The Secular Wood

Literary Criticism in the Public Sphere

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The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

James Ley
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Abstract

The thesis considers the work of six prominent literary critics, all of whom have written for large non-specialist audiences: Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling and James Wood. The subjects have been chosen because each occupies a distinct historical moment and addresses himself to a distinct critical milieu. Collectively, however, their lives span 300 years of cultural history.

The thesis addresses the various ways in which the six critics construct their public personae, the kinds of arguments they use, and their core principles and philosophies. It considers how they have positioned themselves in relation to the modern tradition of descriptive criticism and the prevailing tendencies of their particular historical period. The thesis proposes that, by virtue of being public critics, they must deal with the problem of presenting themselves as individual voices within the public sphere and must address, through literary criticism and the essay form more generally, the issues of individualism and the social implications of the democratising, secularising, liberalising forces of modernity. This follows from the fact that, as critics, they are necessarily concerned with the status of individual judgement and individual responsiveness.

The thesis is composed of six essay-chapters, one on each critic. Each essay is an attempt to ground these large, somewhat abstract questions in specific instances that give them tangibility. They are also written in such a way that they might be profitably be read by a non-specialist. The style of the thesis is an extension of my own practice as a public critic and is intended to reflect the familiar style in which its subjects wrote.
T.S. Eliot declared that criticism is as inevitable as breathing. Like so many of his unequivocal pronouncements, the line is instantly memorable. Its rhetorical force derives partly from the confidence with which it is asserted, but also from its appearance of almost bland self-evidence. One instantly knows what he means. The claim of inevitability would seem to rest on the unremarkable assumption that we all respond, on some level, to the cultural artefacts we encounter over the course of our lives. These responses naturally involve us in a process of evaluation and interpretation, even if we do not bother to formulate them beyond the recognition of an instinctive sense of like or dislike, even if we never feel compelled to share our impressions with another person. Find something meaningful or moving, engaging or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, and one is beginning to act as a critic.

Understood in this way, criticism does indeed seem to be a universal, even definitive, human activity. Yet the inclusiveness of such a definition renders it problematic in a way that limits its usefulness. If criticism is inevitable, if it is simply the normal process of analysis and judgement by which we arrive at our personal opinions, the critic is not in a position to claim any distinct cultural function or identity. The many attempts that have
been made throughout the modern era to define the function of literary criticism, to align its practice with some higher purpose or to justify its existence as an independent intellectual discipline, can be understood, at least in part, as responses to this uneasy sense that the critic seems to have no stable, clearly defined purpose — that the cultural position of the critic is self-created and must therefore be constantly scrutinised and reconceived. One of the most evident of the various cultural anxieties that have shadowed the practice of literary criticism throughout its modern history is a nagging sense of doubt about its necessity: What purpose does the critic serve? Do we really need an intermediary between reader and text? Are we not perfectly capable of making sense of the work for ourselves? ‘One of the historical vulnerabilities of literature, as a subject for study,’ Martin Amis has observed, ‘is that it has never seemed difficult enough. This may come as news to the buckled figure of the book-reviewer, and to the literary critic, but it’s true. Hence the various attempts to elevate it, complicate it, systematise it. Interacting with literature is easy. Anyone can join in, because words (unlike palettes and pianos) lead a double life: we all have a competence.’

One response to the uncertain cultural status of the literary critic is to claim expertise, to position oneself as the person who is more knowledgable, insightful, cogent, sensitive and articulate than the average reader. Eliot often makes a show of downplaying the intellectual ambitions of his criticism, but he is, in fact, a master of this critical strategy. Everyone is a critic, according to Eliot; the problem is that almost everyone is a bad critic. In his early critical writings, in particular, he surveys a world awash with naive and sentimental responses to literature. He chides critics who have not read well enough or widely enough, who have failed to see the big picture, whose philosophies are inadequate or unsound, whose definitions lack clarity and precision. He deplores criticism that is merely subjective and piecemeal when it should always strive to be objective and comprehensive.

In practice, Eliot never quite lived up to his own critical ideal of comprehensive objectivity. It is doubtful anyone could. But as a means of establishing his critical authority his stance proved

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remarkably effective. His success, to be fair, was the result of more than just self-confidence and a talent for rhetorical assertion. Eliot was more knowledgeable and insightful about poetry than many other critics before or since; he really did have original things to say on the subject (I am less inclined to credit him with sensitivity and cogency, particularly with regard to his social and political views). Many of the critical ideas he proposed found a receptive audience because he developed shrewd and incisive ways to articulate crucial aspects of the emerging aesthetic of literary modernism.

But Eliot’s donnish air of superiority has dated badly and, as a result, it allows us to recognise that putting on such airs is something of an occupational hazard for the critic. For to criticise something is inevitably to assume a position of intellectual mastery, to offer one’s interpretation as a form of meta-discourse. As any number of literary theorists have pointed out, criticism cannot be regarded as an innocent activity. The act of interpretation, even when undertaken in the best of faith, is an exercise in selectivity; it involves an element of appropriation, in which the critic overwrites the work in his own idiom and, in doing so, adapts it to suit his own purposes. The problem that arises, then, is not simply the heresy of paraphrase but the question of the critic’s underlying agenda, the intellectual position he is seeking, perhaps rather sneakily, to advance.

Eliot’s pretence of reluctant superiority is apt to seem unsatisfactory to contemporary readers because its dated quality highlights the ambiguous, even contradictory, cultural position that the literary critic occupies. He appears to affirm the democratic universality of the critical impulse, to demonstrate and thus validate the authority of the individual judgement. But he also presumes to act as a rather stern cultural policeman. As the person who takes it upon himself to sort out the confusions of others and to correct, rather wearily, their errors of taste, he cannot help but appear suspiciously aristocratic.

This awkwardness is not unique to Eliot, but it is exaggerated in his criticism, partly because his views are indeed aristocratic, but also because of the way he plays up to the role of gentleman critic. He affects to be both amateur and expert. He is the perfect example of a literary critic who advocates critical rigour without actually being rigorous, whose arguments are casual and
impressionistic but are presented as rational and authoritative. He claims for himself the high moral ground of disinterestedness, insisting that his social and political views are not implicated in the value judgements he makes about literary works, yet his criticism clearly has a wider agenda. The self-conscious way in which he identifies with the English critical tradition, his appropriation of many of its mannerisms and commonplaces (his line about the inevitability of criticism is a reformulation of John Dryden’s observation that to breathe is to judge and Samuel Johnson’s maxim that judgement is forced on us by experience), throws the internal contradictions of that tradition into sharp relief because he claims to be philosophically opposed to its liberal-humanist orientation. Throughout his critical writings, he bases his critical authority as an individual, paradoxically, on his advocacy of an impersonal, anti-individualist critical position. As such, he provides a particularly dramatic example of a critic attempting to solve the basic problem of how to construct an effective public persona.

Eliot, like the five other critics discussed in this thesis, practices a version of what George Watson called ‘descriptive criticism’ — a mode of writing Watson traces back to the criticism of Dryden and whose informal combination of personal responsiveness and literary analysis has predominated for more than three centuries.\(^2\) One of the defining features of this kind of critical writing is its element of subjectivity. To the extent that the critic’s arguments involve explanations and justifications which evoke matters of individual judgement, they establish themselves on the unstable ground of aesthetic preference. It is this necessary involvement in the subjective that turns modern literary criticism against itself. Northrop Frye makes the distinction in the sharpest of terms in his polemical introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism*. Accepting Eliot’s premise that literature should be regarded as a discrete object of intellectual scrutiny, Frye argues that genuine criticism should have nothing to do with personal appreciation. It must be disentangled from what he calls ‘the history of taste’, which he goes on to mock (along with Eliot himself) by describing the reputations of poets booming and crashing in an imaginary stock exchange: ‘That wealthy investor Mr. Eliot, after dumping

Milton on the market, is now buying him again; Donne has probably reached his peak and will begin to taper off; Tennyson may be in for a slight flutter but the Shelley stocks are still bearish.\textsuperscript{3}

