean an approach that would seek to use literary texts as opportunities for the cultivation of our aesthetic sensibilities, where “aesthetic” is understood in an instrumental and materialist sense, as indicating the whole range of our social practices for encountering value. In previous chapters, I have tried to show that for the project of literary criticism understood in this way, the task is neither to use the text as a diagnostic tool through which to determine the state of the culture that formed it (which is, as I have tried to show, the dominant mode in the discipline today), nor to try to isolate the text from its various contexts (in the way some of the older criticisms).

This book proceeds from the idea that a formal and historical analysis of the bildungsroman at this turning point in literary history yields insights into the fate of developmental thinking more broadly during the breakdown of nineteenth-century positivist historicism and the massive but strained expression of European political hegemony.


Modernism, Imperialism and the Historical Sense contributes to the emerging field of what we might call “postcolonial modernism,” by demonstrating that it is precisely through their aesthetic forms, typically viewed as the mark of modernism’s ahistoricism, that Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf engaged the structures of empire.


It is the argument of this book that although Woolf read translations to acquaint herself with the diverse cultures of the world, as a writer she quickly learned to use translation as a means to resist the tendency of the dominant language to control meaning.


In each case, the literary texts are seen as interesting primarily for what they can teach us about cultural history. Admittedly, all of these examples are published by either Oxford or Cambridge University Press, but it would be quite wrong to read their foundation in scholarly historicism/contextualism as a local Oxbridge phenomenon, as a manifestation of age-old British empiricism, or similar: rather, in their sense of the task of literary study as the production of knowledge about the history and modes of operation of cultures, these kinds of formulations are recognizably those now being produced by the discipline of English Literature in many areas around the globe. I hasten to add that the three examples I have cited here are all, in my view, fine books; I mean to point out the nature of their project, not to dismiss it.
sought to do). By rethinking the category of the aesthetic in materialist terms, I have tried to suggest that an aesthetic criticism need not isolate the work from its contexts, but could instead observe and then make use of the fact that works generate their aesthetic effects precisely by projecting a range of contexts, which then form part of the text as it is actually experienced in reading. Once we understand the relationship between the work and the context in this way, we are in a position to say that one of the tasks of a materialist aesthetic criticism would be to construct a text by putting the work together, “in concert,” as it were, with certain elements of its various contexts, and then to find a way to make use of that whole text as a structured field for aesthetic training.4

In the present chapter we have an opportunity to show how these claims play out in critical practice. In particular, I am trying to show that *Mrs Dalloway* can be set to work as a means of developing our aesthetic capability for meaningful and coherent political feelings on the issue of class relations. As I shall go on to show, the sophisticated ambivalence of the whole text of *Mrs Dalloway* – by which I mean, again, not simply the work (the novel, the “words on the page,” as it were) but at the very least the work taken together with our sense of its author, the author’s context, and certain elements of our own context – makes it a demanding and effective training-ground for political feeling. As

4 Formulations of this kind are an attempt to unite what is basically a poststructuralist account – both of the relationship between text and context and of the reader’s role in constructing the text – with a materialist aesthetic criticism. It may be helpful here to reproduce, just by way of a reminder, what is no doubt the most famous account of the poststructuralist approach to which I refer:

*Adding, here, is nothing other than giving to read. One must manage to think this out: that it is not a question of embroidering upon a text, unless one considers that to know how to embroider still means to have the ability to follow the given thread. That is, if you follow me, the hidden thread. If reading and writing are one, as is easily thought these days, if reading is writing, this oneness designates neither undifferentiated (co)fusion nor identity at perfect rest; the is that couples reading with writing must rip apart. One must then, in a single gesture, but doubled, read and write. And that person would have understood nothing of the game who, at this [du coup], would feel himself authorized merely to add on; that is, to add any old thing. He would add nothing: the seam wouldn’t hold. Reciprocally, he who through ‘methodological prudence,’ ‘norms of objectivity,’ or ‘safeguards of knowledge’ would refrain from committing anything of himself, would not read at all.*

we shall see, the text of *Mrs Dalloway*, as we shall construe it, does this by allowing its readers — even, in a certain sense, compelling its readers — to play out many of the various, complex aesthetic processes by which they might consider allowing themselves to feel the force of political claims about class, in a situation where doing so would involve them in a far-reaching revision of many of their habits of value.

To make a start on this, let us return to the question with which we closed the last section: the question of the class politics of the implied author of *Mrs Dalloway*. Here it is important we see that for the purposes of literary criticism, as distinct from literary scholarship, this question is not merely of biographical or historical interest: it is not a question that is chiefly interesting because it takes us “beyond” the text, into the “real world” of authorial intention, or of actual cultural history. Rather, it is a question posed by the work itself as we encounter it as a text for use today: a question that is significant for criticism chiefly by reason of the aesthetic demands it makes, and allows the text as a whole to make, on our habits of perception, habits of feeling, habits of social and political value. To say this is in no way to reject “historicism” or “contextualism,” if we understand those terms to indicate a belief firstly that texts are bound up inextricably in their various contexts, and secondly that those contexts are not immutable, but are rather products of and subject to ongoing processes of material history. It is, however, an attempt to find a way to approach works of literature as something more than occasions for inquiry into those histories and contexts. Specifically, it is an attempt to use texts, considered as concerts of work and projected context, as opportunities to intervene in the history and context of the present day. For if we resist biographical or cultural-historical methodologies that would approach *Mrs Dalloway* chiefly as a diagnostic tool with which to determine either Woolf’s own range of feeling or the ranges of feeling current to her time and place, we must nevertheless take into account the large extent to which the drama of her texts is produced by way of the staging of the reader’s attempts to get, on the one hand, a sense of the author’s
putative intention, and on the other hand, a sense of the significance of her time and place; which is to say, in another vocabulary, to project an “author function” as well as what we might call either a “history function,” “place function,” or “context function,” depending, and then to engage with all these as opportunities to undergo productive aesthetic effects. We usually read with a strong sense of interest in the apparent range of possible authorial intentions, regardless of whether or not those intentions are ever made to appear explicitly as such; and therefore to engage one’s range of aesthetic habits with the text is often to engage with that sense of putative intentions. We also often read with an interest in the whole time and place from which we feel that the work derives, and when we do our sense of the significance of that time and place also becomes an important part of the text taken as a whole, and is thus an important source of aesthetic effects. Both of these classes of effects – those that derive from our sense of authorial intention and those that derive from our sense of the significance of the work’s time and place – can be heightened or muted for specific texts, specific readers, and specific moments in reading. In order to show them in action I have chosen a text in which they are both at issue.\(^5\)

\(^5\) This is clearly just the first step towards a classification of these kinds of effects. If we were to attempt to construct a fuller poetics of this, we would see the categories proliferate rapidly. At the risk of splitting hairs, let me give an example. Within the class of effects that derive from our sense of a putative authorial intention, we can further distinguish between what we might think of as “intended” and “unintended” versions. This sounds like a redundant distinction, but I do not think it is: indeed, we have already seen both sides of it operating quite distinctly in the first lines of *Mrs Dalloway*, above. In the first (“intended”) case, our sense of the author’s intention carries with it what we might call an additional “effect of intendedness,” by which I mean that we sense, not just that the text is prompting us to guess at the author’s possible range of intentions, but that this prompting is itself meant to be read as a sign of those intentions. As we saw in *Mrs Dalloway*, the effect is of an author consciously or intentionally playing a game with us, holding out as a lure the prospect of us discovering her “real” view (here, on class). We sense that she intends us to know that she intends this, as it were – the example here being the way in which the whole aesthetic structure which prompts us to wonder about Woolf’s views on class was confirmed as intentional by her wink on “… thought Clarissa Dalloway…”. The “effect of intendedness” here allows us to suspect an intended, ambiguous irony.

This would be distinct from the second case, where the text seems to prompt us to wonder about the author’s intentions without staging that prompt as itself intentional. We saw this in the first lines of *Mrs Dalloway* when we noticed that the work is positioning us such that our mode of attention has a certain class-narcissism; this may well cause us to wonder how Woolf intends us to take this effect, whether she would endorse the mode of value implied, and so on – but there is no “wink”; it is not clear that she intends us to wonder about it; or at least the prompt that makes us wonder about her intentions here is not itself further marked as intentional. Clearly Woolf intends this effect in the sense that she wrote
Keeping this sense of the stake of the methodological maneuver in mind, let us do what the work seems to ask us to do: project and engage with an implied author (the implied Woolf, the Woolf-function), and an implied time, place, and class position (we might call the implied Bloomsbury, the Bloomsbury-function), specifically in order to deepen, if not really to answer, this question of the Woolf-function’s mode of feeling about class politics. To do so, it will be helpful to welcome into our text just a small test-piece, as it were, of what is usually thought of as “context.” The first test-piece will be a moment in Woolf’s diary; the second will be some reflections about Woolf’s own class position, and the class position of the Bloomsbury group generally.

III

As we noted above, the opening lines of Mrs Dalloway try to teach us to wonder continually where in relation to the class politics of the character the class politics of the implied author lie. Let us then enquire: what are the implied author’s political views? Or rather, since it is not clear that this question can be answered meaningfully, dealing as it does with that somewhat spectral thing, a

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the text, was also a fine reader of her own texts and so knew, in some form, that the effect was there, but the effect functions in the absence of our considering whether or not she intends it.

It is worth noting that the first, “intentional” version of this effect, in which the author plays an openly intended hide-and-seek game with the reader by seeming to promise, and then withholding, revelations about some larger meaning, is characteristic of the literature of high modernism, though certainly not unique to it. Woolf of course does not seek to mystify and thereby sanctify the authorial intention in quite the manner of a Joyce or, later in the century, a Nabokov, but the technique is still there as a means of luring the reader into certain kinds of engagement with the text. Certainly this is one of the central means by which Mrs Dalloway generates its effects: by way of its careful staging of the drama of our repeated attempts to discover the author’s intention, and of her then eluding us. For most purposes, if we are to put the novel to use, and understand what we are doing when we do so, then we must be aware of these kinds of aesthetic effects, and put them to use, also.

So that is one example. In the service of a more thorough poetics, we could also make distinctions within the class of effects that derive from our sense, not just of the author-function or of the author’s intention, but of the significance of the whole context (historical, cultural, economic, etc...) in which the work was produced. But here in fact things get somewhat more complicated, for reasons that take us rather beyond the scope of this footnote.
merely “implied” author, let us instead expand our text in order to clarify the terms of the ambivalence that makes us want to ask it.

Woolf wrote the bulk of Mrs Dalloway throughout 1923 and 1924. In her diary entry for Tuesday 19th June 1923, she writes:

One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoievsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No, I think not. In this book [Mrs Dalloway] I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & show it at work, at its most intense – But here I may be posing.6

This last line (“I want to criticise the social system, & show it at work, at its most intense”) is often quoted without its final phrase (“ – But here I may be posing”).7 This is a pity, because the whole movement of thought here – the strong urge to make large claims, followed by the quick retreat and self-examination – is so characteristic of Woolf generally. Certainly that last phrase displays many of Woolf’s most admirable, one might even say “disarming,” qualities: her unwillingness to take grand claims too seriously, even her own; her self-awareness (she is fully aware, even at the draft stage, that Mrs Dalloway will not really become a sweeping critique of the social system); the vigilance with which she monitors herself for any sign of pomposity, of faking to sound more sophisticated, of “posing.” But once we have celebrated Woolf’s skepticism about grand claims generally, we then need to go on to ask why it is at this point in the list that she pulls herself up; why after listing a number of rather grand claims (“I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity…”) it is with the question of making grand political claims (“I want to criticise the social system, and show it at work,  

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at its most intense”) that she feels she must start disarming. And here we may also want to try to
investigate a little further into the question of what she actually means by “posing” – for the term is
by no means transparent.

To understand the term “posing” as Woolf uses it here, it will be helpful to recall Bloomsbury’s
particular take on the distinction between the public and private spheres, a distinction so important
to liberalisms generally. In the Bloomsbury milieu there is, it seems fair to say, a strong tendency to
feel that novels, together with other works of art, are meant to deal with private things: matters of
the inner life, of personal philosophy, of subjectivity; with intimate and more or less directly
interpersonal relationships. The public sphere of politics proper is a rather different thing. It is not
simply that a political novel, painting, or play would necessarily be a bad novel, painting, or play,
though it is that too; it is also that Woolf doubts – as her part in the “social system” has taught her
to doubt – whether political feelings are really “feelings” at all, in the full inward sense of the term.
Can one really, in one’s heart of hearts, have political, which is to say public, feelings? Or are
feelings by definition always private, intimate, individual? Might not this phrase “political feeling”
be a mistake in itself, a kind of contradiction in terms? It is when thinking in this way that one
comes to suspect that people who claim to have political motivations, to be moved by political
feelings, are not being entirely honest: surely they are just pretending, because after all true feelings
are a matter of private rather than public life. “Political feelings” then seem available only as a
“pose.” In this light Woolf’s diary entry begins to seem a little less puzzling. To address “life and
death, sanity and insanity” is to address matters of “deep feeling,” matters of the private sphere:

8 The most influential recent study of Woolf that focuses on this issue of the distinction between the “public” and the
“private” is Melba Cuddy-Keane’s Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).
But see also Anna Snaith, Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations (London: Palgrave, 2000); Melba Cuddy-Keane
"Virginia Woolf and the Public Sphere" in Susan Sellers, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf (Cambridge:
Cambridge UP, 2010); and Jesse Wolf, Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,
2011). The latter in particular provides an extensive “straight” reading of Mrs Dalloway, in the sense that Woolf is not
suspected of irony in relation to her subject.
these are the kinds of grand aims that one can safely avow when writing a novel. Whereas to claim to want to “criticise the social system” in a novel would be an unwelcome entry of public matters into private life; would be pompous, probably, and fake; would just be “posing.”

To confirm our sense of this particular structure of feeling, we might think of some of E.M. Forster’s famous declarations:

> Love is a great force in private life; it is indeed the greatest of all things; but love in public affairs does not work.

> The fact is we can only love what we know personally. And we cannot know much. In public affairs…. something less dramatic and emotional is needed, namely tolerance.\(^9\)

It may look as if with this word “tolerance” Forster is describing a truly “public” or “political” feeling, but he is not: he soon tells us that tolerance “is negative. It means merely putting up with people, being able to stand things.” The term “tolerance,” then, marks the absence of feeling – and indeed we might be tempted to say that tolerance is what certain central strands of liberalism keep offering us in place of political feelings: that tolerance is the term liberalisms of this kind use to secure the emptiness of the space in which political feelings might otherwise arise. To make the stakes here more apparent, we might contrast Forster’s declaration that “love in public affairs does not work” with the current anti-capitalist slogan “Join the Revolution – fall in love!” (or more recently “Join the Occupation – fall in love!”). Much could be said about these slogans, which circulate widely in a range of quite different contexts. Here it is enough simply to note that in many anti-capitalist contexts they derive much of their force from their attempt to reunite the public and the private spheres by insisting that the deepest “personal” feelings are to be found precisely in the

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realm of politics where Forster would tell us they are misplaced, even impossible. This contrast illuminates something about Woolf’s diary entry by showing us that even just accepting that there might be such things as “political feelings,” in the full sense of the phrase, is already to come up against the limits of certain widespread liberal modes of being, circulating in what we might imagine to be the Bloomsbury context, in which such things can only appear as fakery, as a “pose.”

But this analysis by no means exhausts Woolf’s momentary charge of “posing,” for any discussion of liberalism’s insistence on the importance of the distinction between the public and the private must also raise the issue of gender. In Woolf’s charge of “posing” we should also hear the tone of the daughter of an intellectually dominant father; the tone of the sister of older brothers in a very patriarchal society; the tone, still lingering from Woolf’s youth, of an exceptionally intelligent and sensitive young person who, because of the restrictions placed on her gender, worries about seeming uneducated and unworldly in company, particularly in the company of intellectually dominant men.

That woman watches herself, not just for signs of faking but for signs of what one might think of as its opposite: naiveté. Elsewhere, in her more public writings – and in particular in *Three Guineas* (1938) – Woolf will respond to this anxiety by developing a self-conscious pose of feminine naiveté, and then working that pose up into a position of critical strength; here, alone except for that company of men and woman she carries inside her, she would prefer to seem knowing. It is this company – the “social system” itself, as she registers it most directly in the texture of her most determining interpersonal relationships – that does so much to set the point at which she begins to temper her claims, and here again it is significant that she seems confident enough to admit wanting to write about issues as large as “life & death, sanity & insanity,” which seem at least plausibly within the private realm available to novels and to women, whereas it is when she encounters the prospect of avowing directly political aims, which seem to belong to a public world dominated by certain

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10 In this sense they are comparable to the older slogan “the personal is political.”
classes of men, that she feels she must start disarming. The danger is of being seen as someone who is not as “knowing” as the men, but who is naive enough not to realize this, and so speaks up anyway.

This observation leads us back to our discussion of Bloomsbury’s version of the public/private distinction, for being as knowing as the men here is at least in part a matter of being appropriately cynical about the possibility of having genuinely political feelings. Who would be foolish enough to show their naiveté by avowing political feelings? What woman would be foolish enough to expose herself in this way? For those who avow such feelings are suspected, not only of faking and oversophistication, but also of naiveté; of childishness, which is also marked as feminine; of a touching but of course unrealistic idealism; of wanting to “change the world,” and so on. As one ages, surely, one gives up this childish, too-female idealism, and settles into a more accommodating relationship to the social world? This complex of anxieties, too, will become central to Mrs Dalloway once written, particularly in our sense that Clarissa had political motivations in her youth, but has somehow “grown out” of them. This is the Clarissa who when young “read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelley by the hour,” and then went on instead to marry a conservative Member of Parliament and live in Dean’s Yard, Westminster. Plato is present here presumably for the utopianism, rather than the arch-conservatism, of The Republic, as well as for that text’s symbolic value as the very icon of that supposedly male activity, “thinking about politics,” and Morris and Shelley are present in their capacity as radicals, if not indeed in their more specific capacity as manor-born radicals who made that difficult move to reject their natural class affiliation – radicals who in their differing Romanticisms then came to represent, not so much that dry, male-dominated business of political thinking, but the rather different activity of political feeling.11 Was Clarissa right

11 For recent work on Woolf’s relationship to Romanticism, see Alexandra Harris, Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2010); and Nicholas Roe,
to reject those forms of radicalism – those political feelings – even, if you like, those representatives of the very possibility of “deep [political] feeling”? Or, better, since “reject” is too active a verb, was she right to allow herself to age into a comfortable conservatism? Could things have been otherwise – instead, could she have allowed herself to feel that it was possible to “criticise the social system” really, and not just as a “pose”? For the implied author, for whom these issues are live ones, the answer is – perhaps. She is not sure. She fears the consequences of saying. She would rather not say.