Frye's classic study is a heroic work of systematisation and one of the more noteworthy historical attempts to place the practice of literary criticism on a firm intellectual footing. His dismissal of apparently arbitrary and impermanent assertions of cultural value invites easy assent. Yet, viewed from a slightly different perspective, it is precisely the unstable, subjective, presumptuous quality of descriptive criticism that makes the literary critic a cultural figure of particular interest. Edward Said observes that ‘one of the hallmarks of modernity is how, at a very deep level, the aesthetic and the social need to be kept, and often are consciously kept, in a state of irreconcilable tension.’\textsuperscript{4} If we take the salient features of Western modernity to be the rise of secularism and liberal democracy, the achievement of near-universal literacy, the creation of the public sphere and the mass media, the notion of individualism, and the sense of cultural enfranchisement these phenomena have engendered, then the ambiguous position of the critic takes on a symbolic significance. The tradition of descriptive criticism has emerged in parallel with the transformations of modernity and is itself a product of those transformations. Criticism might be inevitable as breathing, but becoming a critic is not. For the critic is the person who takes the ‘inevitable’ critical impulse and performs the secondary action of publicly articulating his ideas. He addresses his audience as an individual and thus faces the problem of presenting his views — which extend beyond merely aesthetic questions to touch on social, political, philosophical, psychological and theological issues — in an effective manner. He must individuate his voice, find a way to cut through, to project his ideas with authority. In his engagement with the modern \textit{agora}, he embodies the problem of the enfranchised individual who must address the particularities of his immediate cultural context while remaining apart from that context, who must find a way to negotiate the tension between his


own sense of personal conviction and the destabilising cultural forces and shifting values of modern secular society.

My exploration of these issues has its origin in my own background in literary criticism. In many ways, they are the culmination of more than a decade spent scratching out an uncertain living as a freelance critic. They are inspired by a desire to investigate the history of the inherently precarious profession of literary criticism in some depth, and also by a desire to explore the possibilities of the long essay as an accessible form of critical writing.

The six writers discussed in this thesis — Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling and James Wood — have been chosen because they have three features in common: they all write in English; they are all literary critics (among other things); and their criticism has been read by a sizeable non-specialist audience. That they are all public critics is very much the crux of the matter. The point of departure for the essays that form the body of this thesis is my interest in the way each of these well-known literary figures has chosen to present himself to his audience. They assume an intimate connection between their subjects’ rhetorical propensities — their habits of expression, the strategies of argumentation they use — and the individual critic’s need to develop an effective public persona, to distinguish himself as an authoritative critical voice.

The chapters are conceived as stand-alone essays. They are also intended as examples of the kind of writing they set out to investigate. That is, they are themselves works of descriptive criticism written in a familiar style with minimal recourse to technical language and abstruse theorising. They are, of course, longer and more involved than the average magazine or journal article; but I hope that their style is such that — hypothetically, at least — they would not appear out of place in the pages of one of the innumerable literary periodicals that have bloomed, flourished and withered over the past three centuries — the same kinds of publications in which my six subjects practised their craft. My aim is to combine an analysis of the critics’ ideas with an overview of relevant aspects of their life and work, in such a way that the essays might profitably be read by an interested non-expert, and not simply by someone with an academic background in the history of literary criticism. As such, they contain some contextualising
information that might be considered gratuitous in a more narrowly focussed academic thesis, but which has been included as part of the attempt to present a series of rounded critical portraits.

I have approached my subjects as figures — that is, they are presented both as individuals and as representatives of certain key ideas. Among Walter Benjamin’s papers is a fragment that has been published under the title ‘The Task of the Critic’, in which he observes:

Regarding the terrible misconception that the quality indispensable to the true critic is “his own opinion”: it is quite meaningless to learn the opinion of someone about something when you do not even know who he is. The more important the critic, the more he will avoid baldly asserting his own opinion. And the more his insights will absorb his opinions. Instead of giving his own opinion, a great critic enables others to form their opinion on the basis of his critical analysis. Moreover, his definition of the figure of the critic should not be a private matter but, as far as possible, an objective, strategic one. What we should know about a critic is what he stands for. He should tell us this.5

What each of the six critics discussed in this thesis ‘stands for’ is at the centre of its concerns. One of the reasons they have been successful as critics is because they have been able to express their ideas and cultivate a public persona in such a way that they take on a cultural significance that is greater than the substance of their opinions. No one today would view literature through the lens of Johnson’s Neoclassical assumptions; few would share his preference for the work of Samuel Richardson ahead of Henry Fielding. But Johnson remains a great critic and a compelling literary figure because he articulates an idiosyncratic yet powerfully consistent view of the world. This can be viewed as a personal response to the unique cultural pressures of his own time, but it has also served as a compelling point of reference for subsequent critics, who have often sought to define their own ideas against

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Johnson’s critical stance. He is a symbolic figure around whom cultural arguments coalesce.

All of the subjects of this thesis have something of this symbolic quality. Each has placed himself at a locus of public debate; each has defined key issues and concepts in a way that has successfully generated much disputation, admiration and rancour. With varying degrees of self-consciousness, they have built themselves a rhetorical platform and presented themselves as public targets. Wood has observed in an interview that the literary critic only has rhetorical authority: ‘It’s a judicial argument in that sense. You can only win by persuading readers by rhetorical parries of your own and quotation.’ Yet it is also the case that, though the means of argumentation are rhetorical, there is always more than rhetoric at stake. Literary criticism, by virtue of the vagueness of its brief, is invariably entangled in extra-literary issues. Even Wood, who has not sought to link his literary opinions to any clearly articulated political agenda, cannot help being implicated in contentious questions of cultural politics, because his work evokes a humanist tradition of literary criticism in a post-theory, post-humanist context. His largely aesthetic arguments about the Postmodern novel raise the issue of the novelist’s obligations and limitations as a cultural critic; while his interest in theological questions leads him to posit a form of literary secularism that reflects his atheism.

The sense in which each critic’s broad philosophical outlook, his sense of personal conviction, is reflected in his literary opinions is one of the concerns of this thesis. The essays are not comprehensive accounts, but they try to convey a sense of the overarching views of their subjects. They want to get at those fundamental views that contain and contextualise each critic’s opinions, the views whose presence is felt at every level of his critical practice. As such, they do not focus narrowly on the literary opinions of their subjects, but take a wider view. They consider them at various times not only as critics, but as characters, as writers, as thinkers, as advocates. They pursue each critic’s underlying sense of conviction on the assumption that the

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better one understands that sense of conviction the more comprehensible his specific opinions become.

Collectively, these essays attempt a form of paratactic criticism, as in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age*. The six critics have been chosen because they form a chronological sequence. Together their overlapping lives stretch across a period of more than 300 years in an unbroken line. Each critic occupies a distinct historical and cultural moment. Johnson is the preeminent English man of letters of the eighteenth century; Hazlitt is steeped in the Romanticism of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; Arnold is the Victorian critic; Eliot, born the year of Arnold's death, is one of the talismanic figures of early-twentieth century Modernism; Trilling’s brand of liberal criticism found a receptive audience in the decades after the Second World War; Wood — my only living subject — is still in his forties.

Each critic, then, is offered as a representative of his time, although their significance as critics depends on their ability to position themselves in opposition to certain prevailing tendencies. They are six individual writers, each of whom has a distinct outlook, each of whom speaks in a different historical context, but they are all performing essentially the same role.

In 2009, James Wood gave an interview on Australian radio in which he defined the function of metaphor by saying ‘it is often very violent and it often proceeds by, in effect, yoking together things that aren’t very alike and forcing us to see a similarity where we’d never seen one before, and that may often involve a dissimilarity rather than a similarity.’7 Wood’s critical interest in metaphor lies primarily in its ability to act as a means of sharpening fiction’s mimetic quality, a means of rendering detail in vivid and striking ways, but his metaphor for describing the metaphorical process itself — that of ‘yoking’ together different images — is the same one that Samuel Johnson uses in his *Life of Cowley*, in which he condemns the metaphysical poets’ frequent recourse to unusual or striking conceits as a form of literary affectation; it is the same idea that Eliot appropriates in his revisionist reading of the metaphysical poets, in which he

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overthrows Johnson’s disapproval to reclaim their heterogeneous practice as a tacit justification for his own poetry.