So this question of “posing” has at least two sides: to avow political motivations, to allow oneself to feel political feelings, is on the one hand too artificial, too pretentious, too sophisticated, and on the other not sophisticated enough because too naïve, too childish and direct, too much like the romantic (and indeed Romantic) mistake of a young, unworldly woman. The Bloomsbury structure of feeling, like the structures of feeling of so many class fractions today, made good use of this contradiction. When a member of the relevant class, or an institution of the relevant class, was confronted by a situation which seemed to call for a real political commitment, either or both of these aesthetic stances could be adopted. This of course is how many individuals, and indeed many class fractions, manage to continue on through what would otherwise become political crises, even today. Observing this gives us at least a preliminary sense of the broad outlines of the implied author’s strongly felt ambivalence about the prospect of political feelings, the implied author here spanning both the novel and diary. The shuttling between these two sides of the liberal structure of feeling is a central part of the struggle that motivates this whole text of Mrs Dalloway, and – more importantly – of the struggle that the text asks us to run ourselves through as readers: the struggle, not to “criticise the social system” quite, but instead to determine whether or not to “criticise the social

system”: the struggle to determine whether or not one should let oneself become “political” in that problematic sense by acknowledging the force, indeed even the possibility, of “deep [political] feelings.” In terms of the context in which *Mrs Dalloway* was written, one could say that this is true at the level of the “author’s intention” – indeed, as we have seen, one could say that Woolf’s diary “attests to it,” or similar – but really “intention” here is not quite the word, for it seems too direct. It would be better to say that Woolf’s intention on this crucial point is muddled, to remark a word from Forster: part of the implied Woolf here wants to critique the social system, and part of her does not, and it is to a fair extent just this serious play by which she tries to work out what her intention is in writing the novel, this struggle with the muddle of her political intentions, that produces – or at least seems, as an aesthetic effect of the text, to have produced – *Mrs Dalloway*.

**IV**

Let us begin this next section by taking a moment to retrace the particular reading practices that we have made use of in order to bring us to this point. I will shortly make my way back to the novel’s first line, in order to set it to work as a means of cultivating what we might, adumbrating the larger argument given in the previous chapters, call our aesthetico-political sensibilities. In order to do so, I have tried to introduce just a small fragment of what is usually considered “context” into the text: specifically, I have introduced a line from Woolf’s diary, and with it some further reflections on something akin to what is commonly thought of as “authorial intention.” Putting this in our terms, I have tried to use the diary to help make visible the fact that the figure of the author projected by for us by the novel has a political urge to “criticise the social system,” which is also, within the structure of the novel, an urge to critique Mrs Dalloway herself on something like class grounds; but that the implied author also has a contrasting urge to deny even the possibility of having feelings of that kind – an urge to accuse herself, when she has such feelings, both of childishness and over-
sophistication: to accuse herself, in a word, of “posing.” The aim of welcoming this particular fragment of “context” into the text has been to deepen our sense, already implicit in the novel’s first line, that the implied author is strongly ambivalent about the prospect of avowing explicitly political feelings about the political matter the first line raises, the matter of class; and further that she is ambivalent even about acknowledging the possibility of “political feelings” _per se_. For our purposes, this ambivalence on the part of the implied author is one of the novel’s most important aesthetic effects.

In order for that effect to be realized, though, we need to ensure that readers cannot simply bypass the training ground by taking a short cut past the text’s complex ambivalence. For indeed any look at the history of the novel’s reception shows that so many readers (particularly readers of certain classes and aspirations) have seen fit to take Clarissa straight, as if there were no question of an ironic distance between her class politics and those of the author; as if Clarissa were unproblematically to be endorsed on this point (or, even more often, endorsed while largely ignoring this point, this textually central matter of class). Thus Clarissa has been celebrated. Not uncritically, of course: each reader, each critic, has had their own reservations, their own sense of what they are called upon, as exasperated friends, to forgive her for: snobbery, say, as well as a certain coldness; a lack of sympathy, a lack of certain kinds of humane interest in the world; for some, a lack of sensuality, even of sexuality; for some, a lack of a political commitment. Often enough this is the result of an aesthetic maneuver – metonymy, in a certain sense – by which the reader associates Clarissa’s enthusiasm, her giddiness, her rapture at the world, with what one imagines to be the author’s own enthusiasm, giddiness and rapture at her portrayal of Clarissa. For some readers, particularly outside the United Kingdom, this effect is then reinforced by a somewhat imprecise sense of Virginia Woolf’s own class position: as the opening pages of Hermione Lee’s biography attest, many people have a vague sense of Woolf as a “snob,” and one perhaps then assumes that
she and her circle, on the one hand, and Clarissa and her imagined circle, on the other, probably belong to the same sociological milieu, and have a roughly analogous set of values.¹²

Readings of this kind could no doubt be effective for purposes other than ours. For us, though, their chief significance is that they allow one to avoid being struck by the various layers of

¹² Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). It seems fair to say that this straight reading of Clarissa is by way of becoming that elusive thing, the “standard reading.” The majority of critics I have come across seem to feel that Clarissa is endorsed by the text, of course allowing for certain reservations. Such readings are then able to see the novel as a whole as a kind of joyous affirmation of London, of modernity, and of the new possibilities for permeable subjectivity that the modern metropolis makes available. Even Alison Light, whose fine book *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008) is very attentive to the issue of master-servant relations in Woolf’s own life, nevertheless reads *Mrs Dalloway* in this way as a “celebration of London,” without any mention of the ways in which the novel, right from the opening lines, seems bent on raising the question of class precisely via the specific topos of domestic servitude. More generally, if one is prepared to endorse *Mrs Dalloway* then it is easy to end up limiting the various critiques of modernity that the book seems to raise by clustering them solely around Septimus, the victim of modernity (victim of the Great war, victim of the new institutions of psychology, and so), rather bring them home to Mrs Dalloway herself, whom the novel really entertains as both a victim and a villain in the story of class relations.


My sense is that many of these readings spring from a characteristically liberal structure of feeling, in which one comes to a novel expecting to have to sympathise with the victims, certainly, but not to see oneself as one of them (except of course in certain specific genres). For those of us interested in setting the texts to work in the present as a means of aesthetic education, and thus also as a means of moral, social, and political education, the risk here is that this mode of reading puts us back in the territory of Nussbaum, where all too often the task seem to be to learn to sympathize with those poor unfortunate who do not have the privilege of being oneself. We would then join the long line of liberal thinkers who place “sympathy” at the top of the list of moral virtues, bracketing the political. In the interests of being clear and open about the position from which I am trying to make this critique, it may be helpful to record here my sense of one of the chief differences between liberalism and radicalism in this respect. Speaking schematically, when one is at the top of the pile within liberalism one feels that one is lucky to live the way one does, and one generously wants to extend that opportunity to others. In contrast, people become radicalized when they start to feel dissatisfied or disappointed with their own lot, as well as with the lots of others. For the radical, with whatever further distinctions and provisos, the fight for the other is then the same as the fight for the self. A *Mrs Dalloway* who returned to follow Morris and Shelley would be one who had managed to imagine what she already knows: she will continue to be the villain just so long as she is unwilling to acknowledge herself the victim of capitalism, and then act on that knowledge by seeking to transform her life, and in her – our – own interest, not simply in “sympathy” with others.
ambivalence the whole text offers, thereby short-circuiting one of the most important aesthetic features of the text and rendering it less useful as a means of cultivating our political sensibility on this issue of class. Thus it seems worthwhile to trouble these kinds of readings by arguing, for a moment, for their opposite; and to do this it will be necessary to welcome some additional fragments of context into the text. Specifically, I am going to bring in some more reflections, not just about the figure of Woolf herself, but about her milieu and class position. This has the advantage of allowing us to see the ways in which the methodology I am proposing is capable of dealing, not just with the issue of “authorial intention,” here rethought as the issue of the aesthetic potential of our sense of the significance of the implied author, but also the issue of historical milieu, here rethought as the issue of the aesthetic potential of what we might perhaps call the “implied Bloomsbury”: the projected picture of Bloomsbury, and of the possible significance of Bloomsbury, with which a reader may engage aesthetically when they engage with the whole text of *Mrs Dalloway*.

One could of course choose many different sources for this. I have chosen David Garnett, a younger participant in the Bloomsbury scene, writing in 1979.\(^{13}\) He describes *Mrs Dalloway* as he felt those in his particular class fraction understood it as follows:

> The theme of *Mrs Dalloway* is probably more easily missed by the younger generation and by foreigners than by those who grew up surrounded by the English social scene before the first war. The theme of *Mrs Dalloway* is the death of the soul, or perhaps one should say the withering, for death is an exaggeration. It is the study of a woman who as a girl had her chance but took the wrong turning, who failed to realize her highest potentialities by timidly sticking to the traditions of her class.

For our purposes, this last word is the key note: Garnett is telling us that, at least for a particular class fraction at a particular point in time, the charge (within the novel, Peter’s charge) that Clarissa has allowed her soul to wither was a political charge. It seems worth remembering this, not strictly

or merely out of any particular sense of fidelity to the context of production (with which it is in any case impossible ever to hold faith completely), but just in order to prevent one of the text’s most powerful aesthetic circuits from shorting out. Garnett is telling us that, for Bloomsbury types, the novel was a kind of satire on Clarissa, and specifically on a Clarissa considered as a representative of her class. This reading rests on a sense that Woolf’s milieu – which is also the milieu of the readers Garnett is claiming to speak for – and the milieu into which Clarissa is being imagined are not the same, and that there is something at stake in this difference. We might flesh this out by recalling that Woolf’s Bloomsbury was what Noel Annan, in his classic account, dubbed an “intellectual” aristocracy, rather than a real one, whereas Clarissa and her circle are palpably a cut above this, as well as a step to the right: they are people whom one could describe as aristocrats, in a loose but certainly current sense of the term. Or rather – to put this more precisely – Clarissa’s milieu is a class-fraction that Woolf’s own class-fraction could describe, critically, as an aristocracy, the sociologically imprecise use of the term then illuminating something about Woolf’s own class position, as we shall see. At stake in this class difference is the possibility of political critique. If we are prepared to follow Garnett, what the novel can provide us with (and here I would rather say keeps threatening to provide us with, without ever quite providing in any committed way) is a portrait of a woman who, far from living an enviable, secure, and above all rich life, as many readers seem to feel, has in fact lost everything: she has debased herself, and lost everything that ought to have mattered most to her, precisely by “timidly sticking to the traditions of her class.” This, I think, is an important element of what one might consider a potential “Bloomsbury reading” of the novel, which, if the twenty-first century reader can be allowed to project it and engage with it in a rich way, is itself a part of the whole text of the novel today, and thus a source of some of the text’s most powerful aesthetic, and thereby political, effects.

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As a contrast with those views that would see the text as a reasonably unproblematic, and certainly quite apolitical, celebration of Clarissa, it is worth taking the time to register the force of this “Bloomsbury reading.” For if Clarissa’s rapturous embrace of “life; London; this moment of June” draws out of many readers a strong urge to identify with her, and indeed to long to be her or be with her, we must at the same time see how the text repeatedly diagnoses Clarissa’s raptures as symptoms of a deeper condition – a condition that makes identifying with her much less comfortable, and so much more challenging and worthwhile. Three times in the first three paragraphs the novel tries to show us that Clarissa orients herself outwards, towards the present, largely because her inwardness is so problematic: left to its own devices, her mind continually threatens to make sense of the real dissatisfactions of her present situation – among them, her discomfort with the role of master, and all it entails – by seeing them as the result of choices she made at a series of crucial turning points in her past.

The first of the novel’s attempts to show us this, we have already observed: Clarissa’s initial rapture (to buy the flowers oneself!) is, as we saw, at least in part a way of avoiding a deeper political anxiety. Here it may help to observe this from another angle. Why, one might wonder, does Clarissa leave the house in the first place? It is of course a lovely morning. But surely the prospect of a morning’s shopping also owes some of its charms to the discomforts that would accompany the alternative, which is remaining in the house while the domestic servants and hired men go about their work to prepare it for the party. One would have to give orders, perhaps; or else one would have to sit by and pretend not to be bothered. There is that awkwardness. It is, moreover, an awkwardness that raises real anxieties about oneself and one’s place in the world, rubbing as it does against one’s sense of oneself as a modern, benevolent, liberal person. Stepping out of the house for a while seems to promise to allow one to absent oneself from these anxieties.
So as Clarissa tumbles out the door, feeling but also affecting a certain rapture and distractedness, she seems to be hoping that the city’s call to outwardness, its call to further distractions, and with it the feeling of the open air around her, will come as a relief and a liberation from an inwardness and a closed domesticity made problematic by her role as master. Does Clarissa get what she hopes for? Here it will be necessary to quote at some length in order to capture the rhythm of the novel’s first three paragraphs. Clarissa bursts outwards:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, “Musing among the vegetables?” – was that it? – “I prefer men to cauliflowers” – was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out onto the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb…

One sentence, three sentences, then the whole of a tumbling paragraph bring Clarissa out from inside the house and onto the kerb. It certainly seems as if doors and windows are being flung open, in the style as well as in the London of the novel: as if a kind of modernist spring has arrived in the musty Edwardian or even Victorian house, and the writing is breaking us out of the old, blunt, constricting world of domestic realism, full of static objects and old anxieties, and letting us
promenade freely with Clarissa out into the present, out into the city, out indeed into modernity itself (“life, London; this moment of June”). Yet against our sense of the passage’s outward movement we must place the realization that there is almost nothing in the passage about the present, the city, the bustling modern; that in fact there is almost no outwardness at all in Clarissa’s “stream of consciousness” here – for when one looks one finds only three points at which the passage can plausibly be construed as indicating that Clarissa is conscious of anything outside herself. Everything else in the first and second paragraphs is in the future; everything else in the third paragraph is in the past. Those three hints of outwardness then come to seem significant. First there is Clarissa’s sense of the freshness of the morning (“what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach”); second there is, possibly, the sound of the hinges of the front door as she opens it (“a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now”), and third there is the feeling of the open air around her once she gets outside (“stiller than this of course”). None are really celebrations of the present world of sense impressions, of the city, or of modernity; rather all are complicatedly bound up with Clarissa’s anxieties about her class position; anxieties that tug her back into the past. Let us read them in turn.

To see the first in action, we will need to follow quite closely. If Clarissa is leaving the house in order to escape the inner discomfort that arises when she is forced to think of herself in her relation to her servants, then the first moment of outwardness does seem to come as a relief: “And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” What is the comparison, and what does it tell us about Clarissa’s particular sense of the freshness of the morning? I think perhaps we are meant to understand that the morning is being compared, via simile, to an “ice” or “ice cream” (such as might be “issued to children on a beach”) – and that is certainly fresh and relieving enough. We can add that this is not solely a simile, but also a metonymy, in that Clarissa is also vaguely and happily associating the freshness of the morning with
the freshness of children and the freshness of a beach. And we can add more again, because the whole implied scene has its own affective charge: one is a child among other children on a summer holiday, being given an “ice” for no reason other than the pleasure of the thing. The morning, then, like the ice cream, is “issued” to all, deserving and undeserving alike, with the question of adult judgment temporarily suspended. Is it too much to detect a dream of a certain kind of equality here? Is it too much to say also that, buried somewhere within the appeal of this standard scene is an even deeper appeal – an appeal to the possibility of grace? As if the morning – soon to be figured as “life; London; this moment of June” – were given to everyone freely, to do what they want with; as if it did not carry with it any sense of obligation, any question of conscience or super-ego; any need for forgiveness, or for reciprocal exchange? Regardless of what we think of this suggestion, it seems clear that the sensitivity, one might even say the naiveté, of the sentiment here contrasts favorably with the affectedness of her initial declaration. If the initial declaration that she would buy the flowers herself sprang from a mode of feeling proper to a “Mrs Dalloway,” then this sincere, if perhaps sentimental (“children on a beach”), embrace of the beauty of the morning belongs rather to a “Clarissa Dalloway” – not quite the same person, as we shall see. For once one has observed the way that this split between the older woman and the younger plays out throughout the rest of the novel, one is even tempted to say that “Mrs Dalloway” leaves the house, not simply to enjoy the morning or even to evade the class anxieties that cluster within the domestic scene, but in the hope of becoming once again “Clarissa” – in the hope of regaining something of that openness to experience, that sense of possibility, which she feels she had in her youth, before the crucial turning point at Bourton.

15 If one is willing to go this far, then perhaps one is willing to go further and say that here, too, the escape from class anxieties brings her back to them: surely for late-Victorians or Edwardians the ability to issue “ices” to one’s children is a class marker.

16 Later, we might recall, a strong contrast will be made between Clarissa’s mode of sincere outwardness, as here, and Mrs Dalloway’s, which is largely the distractedness of shopping. Thus, as she walks up Bond street:
So stepping out of the house does seem to offer her a kind of relief – the relief of a naïve outwardness and enthusiasm, a receptivity to the present, a “fresh,” youthful sense of each moment being full of possibility. But in fact becoming Clarissa again, even for a moment, carries with it its own problems, for it quickly takes Mrs Dalloway, not into a fuller relationship to the present, but back into her past. The first sign of the danger comes with the line “Fresh as if issued to children on a beach,” dangerous not only because it shades towards sentimentality, but because it seems to touch on the possibility that for Mrs Dalloway the simple outwardness, the full presentness that is meant to bring her relief from her inner anxieties will turn out to be achievable only via the problematic mode of nostalgia, as a memory of a lost Eden. Here this is just the slightest hint of a theme that will return quite firmly later, bringing with it one of the novel’s key problematics: under pressure to embark on a thorough reconsideration of her life, Mrs Dalloway tries to escape by becoming Clarissa, for whom the question of a wasted life has not yet arrived; but doing so ties her in a kind of loop, for in the absence of any willingness to reconsider her life, Clarissa is destined, in time, to become Mrs Dalloway. This problem is one of her central preoccupations throughout the novel: she is able to avoid asking herself whether her life ought to have turned out differently only by returning in memory to just those scenes in which that question is raised most insistently. Here it may help to recall just one of many examples, this one from the climactic scene in which she kisses Peter:

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She had the oddest sense of herself being invisible, unseen, unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway.

Bond street fascinated her; Bond street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops…

(10-11)

Again here, when her mind threatens to come to rest on the problems of her present situation, her response is to flit away outwards into a celebration of the (commercial) present. She runs out, after all, to “buy.”
“Do you remember the lake?” she said, in an abrupt voice, under the pressure of an emotion which caught her heart, made the muscles of her throat stiff, and contracted her lips in a spasm as she said “lake.” For she was a child, throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, “This is what I have made of it! This!” And what had she made of it? What indeed? sitting there sewing this morning with Peter.