Wood’s echoing of these earlier critics may well have been deliberate; it may have been unconscious or inadvertent. But the fact that such an echo can be heard across three centuries suggests something of the implicit unity of the critics discussed in this thesis. They have been chosen because they seem to have a natural affinity. This is not because their beliefs coincide or are even harmonious. They present a spread of political opinions from radical to reactionary, and a spread of religious opinions from atheism to devout belief. But there seems to be a natural conversation between them that arises, not only from the fact that the later critics have often sought explicitly to define themselves against the legacies of their predecessors, but from the way they have conducted themselves, through will and necessity, as public critics. I hope that this thesis will throw some light on their individual practices and the wider issues these evoke.
In the annals of literary history, 1709 was, as the critic and biographer Peter Martin observes, an auspicious year: 'the first copyright act was passed in Great Britain; Alexander Pope launched his poetic career with the publication of his *Pastorals*; Nicholas Rowe published his famous edition of Shakespeare’s plays, the first important editorial instalment in a century of sometimes frenetic Shakespeareana; and Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele published the original issue of *The Tatler*, the first major British periodical.'

And on September 18 Sarah Johnson, the wife of an unsuccessful bookseller named Michael Johnson, gave birth to her first child. Her son would later write that he came into the world only after ‘a very difficult and dangerous labour.’ He was ‘born almost dead, and could not cry for some time.’ His ill-health was such that, as his most famous biographer records, ‘his initiation into the Christian church was not delayed; for his baptism is recorded, in the register of St. Mary’s parish in that city, to have

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2 Martin, 17.
been performed on the day of his birth. They named the child Samuel.

In Samuel Johnson’s *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, the scholar Imlac argues that to become a poet a man must ‘divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and variable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same.’ The poet’s duty is to ‘examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances.’ He must ‘write as the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as being superior to time and place.’

‘Enough!’ responds Rasselas. ‘Thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet.’ But Johnson endorsed Imlac’s idealism. He was unequivocal about literature’s duty to edify. ‘The task of an author,’ he wrote, ‘is either to teach what is not known, or to recommend known truths by his manner of adorning them.’

In the *Rambler* he suggests that pastoral poetry’s strong powers of generalisation spring from the universal recognition its natural imagery affords. Poetry, he argues, ‘cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions, by which one species differs from another, without departing from that simplicity of grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent quality of things, without losing its general power of gratifying every mind by recalling its conceptions.’ The poet should address the ‘passions of men, which are uniform,’ not ‘their customs, which are changeable.’

Shakespeare he defends on similar grounds, against ‘the censure of criticks, who form their judgements on narrower principles.’ Though there are elements of Shakespeare’s plays that Johnson regards as troublingly amoral, he praises the dramatist’s

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‘just representations of general nature.’ The defining quality of Shakespeare’s characters is that ‘they are not modified by the customs of particular places.’ They are ‘not accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions; they are the genuine progeny of common humanity.’ They are animated by general passions and principles, which are familiar to all minds: ‘In the writings of other poets,’ he proposes, ‘a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.’

This imperative to generalise and universalise, which is evident in his parodiable fondness for aphorism, is central to Johnson’s thinking. It implies not only a way of reading but a way of seeing — a view of the world in which one’s duty is always to look beyond the specifics of any situation to perceive a deeper underlying principle. For Johnson, truth is closely related to the concepts of virtue and reason. It is pure and immutable, independent of changing fashions and customs. The duality this creates is everywhere in his writings. Life presents a meretricious surface and a meaningful depth. Our postlapsarian nature is always tempting us away from truth, away from the ideal of virtue we should embrace. A significant part of the critic’s function is to distinguish between these conflicting aspects of existence, to cut through the modish and the superficial and identify that essential ethical core which might prove morally instructive. A Johnsonian aphorism is a cleaver that descends to sever reason from unreason, true sentiments from false. The task of criticism, he argues, is ‘to establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge; and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to fancy.’ Sentiment or reasoning becomes false to the extent that it affects a wilful singularity; to be valid it must always reach beyond itself to partake of general experience. This is true in art as in life. A work of fiction moves us, he observes, not because we mistake it for reality, but because it brings realities to mind. The moment of recognition, in which the representation divests itself of particularity, becomes the kernel of understanding that connects us with our common humanity.


8 Rambler, no.92, 4.122.
Johnson is mindful of Rasselas’ worldly interjection. His writings express a profound awareness of humankind’s essential fallibility. The fifty-two biographical essays in Lives of the Poets are, in part, a deliberate sullying of Imlac’s lofty idealism. Johnson’s poets do not divest themselves of their prejudices. They conspicuously fail to disregard present opinion. They are not superior to time and place. Lives of the Poets contains its full human measure of vanity, jealousy, spite and petty ambition. The aspirations of the lesser poets, many of whom Johnson dismisses with a few brusque pages, are laid low by the humiliating fact of their inconsequence. The better-known figures are notable for their moral failings. Milton is consumed with Satanic pride, his republicanism depicted as a symptom of personal arrogance and Puritan resentment toward legitimate authority. Swift is obdurate in his singularity and disposed to petulance and sarcasm. Dryden, who ‘appears never to have impoverished his mint of flattery by his expenses, however lavish,’ is thin-skinned and quarrelsome. The dissolute Earl of Rochester has ‘an avowed contempt of all decency and order, a total disregard to every moral, and a resolute denial of every religious obligation.’

The distinctive note of Johnsonian irony, which often sounds in his breezy unconcern with precision of detail, is deadpan and bathetic, but comes with a tincture of acid. Milton’s second wife, he records, ‘died, within a year, of childbirth, or some distemper that followed it; and her husband honoured her memory with a poor sonnet.’ On the subject of Dryden’s Catholicism he remarks that ‘there is no reason for supposing that he disbelieved the religion which he disobeyed.’ Swift’s belief that he once contracted a distemper as a result of eating too much fruit prompts the dry observation that every other boy seems able to eat fruit without ill effect. Occasionally, his archness gives way to scorn. ‘It is not possible to read, without some contempt and indignation,’ he writes of Edmund Waller, ‘poems of the same author, ascribing the highest degree of power and piety to Charles

10 Lives, 1.155.
11 Lives, 1.84.
12 Lives, 1.294.
the First, then transferring the same power and piety to Oliver Cromwell; now inviting Oliver to take the throne, and then congratulating Charles the Second on his recovered right."13

Johnson considered biography to be a particularly useful genre. Throughout his critical writings he judges all kinds of literary works in relation to the two justifications proposed by Horace in *Ars Poetica* and reiterated in Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry* — pleasure and instruction — and he believed biography was well placed to provide both. He had a predilection for the form. ‘The biographical part of literature,’ he said, ‘is what I love most.’14 In the *Rambler* he describes the way in which an empathetic identification can stir the passions: ‘All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of imagination, that realises the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.’ These parallel circumstances, he argues, are best experienced ‘in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can more certainly enchant the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction of every diversity of condition.’15

This opinion was rather convenient for his sidekick and biographer James Boswell, who interpreted Johnson’s preference as an endorsement of his own literary project. But Johnson’s ideas about the virtues of the genre are not harmonious with Boswell’s encyclopaedic method. The *Life of Johnson* is commonly regarded as the first modern biography. Its abundance of detail is Boswell’s ambitious attempt to depict what his biographer called ‘the landscape of his subject’s mind.’16 By placing us alongside Johnson in the drawing room, by allowing us to overhear his conversation, by recording his opinions on everything from corporal punishment to bird migration, it presents him as a character in the modern sense of the word. Boswell depicts a complex individual possessed

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13 *Lives*, 1.194 [emphasis in original].