(43)

Here, at a moment of crisis, Clarissa’s deep anxiety about what she has made of her life surfaces in a way that reveals what lay beneath the second paragraph’s “What a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” The two scenes, the first implied and the second remembered, are quite similar: though the “beach” of the first has become a “lake” in the second, the key element of a child in rapture while exchanging something with an adult is the same. Both scenes call out to that part of us that wants to embrace ourselves as children relating to our parents, receiving or giving. Here the more extended treatment of the scene allows the underside of the rapture to become more apparent. If, in the first, the ice cream – the morning – perhaps even “life” itself seemed a gift given to us freely by our parents, as an act of grace, here in this more extended scene it seems that we are being called upon to return it to them: to repay them, in a sense, by submitting our “life” for their judgment after all. Much of the force and beauty of the passage derives from its rather extraordinary willingness to imagine this reciprocity, this submission for judgment, as entirely voluntary: as if the act of presenting our lives to our parents for judgment were also a kind of gift we give them, entirely freely, not in exchange for their having given us life, the morning, to begin with, not because they have done anything in particular to deserve it, but simply as another act of grace. What does it mean to hold out hope for such a thing, as Mrs Dalloway seems to? Does Woolf hope, too? Under the pressure of what kinds of anxieties about one’s life does one come to dwell on such a hope? Here, it seems that the utopian prospect of an entirely happy relation to the life that one has chosen, and to the thought of it being judged, is both a pleasure and a pain: Mrs Dalloway escapes into this fantasy
only to find that it raises the question of judgment in the old way once again. For what is this “lake” that she is remembering? It is the “lake” at Bourton; the lake on which Clarissa, Peter, Sally, and Richard had gone out rowing by moonlight; the lake on which it was decided, somehow, that she would marry Richard Dalloway; the lake on which “Clarissa” set her course to become “Mrs Dalloway.” That scene, and others from the same few days at Bourton, echo through the novel. As much as Clarissa tries, the question of what she has made of her life cannot be avoided: despite her best efforts, she fears – knows – resists knowing – she has made a mess of it.

Returning to the novel’s second paragraph, we can now see more fully the danger that accompanies the movement from “And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning” to “fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” As soon as she manages to achieve a real outwardness, an embrace of the present, both her hopes and her anxieties draw her inwards to a past that threatens to put the present to shame. This, I take it, is what explains the paragraph break, and her movement through to the next lines. Her achieved sincerity threatening to lead her back into a confrontation with real problems, she breaks off that line of thinking and returns to the solution she was trying out when we first met her: an affected rapture. “What a lark! What a plunge!” The artificiality of the tone here should tell us that the problematic trace of “Clarissa” has now been suppressed once again; we are back in the mind of a “Mrs Dalloway.” This note, played delicately here, will soon become a major theme.

We then come to the first full paragraph – and the second slight hint of outwardness in these otherwise entirely inwards “opening” lines. Here once again a usefully distracting insistence on embracing the present, an affected celebration of the value of one’s present experience – “What a lark! What a plunge!” – turns inwards again and to the past. This time the turn is effected by the squeak of a hinge. “That little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now”: this sound, like the
taste of the madeleine in Proust, exists in a doubled time: it seems that we should perhaps understand Mrs Dalloway to be hearing it “now” in the present, as she opens the door to step out onto the street, and she is also hearing it “now” in memory, as it used to be at Bourton in her youth. What we have seen so far makes it easier to observe the loveliness of the writing here: the sound of her leaving to embrace outwardness and the present is the very sound that swings her back inwards and into the past. But what is the effect of this being achieved by way of the sound of “hinges,” of all things? Hinges turn and turn back, of course, and I suppose one could make much of this. But it is actually clearer than that, for if we are reading carefully we will remember that we have seen these “hinges” before, just a few lines earlier: “The doors will be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming.” What are we to make of this repetition? I think we must say that when Clarissa opens the door and hears the sound of its hinges, she is at risk of thinking about the “men” who will soon come to take the doors off their hinges – the men she was thinking about just a moment before. One might say, it is those same damned “hinges” again – those hinges that should, by all rights, be performing their labor silently, unnoticed, but instead keep insisting on giving their “little squeak.” Since this is the very thought she is leaving the house to avoid, the sound of the hinges must be turned into something else – here, a Proustian madeleine, to bring her out of the present. The embrace of outwardness proves little help to her, for it reminds her of what she is trying to avoid. In the face of those difficult questions she flees once again into the past.

From this point onwards, the passage will deal almost exclusively with that past. The one hint of the present scene that remains, which is Clarissa’s residual sense of the fresh and liberating quality of the open air, is soon swamped. From the rapt outwardness of “what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach,” we soon move to “how fresh, how calm,” now doubled like the madeleine, both present and past; then the charm of the present begins to look rather pale in comparison with that of the past (“stiller than this, of course, the air [at Bourton] was in the early morning”); and then
finally, the present having gone under, even the past becomes problematic as a means of escape – for there, she remembers suddenly, there was beneath the freshness, the clam, the stillness, the feeling that “something awful was about to happen.” This is just the same pattern we saw played out in such subtle form in the movement from “What a morning” to “fresh as if issued to children on a beach,” now expanded and made clear.

What is that “something awful,” and why does her mind return her to it now, when she is trying to avoid thinking about the servants? Like the hinges and the open air, the sense that “something awful was about to happen” exists in two times. The mature woman thinks it now, in the novel’s present, and in the formal structure of the novel it becomes a kind of prophecy about Septimus’ suicide, and thus a confirmation in advance of her preternatural sensitivity to him, and to at least part of what he represents. But the young Clarissa at Bourton thinks it too, or at least the mature Mrs Dalloway remembers her as if she had; and here I think it can only be taken to refer to something very like what Garnett means when he describes the novel as the story of “a woman who as a girl had her chance but took the wrong turning.”

What then was her “wrong turning” on this reading? At a local level there are many alternatives, all hinted at and recalled for the re-reader in the first few pages. Is it her refusal to marry Peter? (“If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!”). Is it the conventionality that leaves her unwilling to follow through on her love for Sally? (“she is beneath this roof… she is beneath this roof!”). Her marrying of Dalloway, specifically? (“he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words”). For those who suspect Clarissa of a “wrong turning,” these romantic mistakes, in their various combinations, have traditionally been the favored candidates, but it is perhaps better to say that her “wrong turning” was all of these things and more. For the interest of this “Bloomsbury reading” of the novel is that it gives us a way take all these alternatives together
and connect them with others, potentially of even more significance. Or, turning this on its head, we might say that this reading shows us that one of the aesthetic powers of the novel is that it gives us a way to feel the political interconnectedness of so many issues that might otherwise be felt as separate: in Garnett’s formulation the whole idea of keeping one’s “soul” alive, of realizing one’s “highest potentialities,” seems even quite radical, at least in a certain sense of the term, in its ability to bind together any number of political issues under the central question of class. For what Garnett is really telling us is that this novel raises, as gestural but nevertheless real desires, a whole host of rather radical possibilities, any of which would require for its fulfillment a general abandonment of the “traditions of [Clarissa’s] class.” In Clarissa’s nostalgia for Peter, we have the possibility of genuine intellectual friendship with a partner; in her nostalgia for Sally, the possibility of passionate non-normative sexual love; in her worry about “being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway,” the possibility of an end to patriarchy; in her sense of herself, not as a self-sufficient individual, but as a “part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best,” the possibility of a genuinely social understanding of society; we even have, just hinted at in her continual longing to return to Bourton, that “image of white dawn in the country,” the possibility of a more positive relation to the natural world. In Garnett’s particular formulation of the Bloomsbury reading, all of these longings amount to Clarissa’s soul, which she has let wither just by “timidly sticking to the traditions of her class”; which is to say that read in this way the novel presents us with a whole range of profound and potentially radicalizing desires, all bound together, and indeed bound up and prevented from reaching their fulfillment, by the central question of class.

This is why Clarissa “stiffens” on the kerb at the end of the passage: for the second time, she starts a new paragraph by reasserting herself as Mrs Dalloway, trying to put all those radical possibilities aside. It is against the background of this kind of diagnosis of her situation that we must read the
real outwardness, the tumble of genuinely present sense impressions, in the two pages that follow –
the pages that centre around her famous celebration of “life; London; this moment of June” – a
celebration which is really an attempt at once to distract from and to compensate for her half
knowledge, her knowing-without-knowing, that she has ruined her life by her failure to break herself
out of the prejudices of her class. One might say that all her moments of outwardness, of
embracing the present, are motivated by an attempt to avoid acknowledging what she already knows
– that she has ruined her life precisely by her unwillingness to allow herself the category of “political
feeling.” If this seems a stretch – if we think that Clarissa must have moved on from those anxieties
by now, and left her worries about Bourton and that “something awful” behind her in an access of
summer and shopping – then we should note finally the brief encounter to which those two pages of
outwardness lead:

“Good-morning to you, Clarissa!” said Hugh, rather extravagantly, for they had known each
other as children. “Where are you off to?”

“I love walking in London,” said Mrs. Dalloway. “Really it’s better than walking in the
country.”

(6-7)

Her comparison between London and the country here, to London’s benefit, is hardly a response to
Hugh, except in so far as he reminds her of her youth: rather it exposes the fact that something else
has been occupying her mind for the last two pages, to which the rapturous celebration of the city is
merely a response. Mrs Dalloway is trying to reassure herself that her situation is, after all, better
than Clarissa’s. Much of the character’s celebrated sensitivity to the present, to the city, and to
modernity, figured as life itself – indeed, her purported status as modernist “flaneur” – rests on this
dubious basis. Her tremendous capacity for affirming present experience is at the same time also an
attempt to avoid recognizing the real contours of her situation – an attempt that never quite
succeeds, but never quite fails either. It is motivated, at root, by desperation: she is horribly stuck in
her present life; she knows, really, that she needs to go back to her past to recognize why, and thus how to change her present situation; but she is also unwilling to allow herself to come to that recognition, because she knows what she will find, how radical a revaluation of her values will be required of her, and so she shrinks before the difficulties that this involves. All this is implied in Garnett’s reading of *Mrs Dalloway* as a “study of a woman who as a girl had her chance but took the wrong turning, who failed to realize her highest potentialities by timidly sticking to the traditions of her class.”

What Garnett does not tell us, but that I think is implicit in his reading, is that the text seems to put in question, not only Clarissa’s “timidly sticking to the traditions of her class,” but also Woolf’s, though of course at this level the question is raised with considerably greater ambivalence. If the novel allows us to see Clarissa’s failure in such clear terms, does it therefore represent Woolf’s own attempt to do the opposite: to make a decisive break with the “traditions of her class,” and proceed instead to write from “deep [political] feeling”? Or would that be a “pose”? Certainly at key moments the implied author too seems to long for the fulfillment of certain “higher potentialities,” many of which seem profoundly political in their implications. The implied author certainly seems to feel many of the longings on the list above, and perhaps more deeply and thoroughly than Clarissa does; and we would also need to add to that list the novel’s repeated (though veiled) hints at the violence of Empire, that rely for their force on the imagining of a possibility of a world without imperialism, and which Clarissa does not seem a close party to, since they arise chiefly by way of other characters. Most of all we would have to add the novel’s bitter critique of the treatment of Septimus, and of his suicide, which seems designed to make us long as powerfully as the implied author herself does for a social order that would allow us to deal better with the whole great questions of “life and death, sanity and insanity.” If we read the novel in this way then it comes to seem exactly what Woolf almost said she wanted it to be, before accusing herself of posing: a novel
in which the powerful treatment of “life and death, sanity and insanity” would lead directly into a
critique of the “social system” as a whole, including her own place in it. On Garnett’s reading, then,
the tone of the first line is clear enough: there is an ironic distance between the class attitude
described and the real position of the implied author – which is to say that we are meant to critique
Clarissa. This means that Woolf is doing what Clarissa is not, and breaking with her class. “One
must write from deep feeling,” Woolf thinks, following “Dostoievsky” – and on this “Bloomsbury
reading” of the novel those deep feelings are, in the end, political.

Yet we have already seen that at various points in our text, as we have so far assembled it, the
implied Woolf has her doubts about this: first in the opening lines of the novel, where the possibility
of political feeling seems to be raised ambivalently, as a question; and second in the diary, in that
retreat from “deep [political] feeling” into the charge of “posing.” And indeed, having introduced
this reading in order to trouble those who would see the novel as an unproblematic celebration of
Clarissa, one then wonders whether it really takes into account the complexity of the style of the
whole text, and of the tone in particular. To stay for a moment with just the work (rather than the
whole text), this reading would see the novel’s style as preserving, for the most part, an ironic
distance between Woolf’s own implied tone and Clarissa’s more evident one: a distance that allows
for political satire. Yet if we agree with this, then our sense of the novel as a kind of satire
presumably rests also, at least in part, on a straight reading of lines like these, from the famous scene
in which Clarissa learns about and reflects on Septimus’ suicide:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in
her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter.

(184)

She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted
success. Lady Bexborough and the rest of it. And once she had walked on the terrace at
Bourton.

(185)
Here the “Bloomsbury reading” we have been outlining appears more or less directly in the work itself. Like the novel’s opening line, these lines from the novel’s climax are complicated by the ambiguity of the free indirect style, albeit in an opposite and somewhat subtler way: the lines are certainly the product of Clarissa’s mind – they are her “stream of consciousness,” if you like – but now our question is to what extent it is Clarissa who is truly responsible for them: responsible for these lines which sound so much like they might secretly belong to the author. One wonders to what extent Clarissa’s thinking them absolves her, in some sense, of the charge they level at her, and that the author too seems elsewhere to have leveled at her: to what extent her ability to acknowledge these hard facts about herself, and to feel the significance of Septimus’ death as fully as she does by perceiving in it the potential for some other, less corrupted way of conducting one’s life and death, make her suddenly “admirable.” By reinstating Clarissa as a potential object of praise, this would constitute the collapse of the irony that Garnett seems to see in the tone elsewhere. Once we note this tension, which, if not quite a double bind, is at least a significant ambivalence, we must break with Garnett and ask again: what kind of critique is really being offered here? What kind of class critique, since that is the issue that the novel seems to have raised? What kind of sensibility about class are we being exposed to?

V

We are presented with a kind of dilemma, then, because we have two opposing readings before us, neither of which seems to take into account the full ambivalence of the text as we have construed it, and yet between which it is difficult to see a middle road. Before us we have both the reading of the text that would see it as a relatively unproblematic celebration of Clarissa, and also, to correct for that, the opposite reading – our imagined “Bloomsbury reading” – in which Clarissa is the object of a wholehearted and ultimately political critique. If the first line of the novel is ambivalent, then it is
because both these readings are implicit there. In order to work this dilemma through, it might be helpful to restate it in generic terms as a conflict between reading the novel as social comedy and reading it as political satire. In the first type of reading, there is a breach in the social order – Septimus and all he represents – but the breach is healed in the end, for after all the war is over, Septimus has passed away, and Clarissa is redeemed by her ability to sympathize with him. On this reading Clarissa herself has her flaws, but she is so lovable in her varied and subtle movements of consciousness and sympathy, that we cannot really blame her for them. This would be to see the whole novel as bathed in the forgiving light of social comedy. In contrast, in the second reading Clarissa is critiqued as part of a broader criticism of her type: in having her limitations pointed out to us, we come to see the limitations of her whole class, which is to say that when we see her soul “withering” we see the withering of a whole range of powerful political possibilities: we see indeed the suffering her whole class and type causes. This would be the harsh light of satire.

Once we have articulated the difference between these two readings in such stark terms, one perhaps begins to feel that it would be truer to the complexity of the novel to say that the truth is somewhere between the two: that we should read in such a way as to blend together the two lights, the forgiving light of social comedy and the harsh light of satire. But is that option really available to us? What kind of light would that be? I put these readings in such blunt terms because it strikes me that the text’s ambivalence derives precisely from a failure – perhaps in important respects an inevitable failure – to find a compromise or middle road between comedy and satire, whatever that might mean. The tension of the text, the tension that resides in the tone, is in large part this tension between two opposing and incompatible impulses, each of which necessarily makes its demands in a way that excludes the other. Returning to the novel’s first line, then, we might say that the ambivalence in the tone – are we meant to endorse this carefully described class attitude, or critique it? – is a generic ambivalence, or even something bordering on what we might think of as a generic
double bind: not an inhabiting of a grey middle ground, but a fraught teetering on the line that divides white from black, comedy from satire.

I have found only one critic who manages to articulate something like this: William Empson, who did so in an article entitled “Mrs Dalloway,” published in a Japanese journal in 1932 – an article which was, in 1933, significantly re-titled “Mrs Dalloway as a Political Satire.” As the title suggests, Empson shares Garnett’s “Bloomsbury reading” to the extent that he reads the novel as an attempt at political satire. Unlike Garnett, however, he sees the novel as a failed attempt. He demonstrates this failure in a way that is, I think, exceptionally sensitive to the ambivalence of Woolf’s tone. He writes:

There is a tone of girlish petulance about [Mrs Dalloway’s] claims to safety which Mrs Woolf seems not so much to satirise in the worldly as to view with distaste in herself:

[Here Empson quotes from the novel:]

She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again) – no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn’t that help the Armenians?) - the only flowers she could bear to see cut.

The snuffle and titter of this is Mrs Woolf’s own voice, but she is not praising it in Mrs Dalloway.

The careful balance of this last sentence is worth remarking on. Empson’s explicit point in this excerpt is that in critiquing Mrs Dalloway, Woolf is potentially also subjecting herself to a serious

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18 Also worth remarking on here is the everyday misogyny of the rhetoric to which terms like “girlish petulance” belong: a class of rhetoric that will soon lead Empson to frame his main claim, very unfortunately, in terms of the “fertility” or otherwise of Woolf’s achievement. This seems an instance of the same patriarchal structure of feeling we noted earlier, though now that structure is offering up the other side of one of its contradictions. If, earlier, we saw the implied author having to retreat from making political claims partly in order to defend herself against the charge of being naïve – which is to say, against the charge of being too childish and too feminine in her belief that her views on politics would or should be taken seriously – here the same structure of feeling is capable of dismissing her as “girlish” for not being
critique; but his last sentence pointedly avoids specifying the extent to which that critique is really allowed to hit home. Here we have moved on a step from our initial question of whether, or to what extent, we should understand Mrs Dalloway’s class attitude and Woolf’s as in some sort of proximity: for Empson here, character and author clearly share the same attitude, and the question now is of the extent to which Woolf is prepared to critique those views, not just in her character, but in herself.

For Empson it is this kind of ambivalence that finally leads to the novel’s failure as a political satire. He tells us that his point:

is not that [Woolf] loves her aristocrats too much but that the book, like most post-war good writing, makes a blank statement of conflict; she shows that she can feel on both sides, knows both how to love and to hate her aristocrats, and takes that for an achievement, which indeed it is, but not a fertile one.