14 Boswell, 1.263.


of an astonishingly capacious intellect and a sharp wit, who kicked a stone to refute Berkeley and penned *Rasselas* in a week to pay for his mother’s funeral; he reveals the psychological frailty of a devout man who was tormented by the thought of death and the prospect of damnation; he celebrates the formidable conversationalist who ‘talked for victory.’ (‘There is no arguing with Johnson,’ said Oliver Goldsmith, ‘for when his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it.’) Though Boswell makes a point of noting Johnson’s faults alongside his merits, and begs to differ with some of his eminent friend’s opinions, the cumulative effect of this multifaceted approach transforms the *Life of Johnson* into an epic work of canonisation. In realising his ambition to represent Johnson as a fully rounded human being, Boswell simultaneously invents and lionises his subject as an extraordinary figure, triumphantly appropriating the celebrity Johnson attained in his own lifetime. For Boswell the essential fact about Johnson is his pre-eminence, his ‘superiority over his fellows’; he is a man whose every idiosyncrasy is worth recording. The contrast with Johnson’s attitude toward his subjects in *Lives of the Poets* could hardly be greater. It has been suggested that in Boswell’s biography we encounter the ‘last and most disgruntled spokesman of classical prohibition’ being ‘co-opted as one of the first romantics.’ While this opposition is a little too neat to be entirely fair to either man — Johnson is not a strict Neoclassicist, nor is Boswell a card-carrying Romantic — it does suggest the way in which Boswell stands between the contemporary reader and Johnson as an author and critic. Johnson’s life, observes Paul Fussell, ‘is so interesting that for years it has been confused with his literary achievement, and has even become a substitute for his literary meaning.’

Johnson is remarkably consistent in his opinions. Many of the sentiments he expressed in conversation are reiterated in his writings. Yet he repeatedly insists upon a clear distinction between author and text. In the *Rambler* he writes that ‘there has often

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17 Boswell, 1.372.
18 Boswell, 1.19.
been observed a manifest and striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings.’ Anticipating one of the major themes in *Lives of the Poets*, he laments how often it is the case that ‘those who raise admiration by their books, disgust by their company,’ and proposes that as a general rule ‘a man writes much better than he lives.’  

There is no necessary correlation between a poet’s character and the ideas expressed in his poetry. In the *Life of Addison*, he observes that ‘to write and to live, are very different. Many who praise virtue, do no more than praise it.’ The suggestion by a previous biographer of James Thomson that ‘an author’s life is best read in his works’ is firmly rejected: Richard Savage, Johnson records, ‘who lived much with Thomson, once told me, how he heard a lady remarking that she could gather from his works three parts of his character: that he was a great Lover, a great Swimmer, and rigorously abstinent; but, said Savage, he knows not any love but that of the sex; he was perhaps never in cold water in his life; and he indulges himself in every luxury that comes within reach.’  

Even an apparently intimate form, such as a letter, Johnson argues in the *Life of Pope*, should be approached with an awareness of its conventions and artifices.

This is one of the most significant ways in which Johnson’s assumptions conflict with later Romantic poets and critics, who radically conflated the literary work with the concept of self-expression and, even more radically, individualised and psychologised the concept of ‘character’. Johnson does not assume a psychological model of creativity. Such an understanding had, to a significant extent, not yet come into existence. The word ‘autobiography,’ coined by Robert Southey, only entered the language in the early-nineteenth century, at around the same time that Samuel Taylor Coleridge became the first person to use the word ‘psycho-analytical’ in his literary criticism and William Hazlitt began to interpret Shakespeare’s characters in terms of their complex motivations. This gulf in understanding was highlighted by the Romantics as a way of distancing themselves from Johnson’s legacy. Hazlitt observed in 1819 that it had become commonplace for critics to profess their respect for Johnson’s


22 *Lives*, 1.443.

23 *Lives*, 2.354 [emphasis in original].
eminence while contradicting his critical assumptions. He goes on to contrast the likeable man depicted in Boswell's biography with the affected ‘pomp and uniformity’ of Johnson’s writing, likening his orotund prose style to ‘the rumbling of mimic thunder at one of our theatres.’

Hazlitt intends this as criticism, of course, but Johnson might have accepted the metaphor. For Johnson, writing is always a counterfeiting, a figuring forth. It is inevitably a formal exercise. The vagaries of the creative temperament cut no ice with him. A man can write at any time, he claimed, if only he puts his mind to it.

Annette Wheeler Cafarelli has pointed out that there is an affinity between Johnson and later Romantic essayists. ‘Boswell, like Rousseau, encouraged intimacy and iconoclastic detail,’ she observes. ‘But lives composed on the Johnsonian model — interpretive, subjective, fragmentary, allusive, iconographic — constitute the Romantic mainstream in prose. The brief sequenced lives of collective biography epitomize Romantic discourse in their emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity, heuristic inference rather than proof, paratactic innuendo rather than univocal interpretation, and truth rather than accuracy.’ But this influence does not extend to Johnson’s decisively un-Romantic intentions and assumptions. Lives of the Poets was a commissioned work whose limitations were largely set by the publishers. Its essays are marked by the circumstances of their composition. Indeed, Johnson sometimes makes explicit reference to the limitations and imperfections of his sources. Yet his concise style of biographical essay makes shrewd use of these contingencies, incorporating them into an overarching moral purpose. The Life of Savage, which Johnson wrote many years before Lives of the Poets was commissioned, was included in the final sequence and became a template for the later essays. Its opening pages set the tone for the account of Savage’s misfortunes and hardships, rejecting the notion that intellectual achievement brings happiness or elevates a man above the common run of humanity. Johnson refers to ‘the miseries of the learned,’ their ‘unhappy lives and untimely


This becomes a keynote for the collection. The function of the biographical essay, as Johnson conceives it, is cautionary; its basic technique is levelling. It is in this negative sense that *Lives of the Poets* is written, as Johnson claimed, ‘in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety’ and motivated ‘by the honest desire to give useful pleasure.’

Eighteenth century London was a place of great intellectual and cultural vitality. Its many coffee houses and salons buzzed with conversation and debate. The Licensing Act had lapsed in 1695 and, though some restrictive laws remained in place, this allowed an unprecedented freedom of the press. Publishing became a boom industry. Literacy rates were increasing throughout the first half of the century, and newspapers and periodicals multiplied and diversified to satisfy a burgeoning readership. The historian Roy Porter notes that annual newspaper sales increased from 2.5 million in 1713, to more than 12 million in the 1770s, to 16 million by 1801. By the end of the century London was home to twenty-three newspapers and the nation boasted around 250 periodicals. Between 1660 and 1800, Porter estimates, more than 300,000 titles were published, ranging from pamphlets to books, and approximately 200 million copies were sold.

Richard Steele’s *Tatler* and Joseph Addison’s *Spectator*, which appeared in the early decades of the century, became the prototypes for later magazines, offering essays and commentary on a range of social and political topics. They were not merely popular but influential in shaping public debate, pioneering the concept of the agenda-setting opinion piece that, in Steele’s words, told people ‘what to think.’

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as defenders of propriety and good taste, advocating an ideal of
gentility and cultivation. They saw themselves as disseminators of
the best ideas and promoters of healthy discussion. ‘I have brought
philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges,’
boasted Addison, ‘to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables,
and in coffee-houses.’

The publishing boom meant that writing became increasingly
professionalised, as enterprising authors found they could earn a
modest living by scratching out articles for papers and journals, or
penning a squib that could be sold to the local bookseller for a few
quick shillings. Prose fiction, too, was beginning to reach a wide
audience. This was the century that witnessed the first flowering of
the English novel in the works of Daniel Defoe, Samuel
Richardson, Fanny Burney and Henry Fielding; the Irishmen
Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne and Oliver Goldsmith also
penned bestsellers, as did the Scot Tobias Smollett. Such was the
novel’s rise to prominence that critics began to express concern
about the pernicious influence this new and popular cultural form
might be exercising over the feeble-minded and impressionable —
young women in particular. Concerns were raised about new forms
of public culture generally, about the potential for unchecked
populism to mislead and corrupt, about the threat posed to
hierarchies of cultural value and the possible corrosion of social
stability. The eighteenth century is the period in English history
when that powerful secularising engine of modernity — a nascent
democratic culture that was participatory and to a large extent
unregulated — first lurched into gear. ‘Out of the publication
revolution,’ observes the cultural historian John Brewer, ‘emerged
questions that were to vex authors, critics and the public for the
next 200 years. Who were the public? How could one affect their
taste? How could you discipline and control them in the world of a
free press? And how were you to re-establish firm boundaries in a
culture which seemed to be in flux?’