(452)

An “achievement,” but “not a fertile one.” To return for a moment to our generic characterization of the novel, it strikes me that in emphasizing the way the book fails by putting too much stock in an attempt to “feel on both sides,” what Empson is really describing is the collapse of a satirical project into something like a project of forgiving social comedy. For him the book gives up on any genuinely political aims and instead contents itself with pretending to resolve the conflict in the social order – specifically, the class conflict in the social order – when it decides to offer merely a gesture of reconciliation, a politically inert extension of sympathy and fellow-feeling. But the problem to which Empson is drawing our attention is larger than this: it is not only that Woolf’s attempt to “feel on both sides” is politically ineffective, largely because it fails to leads to genuine

political enough. Without wanting to be mealy-mouthed about this kind of misogyny, which deserves the sternest critique, it is perhaps worth adding that Empson, with his personal commitment to certain rather radical types of gender equality in the private sphere, is hardly the first target one would choose when attacking patriarchy in this period. The presence of this class of rhetoric in his work is a testament to its pervasiveness. I note this by way of intensifying rather than tempering the critique.
self-critique; it is also the fact that her sympathy here is in any case misdirected. Clarissa, for her part, at least sympathises with Septimus, even if it leads her to change nothing; but in contrast Woolf herself, when she decides to embark on an exercise in sympathy, chooses to take as the object of her sympathy not the classes beneath her, but the class above her: the “aristocrats.” Thus Empson’s critique, if we flesh it out a little, is not simply that the book fails by retreating from political satire into an inert, comic attempt to make us “feel on both sides”: it is also that the book fails because “both sides” here means, not “master” and “servant,” which might seem the obvious way to go, given the anxieties called up by the opening line; still less “capitalist” and “worker,” which was certainly one of the more evident options available to Woolf in her historical context; but instead “Bloomsbury” and “aristocracy.” Given this, it is not hard to see why Empson feels that the political project of the book has collapsed.

This is a very telling critique of the novel, and once one has felt the force of it perhaps the temptation for some of us is to put the book away. For, given what we have seen of the ambivalence of the tone, I think we have to agree that _Mrs Dalloway_ is a failure when assessed as a political satire; and perhaps we even agree with both Empson and Garnett that it was really intended as a political satire, or at least should be assessed as a political satire regardless — though I am about to question this. More generally — and the persuasiveness of the following comment will of course depend a great deal on both one’s politics and one’s aesthetics — it seems worth adding that one might justifiably want to follow Empson just a little further than Empson himself wanted to go, and long instead for another Woolf, a Woolf we so almost had but now never will: a Woolf who could have taken that profound step beyond the particular boundaries of her class, and so brought her extraordinary aesthetic powers to bear for purposes that would ultimately have proved both more radical, in terms of her class context, and also more humane. All this seems evident enough. Yet even if we feel we must acknowledge all this, then still we are left with the fact of the novel’s
extraordinary aesthetic sophistication: its fullness, its capaciousness, the depth of its engagement with so much of life. This is not, I think, a question of opposing the realm of “politics” on the one hand to the realm of “aesthetics” on the other. Rather, what is at stake here is precisely the conjunction of the two, by which each is changed – and not through the mere analysis of the ways that conjunction has occurred in the past, or even of the ways it occurs in the present, but by way of an active attempt to make the conjunction, in the service of whatever purposes we think most humane today. For if we put the book away, or else see fit to use it either as a way to unearth the facts of a particular cultural history, worthwhile “for its own sake,” as is sometimes said, or as a sensitive registering apparatus for the study of ideology, which has been the dominant mode in left-leaning literary study over the past three decades, then that would leave us unable to avail ourselves of the truly political opportunity its aesthetic sophistication presents: the opportunity to use that aesthetic complexity for the cultivation of our political sensibilities. In this kind of cultivation, our sense of the work’s origins in a particular cultural formation, even a cultural formation that is at many levels deeply troubling and objectionable, is neither ignored nor treated as a symptom of deeper ideological forces, but instead comes to form part of the aesthetic potential of the work for present-day readers. It therefore seems better, having acknowledged the limitations of the novel, to face the fact that we have the work we have, and then try to put it to use as a text, as best we may.

For our purposes, then, it seems fair to ask of both Empson and Garnett whether or not it is really true that this text is most usefully approached as a political satire. I think we have seen enough now to say that it is not, for the text as a whole seems to derive much of its power precisely from its ambivalence on this issue of genre – this fraught teetering between satire and comedy. Clearing away the demand that the novel function specifically as satire allows us to see what is really so incisive about Empson’s reading: Empson sees, in a way that few readers have managed to do, that *Mrs Dalloway* really is, at heart, something very like a political novel, albeit a highly ambivalent one.
Or rather, as I think we are now in a position to put it, *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel struggling with the question of whether or not to become a “political novel” in some larger sense not reducible to “political satire”: it is a novel struggling with this question of whether or not to allow itself to register the force, indeed the very possibility, of “deep [political] feeling.” Rather than being the record or staging of a political crisis, whether at a personal or social level, it is better seen as a staging of the drama of whether or not to have a political crisis, even whether or not to admit that it is possible for an individual to have a political crises, really, and not just as a “pose”: or, lastly, whether or not to admit the very possibility of political modes of feeling when doing so threatens to necessitate a thorough revision of one’s whole system of values. Within that broad field of the political, one of the central dramas of the text as we are now reading it is this teetering, this hovering on the edge of a political critique, and perhaps even a positive political commitment, with regard to the specific issue of class.

VI

Given the nature of the political crisis on offer, it seems important to construe the text in such a way as to allow these questions not simply a personal, but also a social force. So far we have seen that the first line of the novel represents the dramatization of the “personal” struggle of the implied author, the Woolf of the diary – the struggle of whether or not that implied Woolf will allow herself to enter into the world of political feeling. The reader undergoes the text in large part by imaginatively entering into the drama of that struggle, continually both entreating and rejecting the kind of crisis of values that would result if they were to allow themselves to feel the force of deep political feelings about class relations. But Empson’s observation that the novel is really an attempt to “feel on both sides,” together with our observation that for this novel “both sides” means Woolf’s class position (Bloomsbury) and Clarissa’s class position (what Empson terms an
“aristocracy”), raises a series of questions about the nature of our text’s implied Bloomsbury, its
Bloomsbury-function – questions that help us to specify what would be at stake socially, for the
reader, in this possible crisis in class relations, were it to arrive: this possible crisis of class relations,
and associated crisis of value, that the text seems both to envision and forestall. For implicit in both
Empson’s and Garnett’s emphases on the significance of the whole Bloomsbury scene, and of its
relation to Clarissa’s imagined class, is the idea that the struggle the text enacts is more than merely
“personal”: the text is richer if the reader can learn to feel that the struggle being envisioned is not
merely the struggle of the implied author, but the struggle of the whole implied class fraction of
Bloomsbury. For if the novel’s first line raises the question of class, as we have noted, it does so in a
way that makes us ask, not merely “What is the implied author’s position on class?” but also “What
is the implied author’s class position?” or again “What kind of class formation, with what range of
class values, is implied?”19

Thus if we want to use the text as an effective aesthetic ground for the cultivation of our political
sensibilities on the issue of class relations, then we will find that in the ambivalence of the first line
of Mrs Dalloway, a whole class formation is at stake. To feel the power of this – a fully aesthetic

19 In the interests of clarity, it may be worth being very explicit about the methodological assumptions that underpin this
statement. In order to make any sense of a work, a reader almost invariably (and perhaps indeed invariably) has some
imagined sense, however embryonic, vague, or even erroneous, of where that work may have come from – which is to
say that one part of reading is the projection of an originary milieu. This projected milieu then becomes part of the
whole text being read, in the sense that it serves as an important source of additional, but also regulatory or
supplementary, aesthetic effects. Here, with Mrs Dalloway, we are encountering a specific case within this broad
phenomenon, since the problematizing of the issue of class in the novel’s opening lines seems to ask the reader, not just
to project an imagined milieu in some general sense – a generalized implied Bloomsbury from which the text is then
imagined to have sprung – but to imagine something more specific about the class character of that imagined
Bloomsbury: to ask oneself, with a sense that much in the reading is at stake in the question, “From what specific kind
of class does this text spring?”

Having noted that, and given also the way that contemporary historicist / contextualist scholarship within the discipline
focuses so insistently on the issue of the text’s actual historical and cultural origins, it seems worth noting also that the
projection of an originary milieu is by no means always a central or indeed even a very important part of the text. Here,
with Mrs Dalloway, including the implied Bloomsbury makes a richer text, which is why it seems important to have
recourse to it – without it, it would be difficult to use the text to feel the full significance of the question of class in quite
so powerful a way. Yet for other texts, or for other purposes, one may well want to proceed differently; and clearly in
many cases the question of the texts’ origins would become, if not entirely irrelevant in principle, then at least
functionally irrelevant in the actual reading.
power, in the sense that our political sensibilities are being confronted – it will be helpful to introduce just one further element of the context of the work’s production into the text. For this we will turn to Raymond Williams’ classic book *Culture* (1981), which so precisely articulates the particular contradictions and ambivalences of Woolf’s class position. Williams first celebrates Bloomsbury and then turns to press his own critique:

Thus Bloomsbury came to criticize the dominant order over a wide range: for its militarism; for its repressive colonialism; for its unmanaged capitalism; for its sexual inequalities; for its rigidities of manners; for its hypocrisies; for its indifference to the arts. Its [Bloomsbury’s] view of a more civilized order involved at once the removal of unreasonable restraints and the sensible management of the necessary political and economic framework of life. With these conditions fulfilled, generally or for the time being locally, people would live as free and tolerant individuals, finding their deepest values in the consequent kinds of human diversity and intimacy. Thus the extreme subjectivism of, for example, the novels of Virginia Woolf, belongs within the same formation as the economic interventionism of Keynes, who wanted not only to preserve the economic system by rationalizing it, but to do this so that, within that achieved stability, the real processes of civilized life could be extended, undisturbed.

In the course of their work, which they characteristically, in the terms of their sector, did not see as collective but as a series of specialist contributions, they intersected and overlapped with other groupings and other classes. In their critique of unmanaged capitalism and of colonialism this was especially so, and, together with the related Fabians, they had important influence on the evolution of the working-class Labour Party into a specific kind of social democracy. In their real critique of the old order, they were also, often, both isolated and mocked. Yet they remained, practically and culturally, a fractional formation, and this can be seen especially with the advantage of hindsight, since it is now evident that they were expressing at once the highest values of the bourgeois tradition and the necessary next phase of a bourgeois social and cultural order.

(80-81)

For Williams this last line is of course a devastating indictment: Bloomsbury is a “fractional” (rather than “oppositional”) formation, which here means that, that like many Bohemias, it represented not a rejection of the ruling social order, but its advance guard. This, I think, is what Empson is really pointing to when he writes that *Mrs Dalloway* represented an attempt to “feel on both sides”: in broader historical terms, the opposition between the “aristocrats” and “Bloomsbury” is in fact an

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opposition between the bulk of the ruling class, which has not yet reformed itself in such a way as to maintain its power into a new phase of capitalism, and the advance guard of that ruling class, which sees the need for certain kinds of changes in order for the power of the ruling class to be maintained. Here at last I think we understand what the charge of “posing” means, and why it must arrive at the point it does: it marks rather precisely the furthest point to which that critique will extend – the critique that the advanced fraction of the ruling class levels at the trailing bulk of that class. “Posing” shows us that Bloomsbury’s willingness to “criticize the social system, to show it at work at its most intense” will extend only to the point of targeting those features of the system that must be dispensed with in order for the system as a whole to proceed into a new phase and a new era. To feel the real social force of the tone of the first line of Mrs Dalloway, we need to feel the force of this ambivalence, which is the political ambivalence of a whole historical liberal formation. We can specify the precise character of that ambivalence in the first line by observing that it offers us the spectacle of a whole advanced fraction of the ruling class turning to address the rest of its class, and announcing, in effect, what Tancredi, the young Liberal, says to his uncle, the old Prince, on the eve of Garibaldi’s invasion in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s classic novel The Leopard (1958): “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

This reference point is surely unexpected, but it is not frivolous, since it puts us in a position to make a final observation about the class character of the text we are reading. To do this, let us return to Empson’s comments on the novel. Historically Empson himself was in most respects a younger member of the same advanced liberal class fraction as the Bloomsbury set. We can register something of the significance of this by looking at his rather intriguing use of the word “aristocrats” (“the point is not that she loves her aristocrats too much… but that… she shows that she can feel

on both sides; knows both how to love and to hate her aristocrats’). Empson was, like those in Bloomsbury, a kind of radical in something like the private or inner sphere: we might think of the Cambridge scandal, the open marriage, the outspoken atheism, and so on. Also like those in Bloomsbury, he was a liberal, rather than any kind of radical, in something like the public sphere: we might think here particularly of his notorious declaration that “the Whig view of history is the correct one.” This last declaration weaves rather fittingly into our text: in the background of it is Empson’s feeling that radicalism on this point – this crucial, public, political point of the philosophy of history – would be a bridge too far, as it were; would be passé, would be fake and also naïve; would be indeed a kind of posing. It is clear that a large part of the point of Empson’s famous declaration is to stage a drama in which he shocks his contemporaries, precisely not with his radicalism, but with his unexpected conservatism. It thus compares interestingly with his critique of Mrs Dalloway: he is showing, really, that he can “feel on both sides.” This move, as Empson himself showed us, is characteristic of his and Woolf’s particular class position. Despite being a generation apart, and each having of course many complex ambivalences, both Empson and Woolf largely in the end seemed to identify with the same advanced class fraction, and occupied a largely similar structure of feeling.

For surely it is open to us to feel that Woolf is making just this same kind of move in Mrs Dalloway. By taking as her subject a “Mrs Dalloway” – a character, moreover, whose monstrous conventionality she had already shown to her readers in The Voyage Out (1915) – and then continually threatening to sympathise with her, Woolf is able to generate a real aesthetic frisson: she continually remains on the verge of shocking her Bloombury contemporaries with her unexpected conservatism. Though no-one seems to notice it, even the title invokes this threat, this tension, this complicatedly ambivalent tone that we found in the novel’s first line. Virginia is going to take a “Mrs” as her heroine? Really? When those around one are shocking the bourgeoisie by showing their radicalism,
it sometimes seems cleverer, for a while, instead to shock one’s Bohemian friends by intimating to them that one is just a bourgeois after all.

The contrast with Tancredi’s line in The Leopard is then illuminating. Di Lampedusa’s novel famously dramatises the process by which the last vestiges of truly feudal power in Italy were replaced, but then also in important respects taken up and continued, by the newly empowered bourgeoisie: he is dealing with a struggle against actual “aristocrats.” This throws Empson’s own deployment of the term into some relief: he uses it in relation to his own rather different period, when the conflict is no longer between a genuine aristocracy and a rising bourgeoisie, but between two elements of the upper bourgeoisie. If Clarissa is an aristocrat, it is not in any precise sociological sense. Rather she, like Woolf, is a member of the elite higher fraction of the bourgeoisie. Evidently enough this is not a feudal class: it is the class that administrates the higher functions of capitalism, a “liberal” class in the broadest sense of the term. But the term “aristocracy” is nevertheless a natural one for the advanced class fraction to use to describe it. Indeed, it seems to confirm Williams’ analysis precisely: the rhetorical application of the older terminology allows the advanced class fraction to project the trailing bulk of the upper bourgeoisie back into the past, into an earlier, now obsolete order, as if what were at stake were still the move from a truly feudal order to a liberal one. The charge is then that those members of the liberal class have, in their refusal to change with the times, become archaic; they have been left behind by the ongoing march of liberal progress; they are now, hyperbolically, in the position of the historical enemies of the bourgeoisie itself; they are thus, rhetorically, traitors to their class; traitors to the liberal cause; traitors, ultimately, to capitalism. Despite his commitment to the “Whig view of history,” Empson’s use of the word “aristocrat” is a kind of microcosm of the Marxist one.
We have now put together a text of some aesthetic complexity. We have seen that there is much at stake in the tone of the novel’s first line: the carefully ambivalent staging of Mrs Dalloway’s declaration that she would “buy the flowers herself” spins out of itself a whole aesthetic text that comes to encompass even its commentators. To understand the significance of this, it may help to retrace the ground we have covered so far in our reading of the tone of the novel’s opening line. I have tried to show that the complex ambivalence of the opening line operates at a number of levels. We have seen this ambivalence firstly as a case of the central ambiguity of free indirect style: which sentiments belong to the narrator, and which to the character? We have seen it secondly at the level of the implied author: does Woolf endorse the class sentiments implied? In this sense the ambivalence in the first line is the same ambivalence that brings the implied author of the diary to want her “deep [personal] feelings” about “life and death, sanity and insanity” to lead her into “deep [political] feelings” – wanting to “criticise the social system” – and then to retreat and accuse herself of “posing.” We have seen it thirdly at the level of genre, where the ambivalence of the first line is that between social comedy and political satire. We then saw it, fourthly, as a broader historical ambivalence: the distance that separates a straight reading from an ironic reading, or the distance that separates a comic from a satirical reading, is the same distance that, sociologically, separates Clarissa’s imagined class, which is to say the bulk of the ruling class, from the advanced class fraction of Bloomsbury. Now, at a fifth level of analysis, we have expanded our sense of this outwards beyond “Bloomsbury” narrowly defined: we see that the tone of the first line bears on the larger question of the attitudes of a whole developing series of liberal class formations; indeed, the whole bourgeois class as it moves into new phases in its historical development, continually producing new cultural and aesthetic forms together with new commentaries on them, each form struggling to exclude once again the possibility of truly political feeling. Indeed, if the ambivalent staging of Mrs Dalloway’s decision to “buy the flowers herself” seemed intended to dramatize the
question of whether or not to allow oneself to have “deep [political] feelings” about class politics, then we are now in a position to feel more broadly and powerfully what is at stake in that question: the possibility of a decent and humane response to the whole historical development of the bourgeoisie. Following the threads that the first line spins out of itself, we find a far-reaching aesthetic text seeks to set itself to work on our sensibilities, asking us in effect to feel how connected our attempts to come to an assessment of our own lives are to the nature of our larger historical situation. But we can be more specific than this. As we have composed it here, the text asks us to develop a specific kind of aesthetic sensibility: a sensibility that would allow us to feel how necessary it is, for our own “personal” attempts to live without betraying our higher potentialities, that we allow ourselves to register the force of “deep [political] feelings” – and not just any feelings, but feelings in critique of the whole historical development of the bourgeoisie. That, at any rate, is what the tone of the text’s first line seems to ask us to cultivate in ourselves. Now, perhaps, we are in a position to begin reading.
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