Into this robust environment rolled the young Samuel
Johnson. He arrived in London in March 1737, in the company of
his former student David Garrick, with ‘two-pence half-penny’ in

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31 Brewer, 191.
his pocket. He was twenty-seven years old and his attempts at establishing a career had to that point been unsuccessful. Hailing from provincial Lichfield, the big-boned and ungainly Johnson cut an awkward figure. His walk Boswell describes as resembling ‘the struggling gait of one in fetters’; his manner of dress was ‘slovenly’. He was, to put it bluntly, an ugly man. Not just peculiar looking, but physically somewhat disconcerting. Childhood bouts of scrofula and smallpox had left him deaf in one ear and nearly blind in one eye; he had facial scars and a pronounced squint. In person he presented a mess of tics and odd mannerisms. When the artist William Hogarth first saw him at the home of Samuel Richardson, ‘shaking his head and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner,’ he initially assumed Johnson was an ‘idiot’ entrusted to Richardson’s care. A contemporary satirical poem, recorded by Boswell, describes him as ‘unblest with outward grace,’ his appearance enough to make ‘babes cling frightened to the nurse’s breast’; while another poem by Charles Churchill, published in 1762, which lampoons Johnson in the figure of ‘Pomposo’, refers to

Features so horrid, were it light,
Would put the Devil himself to flight.

Nor did William Blake, two decades later, hesitate to mock the afflicted in his poem ‘An Island in the Moon’:

Lo the Bat with Leathern wing
Winking & blinking,
Winking & blinking,
Winking & blinking,
Like Doctor Johnson.

32 Johnson’s precise claim about the state of his finances is recorded by Boswell as most likely a bit of mild exaggeration on Johnson’s part. Boswell, 1.54n.

33 Boswell, 2.614.

34 Peter Martin’s recent biography has advanced the theory that Johnson may have suffered from what is now known as Tourette’s syndrome. Bate, 125; Martin, 285–6.


36 Boulton, 363.
That Johnson’s lumbering and damaged frame housed an uncommonly powerful mind was evident from an early age. As a boy he had excelled at the local grammar school, and he eventually gained admission to Oxford, only to be forced to leave a year later without a degree — not due to a lack of ability or endeavour but, humilitatingly, due to a lack of funds. Returning home, he suffered the first of the mental breakdowns that were to plague him throughout his life. He tried his hand at teaching, establishing what one commentator described as ‘perhaps the most unsuccessful private school in the history of education.’ When he set out for London, leaving behind his much older wife Tettie, whom he had married in 1735, he had no real prospects beyond the vague notion that he might embark upon a literary career. In the words of Paul Fussell, he became ‘a writer by default and by accident, prevented by poverty and ugliness from aspiring to any other life. He finally found a profession in which his shocking person could be concealed from his audience.’ As Johnson was later to observe of the unfortunate Richard Savage: ‘having no profession, he became by necessity an author.’

It was more than a decade before Johnson achieved significant literary fame with the Rambler, which took Addison’s genial model of the familiar essay and reinvented it as a form of authoritative moral discourse. This was followed by the great scholarly achievements: the Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755, and his edition of Shakespeare’s works, which appeared in 1765. These consolidated his reputation as England’s foremost man of letters, the dominant member of an intellectual circle that included such redoubtable figures as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and Sir Joshua Reynolds, and earned him the honorary degree that bestowed upon him the appellation ‘Doctor’. Initially, however, he was just another anonymous Grub Street hack turning out copy for miserable wages, an apprenticeship alluded to in his self-deprecating definition of ‘Grubstreet’ as a

37 Donald Greene, cited in Fussell, 14.
38 Fussell, 7.
39 Lives, 2.103.
place ‘much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems.’

That the new print culture was socially important, unglamorous though it may have been in practice, was a given. ‘More than anything else,’ Brewer observes of the environment in which Johnson wrote, ‘taste depended upon the written and printed word, on the descriptions, criticisms and discussions of cultural activity which created communities of interest.’ Thus ‘developing critical opinions was every bit as important as watching a play or hearing a concert, and one of the chief sources of critical comment was newspapers and periodicals.’ Having experienced Grub Street first hand, Johnson well understood the potential reach of populist writing, as well as its shortcomings. In his introduction to a collected edition of the Gentleman’s Magazine, to which he was an anonymous contributor early in his career, he argues that newspapers promote discourse and speculation which contributes to the ‘Emolument of Society.’ He celebrates their accessibility, noting that ‘their Cheapness brings them into universal Use; their Variety adapts them to every one’s Taste.’ But he also recognises journalism’s less admirable qualities. A news-writer, he claims in the Idler, ‘is “a man without virtue, who writes lies at home for his own profit.” To these compositions is required neither genius nor knowledge, neither industry nor sprightliness, but contempt of shame, and indifference to truth are absolutely necessary.’

The issues facing the professional writer — social, ethical, technical — are united for Johnson in the question of language itself, although he was not alone his belief in the cultural importance of linguistic refinement. In 1712 Jonathan Swift had published A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue, a classic statement of linguistic conservatism, in which he deplores the fashionable coinings of fops and halfwits, and states his concern that the language was descending into

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41 Brewer, 91.

42 Cited in Clarke, 74.

barbarism as a result of these ‘daily Corruptions’ and ‘multiplied Abuses and Absurdities.’ Swift expresses the hope that if English ‘were once refined to a certain Standard, perhaps there might be ways found out to fix it forever.’\textsuperscript{44} Johnson is no less repelled by what he regards as vulgarity of expression, but he is more realistic. ‘That our language is in perpetual danger of corruption cannot be denied,’ he writes in the \textit{Life of Roscommon;} ‘but what prevention can be found?’\textsuperscript{45} In the preface to his \textit{Dictionary} he dismisses Swift’s ‘petty treatise’ and wearily concedes the inevitability of change. Fixing the language is as forlorn a hope as reforming humankind’s sublunary nature with its susceptibility to folly, vanity, and affectation. He proposes instead that ‘we palliate what we cannot cure.’\textsuperscript{46}

This ambivalent attitude to language is characteristic. Johnson consistently conflates formality of expression with edification. He recognises that there is a gulf between reality and expression, as there is between expression and thought. The disjunction between writing and living, whose comic possibilities are so memorably exploited by Sterne in \textit{Tristram Shandy}, is for Johnson a rather more serious matter. Words, he recognises, are arbitrary; they are the ‘dress of thought’ rather than its substance. They ‘owe their power to association’ and therefore wield only the influence that ‘custom has given them.’\textsuperscript{47} This arbitrariness brings language into the domain of the ethical. Since we can choose how to express ourselves, we should choose to express ourselves well — ‘well’ in this context meaning not simply harmoniously and accurately, but decently. Words are at once superficial and deeply important. The cultivation of language becomes a way of cultivating the individual. Thus he praises Addison and Steele as ‘masters of common life,’ who adjusted ‘the unsettled practice of daily intercourse by propriety and politeness,’ and ‘taught, with great justness of argument and dignity of language, the most


\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Lives}, 1.165.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Selected Writings}, 239-242.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Lives}, 1.49-50.
important duties and sublime truths.\footnote{Lives, 1.423-4.} For Johnson, an elevating idea loses its lustre — becomes degraded and contaminated — if it is expressed in vulgar terms. And yet if language becomes too elevated, it loses its capacity to hold an audience. A book is good in vain, he observes in the \textit{Life of Dryden}, if the reader throws it away.\footnote{Lives, 1.334.} He constantly brings these assumptions to bear on literary works, as he assesses their ability to provide pleasure and instruction. They inform his understanding of the importance of style as a means, not merely of conveying a judicious and truthful opinion, but of presenting a critical opinion in an appropriately compelling light. Writers must always strive for a balance between directness and elevation. ‘Words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purpose of the poet,’ he suggests. ‘From those sounds which we hear on small or on coarse occasions, we do not easily receive strong impressions, or delightful images; and words to which we are nearly strangers, whenever they occur, draw that attention on themselves which they should transmit to things.’\footnote{Lives, 1.306.} Thus balance and judgement are paramount. ‘Every language of a learned nation necessarily divides itself into diction scholastick and popular, grave and familiar, elegant and gross; and from a nice distinction of these different parts arises a great part of the beauty of style.’\footnote{Lives, 1.306.}

Johnson’s prose style in the \textit{Rambler} is a conscious attempt to achieve this balance of measured and correct expression, to invent a mode whose very regularity becomes a model of propriety and reason. One of his stated intentions is to ‘to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations.’ He ventures to hope he has ‘added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence.’\footnote{Rambler, no.208, 5.318-9.} Boswell certainly ranked this among his achievements. Johnson’s ‘manly’ style, he argues, the ‘dignified march’ of his sentences, ‘has given a general elevation to the language of his country.’ Against the accusations of ‘some shallow criticks’ that Johnson’s prose is ‘involved and turgid,
and abounding with antiquated hard words,' Boswell argues that his ‘comprehension of mind was the mould for his language. Had his conceptions been narrower, his expression would have been easier.’ Edification is the result, not simply of the moral wisdom the essays contain, but the imposing and authoritative manner in which it is expressed. ‘Johnson writes like a teacher,’ observes Boswell. ‘He dictates to his readers as of from an academical chair. They attend with awe and admiration; and his precepts are impressed upon them by his commanding eloquence.’

Here, for example, is the concluding paragraph of the *Rambler*, number 17:

It is always pleasing to observe, how much more our minds can conceive, than our bodies can perform; yet it is our duty, while we continue in this complicated state, to regulate one part of our composition by some regard to another. We are not to indulge our corporeal appetites with pleasures that impair our intellectual vigour, nor gratify our minds with schemes which we know our lives must fail in attempting to execute. The uncertainty of our duration ought at once to set bounds to our designs, and add incitements to our industry; and when we find ourselves inclined either to immensity in our schemes, or sluggishness in our endeavours, we may check, or animate, ourselves, by recollecting, with the father of physic, *that art is long, and life is short*.54

This is indeed both eloquent and commanding. The interaction between generalisation, moral precept and logical process is characteristic of Johnson’s style. Beginning with a broad observation about human nature, namely that our minds have a natural and pleasing ability to overstep the bounds of the possible, Johnson is quick to observe that this creates an obligation. We must regulate this potentially dangerous tendency. The pluralised pronouns imply universality, and the mode is one of incontrovertible moral instruction — ‘...it is our duty...’; ‘We are not to indulge...’; ‘...ought at once to set bounds...’. But the tone is cautionary rather than didactic. Johnsonian instruction emerges

53 Boswell, 1.129-133.

54 *Rambler*, no.17, 3.97.
from a process of declaration followed by qualification, which is itself a reflection of our complicated state. Just as we must ‘regulate one part of our composition by some regard to the other,’ so too is Johnson’s prose regulated to reflect the idea that our fate is always to oscillate between the poles of desire and disappointment. The abiding danger is to succumb to one of either extremes, to the Scylla of sluggishness or the Charybdis of immensity. And here Johnson not only speaks with the worldly voice of experience, he speaks to experience. His moral precepts have an air of practicality. They are prohibitive but not static. The final aphorism about art and life, which the learned Johnson has borrowed from Hippocrates, is more than a summation of a realised truth: it is a spur to human endeavour.

Johnson’s imposing and authoritative style is an instantly recognisable feature of his critical persona. Charles Lamb pointed out that without professing egotism Johnson’s writing is essentially egotistical: ‘He deals out opinion which he would have you take for argument; and is perpetually obtruding his own particular views of life for universal truths. This is the charm which binds us to his writing.’ The distinctively Johnsonian manner is conveyed in part by a persuasive vocabulary that blurs the distinction between moral and critical categories. Variety, for example, is usually positive, since variety is a source of pleasure and sustains the interest; novelty, however, has negative connotations and is used to signify a work of only superficial appeal. Johnson’s habit of attributing an opinion he does not like to vanity or transient fashion is to this day a beloved trope of conservative polemicists. But Johnson also cultivates a rhetorical technique that reinforces the authority of his pronouncements. He represents, in a consciously stylised way, a process of reflection leading to sound and conclusive judgement. Even in Lives of the Poets, which moves away from the philosophical gravitas of the Rambler to adopt a simpler style of address, there is a deliberate regularity to his prose. What Walter Jackson Bate calls ‘his dialectic and bisociative habit of mind’ is constantly in evidence. His writing uses antitheses and parallelism almost obsessively, illustrating each point by contrast and analogy. One of his favourite techniques is to set out opposed

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55 Cited in Cafarelli, 34.
56 Bate, 535.
positions and then navigate a sensible middle course. His balanced sentences rock back and forth between extremes in a kind of ritual weighing of conflicting ideas and impulses, acting out a judicious avoidance of too-close an association with either alternative, moving toward conclusiveness in the form of a generalised statement of principle. ‘Great thoughts,’ he observes, ‘are always general.’

Here he is again, this time discussing virtue:

To walk with circumspection and steadiness in the right path, at an equal distance between the extremes of error, ought to be the constant endeavour of every reasonable being; nor can I think those teachers of moral wisdom much to be honoured as benefactors to mankind, who are always enlarging upon the difficulty of our duties, and providing rather excuses for vice, than incentives to virtue.

This sentence describing the importance of circumspection and steadiness is itself circumspect and steady. It walks at an equal distance between the extremes of error, neither denying nor overestimating the difficulty of the task. The sense of reasonableness implied in this figuring forth is, for Johnson, the embodiment of respectability and is always praiseworthy. This is a moral conviction he carries into the realm of aesthetic judgement, where moderation is elevated to the status of a critical principle. Thus, in the Life of Pope, Johnson praises Spence, the Prelector of Poetry at Oxford, as a ‘critick without malevolence, who thought it as much his duty to display beauties as expose faults; who censured with respect and praised with alacrity.’ Dryden’s account of Shakespeare’s works he similarly commends for being ‘exact without minuteness, and lofty without exaggeration.

Perhaps the most striking example of this habitual balancing of expression is Johnson’s critical assessment of Addison. Addison is said to have ‘purified intellectual pleasure, separated mirth from indecency, and wit from licentiousness’; his humour is virtuous,

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57 Lives, 1.15.
58 Rambler, no.25, 3.137.
59 Lives, 2.274.
60 Lives, 1.299.
because it ‘never outsteps the modesty of nature’, nor raises merriment or wonder by the violation of truth. His figures neither divert by distortion, nor amaze by aggravation.’ His religion is credited for being ‘neither weakly credulous nor wantonly sceptical; his morality is neither dangerously lax, nor impractically rigid.’ And so too is his prose, which Johnson characterises as ‘the model of the middle style; on grave subjects not formal, on light occasions not grovelling; pure without scrupulosity, and exact without apparent elaboration.’ Addison, Johnson writes approvingly, ‘seeks no ambitious ornaments, and tries no hazardous innovations; his style ‘is always luminous, but never blazing with unexpected splendour’; he is ‘never feeble, and he did not wish to be energetic’; his sentences ‘have neither studious amplitude, nor affected brevity.’ The result is ‘elegant but not ostentatious.’

The manner in which Johnson chooses to praise others is as revealing of his critical preferences as it is of his own style. There is an obvious formality at work here. Each comment is a variation on a basic neither−nor structure. This same habit of expression occurs whether Johnson is complimenting a writer for his critical judgement, his religious virtue, or his prose style. At the bottom of this process, inscribed in its very shape, is a kind of moral reckoning. Any positive attribute Johnson mentions is assumed to have the potential to become a fault if pushed to an extreme. Precision can become pedantry; loftiness can become exaggeration; elegance can become ostentation. The basis of judgement is fused to virtue. It becomes the ability to maintain a delicate balance between closely related but competing concepts: wit and licentiousness; laxness and rigidity; credulity and scepticism. Thus every statement, every observation, must be qualified, checked, moderated. It must be reined back in. Johnson’s modifiers are insistent and tendentious — weakly credulous, wantonly sceptical, dangerously lax, impractically rigid, ambitious ornaments, hazardous innovations, studious amplitude, affected brevity — and serve to emphasise both the latent dangers of these concepts and the corresponding moral imperative behind their regulation.

Johnson was perfectly aware of the distinctive formality of his prose. His style was widely admired, imitated, criticised and

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61 Lives, 1.444, 465–6 [emphasis in original].
parodied in his lifetime. ‘He who writes much will not easily escape a manner,’ he observes in the Life of Dryden, ‘such a recurrence of particular modes as may be easily noted.’ But Johnson regards this as a minor concern. Prose is functional above all else. This is reflected in what W.K. Wimsatt has described as ‘the abrupt, sectional character of his writing. It is put together with tight logic, it is eminently coherent and articulate, but it does not flow.’ Johnson is ‘a man who marches in one direction, hitting right and left as he goes, hammers three times at the end, then turns at right angles or back again and repeats.’

For William Hazlitt, this formality was a grave fault indeed. He devotes much of his preface to Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays to overturning Johnson’s Neoclassical assumptions and it is significant that he proceeds via a critique of Johnson’s prose. The very structure of his style, argues Hazlitt, constrains Johnson’s interpretation. His ‘general powers of reasoning overlaid his critical susceptibility. All his ideas were cast in a given mould, in a set form: they were made out by rule and system, by climax, inference, and antithesis: — Shakespeare’s were the reverse. Johnson’s understanding dealt only in round numbers: the fractions were lost upon him.’ Because Johnson judges by the common standard of conventional propriety, he does not appreciate the true grandeur of Shakespeare’s poetry, since ‘the most exquisite refinement or sublimity produced an effect on his mind, only as they could be translated into the language of measured prose.’ Johnson ‘saw only the definite, the positive, and the practical, the average forms of things, not their striking differences — their classes, not their degrees.’ Thus he ‘found the general species or didactic form in Shakespeare’s characters,’ but did not regard ‘the individual traits, or the dramatic distinctions which Shakespeare has engrafted on this general nature.’

Hazlitt broadens his attack in his lecture on the English essayists, elaborating upon the relationship between Johnson’s style and his habits of thought. The tendency in the Rambler for Johnson to present himself as a ‘complete balance-master in the topics of

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62 Lives, 1.305.


64 Hazlitt, 4.175–6.
morality’ is directly reflected in the structure of his sentences, which creates ‘a species of rhyming in prose, where one clause answers to another in measure and quality’; where ‘each sentence, revolving round its centre of gravity, is contained within itself like a couplet, and each paragraph forms itself into a stanza.’65

It is not surprising that Johnson’s writing should prove resistible to Romantics such as Hazlitt, Coleridge and Lamb. Hazlitt’s critique is acute but severe because he is clearing the way for his own philosophy. Yet his criticisms deserve attention for several reasons. They are illuminating, in the first instance, for the clarity with which they set out the competing assumptions of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. The difference is one of temperament as much as philosophy. Hazlitt does not so much dismantle Johnson’s arguments as recast his Neoclassical terminology in a negative light. He criticises Johnson’s prose in Johnson’s own terms. The lack of variety in Johnson’s writing, Hazlitt argues, diminishes its ‘general power, not only to please, but to instruct’; the great fault of his style is that it ‘destroys all shades of difference, the association between words and things.’66

In other words, the very things Johnson believes it is imperative for good writing to do — to please and instruct, to express generalised truths, to use words in a way that focuses attention upon the objects to which they refer rather than the words themselves — are the things his style works against.

More importantly, Hazlitt points to an underlying psychological motivation for this formality, arguing that Johnson ‘dares not trust himself with the immediate impressions of things, for fear of compromising his dignity’ and that this ‘timidity is the result, not of ignorance, but of morbid apprehension.’67 He who would know himself should consult his enemies. This criticism is harsh to the point of cruelty, but its insight cuts to the heart of Johnson’s approach because it recognises that self-imposed limitation is the central imperative of his writing. For Johnson, the need to control subjective impulses is paramount. If order is the necessary precondition of understanding, the importance of writing is that it provides a way of imposing this order upon a potentially chaotic

65 Hazlitt, 6.102.
66 Hazlitt, 6.101-2.
67 Hazlitt, 6.102.
and threatening reality. This importance extends beyond the fact that, as Freud once remarked, a little repression is a necessary condition of civilisation; as a general principle it applies politically, socially and personally. The critical process enacted in writing is, in an important sense, rationality itself. For Johnson, the very concept of the rational needs to be absolutely divorced from any emotional or subjective components, divorced from its untrustworthy human element. Johnson’s writings have been described as a form of ‘wisdom literature’. This characterisation is obviously apt with respect to his habit of concentrating his ideas into generalised statements of principle, his broad agreement with the Horacian notion that wisdom is the starting point for correct writing. But Johnsonian wisdom, though abstracted into generalisation, is always applied and practical, and the guarantor of this wisdom is the exercise of the critical intelligence.

Johnson’s credentials as a pessimist are impeccable enough for him to count Samuel Beckett among his admirers. Yet the word hope chimes throughout his writings. The persistence of the phantoms of hope, the desire for happiness, is a root cause of what he identifies as a defining paradox of the human condition. The utopian happy valley described in the opening chapters of Rasselas provides its inhabitants with every delight, but it is also a form of imprisonment. The eponymous young prince becomes frustrated with his contentment for the simple reason that it negates the possibility of hope. If every comfort is provided there is nothing to look forward to; striving and achievement become redundant. ‘That I want nothing, or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint,’ observes Rasselas; ‘if I had any certain known want, I should have a certain wish; that wish would excite my endeavour … I fancy that I should be happy if I had something to pursue.’ What he desires, what he needs, is ‘the choice of life.’

This instinct to look beyond the immediate conditions of his existence is double-edged: ‘it seems to me,’ Imlac tells Rasselas, ‘that while you are making the choice of life, you neglect life.’ But

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69 Rasselas, 44–5, 69 [emphasis in original].

70 Rasselas, 103.
the desire itself is understood to be innate and pervasive. ‘The truth is,’ says Imlac, ‘that no mind is much employed upon the present: recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments.’ It is in this spirit that flight becomes a defining metaphor in *Rasselas*. While he remains in the happy valley Rasselas’ thoughts are ‘always on the wing’; his no less discontented sister Nakayah wants to ‘fly’ with him to escape their ‘tasteless tranquility’. (Tasteless being understood, in this context, in the literal sense of bland or flavourless.) Imlac locates the compelling power of fiction in its ability to ‘send imagination out upon the wing.’ The inevitable corollary of this natural desire is represented in the comical allegory of the ambitious artisan, who spends two years designing and building a set of wings, only for them to fail dismally and absurdly. But the implied mockery of his bathetic inability to transcend his earthbound condition is not absolute: it is not intended to ridicule the worthiness of ambition. ‘Nothing,’ the artist tells Rasselas, ‘will ever be attempted, if all possible objections must be first overcome.’

For Johnson, all striving must inevitably fall short of perfection; indeed, the humbling truth is that the greater part of humankind fails utterly at whatever it attempts; but great works are capable of being achieved, as Imlac remarks, not by strength but by perseverance. Not the least irony in *Rasselas* is the fact that the small band of malcontents do not escape the happy valley by flying, but by laboriously digging their way out. The purposeful activity itself satisfies a basic instinct. When they arrive at the mighty structure of an Egyptian pyramid, Imlac calls it ‘a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments.’ That such a laborious enterprise should be undertaken at all, given the vast gulf between its size and its utility, is symbolic of this fundamental human need: ‘It seems to have been erected,’ observes Imlac, ‘only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys.

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71 *Rasselas*, 104.
72 *Rasselas*, 70, 72.
73 *Rasselas*, 133.
74 *Rasselas*, 52.
incessantly upon life, and must always be appeased by some employment.\textsuperscript{75}

That there can be no achievement without delusive ambition and disappointment is the basis of Johnson's tragi-comic vision of our postlapsarian state. One of the ideas \textit{Rasselas} insists upon is that hope and fear are conjoined. Rasselas seeks a happiness that is 'solid and permanent, without fear and without uncertainty.'\textsuperscript{76} But this ambition is callow. The irony is that the absence of fear and uncertainty is what makes life in the happy valley so unsatisfactory. Hope, the spur to all human action, cannot exist without possibility, which necessarily means uncertainty. Thus happiness can never be permanent because it can only exist by virtue of one's exposure to danger and the whims of capricious fate. As Nekayah cries despairingly, 'happiness itself is the cause of misery.'\textsuperscript{77} Life is a vicious cycle: hope, which is necessary to happiness, leads to striving, which leads to disappointment and despair, which can only be alleviated by once again fixing our hopes upon some future goal. This grim comedy is reinforced by allegorical repetition. Each mode of life Rasselas and his fellow travellers investigate — whether luxurious or impoverished, learned or ignorant — is found to be wanting; each creates its own form of discontent. No one is insulated from tragedy and suffering. Human life, as Imlac observes, 'is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed.'\textsuperscript{78}

Walter Jackson Bate observes that in \textit{The Vanity of Human Wishes} Johnson approaches religion 'essentially by a negative path' — in other words, with the assumption that 'when one has cast off all illusions, what one has left is the truth.' Yet Johnson also understands the pervasiveness of illusion. He recognises 'the inevitable self-deception by which human beings are led astray' and the 'built in frailties of human psychology' that anticipate 'the

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Rasselas}, 108.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Rasselas}, 78.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Rasselas}, 117.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Rasselas}, 65.
pessimistic sense of self-betrayal that was later to be powerfully expressed in the writings of Schopenhauer and Freud.\textsuperscript{79}

This awareness is evident in Lives of the Poets. ‘We do not always know our own motives,’ Johnson remarks in the Life of Dryden.\textsuperscript{80} He argues similarly in the Life of Pope that ‘very few can boast of hearts which they dare lay open to themselves, and of which, by whatever accident exposed, they do not shun a distinct and continued view.’ This tendency, he suggests, should not be too harshly judged: ‘To charge those favourable representations, which men give their own minds, with the guilt of hypocritical falsehood, would shew more severity than knowledge. The writer commonly believes himself.’\textsuperscript{81}

Richard Savage, Johnson notes, was in the habit of rationalising his lack of success, so that ‘the blame was laid rather on any person than the author.’ This allowed the poet to live at peace with himself, but for Johnson delusion is pernicious, even though it is commonplace. Savage’s life is an illustrative tale for this reason: ‘It were doubtless to be wished that truth and reason were universally present; that every thing were esteemed according to its real value; and that men would secure themselves from being disappointed in their endeavours after happiness, by placing it only in virtue, which is always to be obtained.’ But there is a grim air of inevitability to Savage’s misfortune. His wilful blindness creates a self-perpetuating cycle of despair: ‘By imputing none of his miseries to himself, he continued to act on the same principles, and to follow the same path; was never made wiser by his sufferings, nor preserved by one misfortune from falling into another. He proceeded through life to tread the same steps on the same circle; always applauding his past conduct, or at least forgetting it, to amuse himself with phantoms of happiness, which were dancing before him; and willingly turned his eyes from the light of reason, which would have discovered the illusion, and shewn him, what he never wished to see, his real state.’\textsuperscript{82}

The classical imperative to know thyself is the insistent subtext of Johnson’s moralising. In the Rambler he argues,

\textsuperscript{79} Bate, 282–3.

\textsuperscript{80} Lives, 1.337.

\textsuperscript{81} Lives, 2.313.

\textsuperscript{82} Lives, 2.143.
following Socrates, that ‘every error in human conduct must arise from ignorance in ourselves, either perpetual or temporary.’ The first step on the road to wisdom is recognition of this ignorance: ‘The great fault of men of learning is still, that they offend against this rule, and appear to study any thing rather than themselves.’

But it is one of the defining tensions of Johnson’s thought that this positive injunction of classical humanism sits awkwardly with his religious beliefs and his conservatism, which recommend obedience and self-denial as paths to virtue. The profound and relentless negativity, the almost obsessive reiteration of humankind’s fundamental weakness, the consistent note of pessimism that sounds throughout his writings: these express a deeply held conviction that we inhabit a realm of sin and suffering, that there is no prospect of any worldly amelioration of our unhappy condition, that ‘life protracted is protracted woe.’ Our essential ignorance and helplessness is, for Johnson, radically inescapable. The only option, he suggests in The Vanity of Human Wishes, is resignation, in the form of a religious subjugation in which fervent prayers are said to promote

A healthful mind,
Obedient passions, and a will resign’d.

Johnson’s overt concern with probity and diligence is, in this sense, a form of protection. It guards against the ever-present threat of dissolution. A poem, titled Know Thyself, which he wrote in Latin after revising his Dictionary, gives concise expression to this idea. The poet voices a sense of exhaustion that verges on mental collapse, but he begins ironically, addressing his lines to the Renaissance scholar and lexicographer Joseph Justus Scaliger, who proposed that the drudgery of making a dictionary be reserved as punishment for only the most hardened criminals. He soon turns to the contemplation of the limitations and imperfections of his own work. Now that his task is complete, he finds he is still fettered to himself. This return to self-awareness, which emerges

83 Rambler, no. 24, 3.131-2.
84 Selected Writings, 145.
85 Selected Writings, 148.
from the ‘dull doom of doing nothing, harsher than any drudgery,’ exposes an innate frailty that fills him with anxiety:

... forced finally to face myself, to own frankly
that my heart is illiterate, and my mind’s strength an illusion
I labour to keep alive.

The poem moves beyond the expression of mere weakness and self-doubt to raise the frightening prospect of psychic disintegration. Left to himself, the poet finds his mind full of fear. He is menaced by ghosts and ‘the thin shadows of nothing, the absence of shapes.’ Only in the final stanza does he regain his composure, gathering courage and strength, literally reassembling himself — ‘get myself together, gather the last of my gall’ — to contemplate one more heroic deed. Or at least ‘some dull, decent job, undemanding: like making a dictionary ...’

The irony of Know Thyself is Beckett-like — I can't go on; I'll go on. The push and pull of the poet’s sincere anxieties and his deprecating humour enacts the exhausting mental labour of maintaining his equilibrium and fortitude. His unhappy choice is between a sense of structure, which can only be sustained by the most dogged persistence, and a horrifying abyss. Irony itself, like the labour of learning, becomes a form of protection, a way of keeping the threatening void at arm’s length. It is a way of rigging up a persona ex nihilo. The psychological implications of the poem are, in this sense, almost irresistible. Johnson’s frequent and devastating bouts of depression and his tormenting fear of death are such familiar features of his character, as it has been passed down to us by Boswell, that the poem has an immediately confessional air. Boswell described Johnson’s mind as a Colosseum, with the great man’s steadfast judgement a mighty gladiator at the centre, beset from all sides by the wild beasts of unreason, demons of his own imagination that he can with tremendous effort subdue but never kill. This grandiose extended metaphor portrays Johnson’s mental struggle as heroic and public, but he would likely have rejected both characterisations. The moral weight of his


87 Boswell, 1.378.
writing is deflationary on precisely this point. He stresses the ordinariness and the solitude of suffering. To claim eminence on the basis of personal anguish could only be construed as vanity.

Johnson’s rejection of all false comfort, his insistence upon the virtue of suffering well, again points to this interesting paradox in his thinking. For Johnson, illusion is both pernicious and necessary. On the one hand, he believes that we must ‘endeavour to see things as they really are, and then enquire whether we ought to complain. Whether we see life as it is, will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable.’ On the other hand, he stresses the importance of formality and convention. If his pistol of universal truth misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it — propriety. Just as there is a moral imperative behind the cultivation of language, even though language is understood to be artifice, it is imperative to maintain the appearance of respectability at the same time as we cast off the cloak of falsehood to acknowledge our degraded condition. When Johnson asserts that it should be ‘the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom,’ it is certainly not so that custom can be disregarded or rejected."88 In his negatively framed understanding of virtue, a man’s chief merit lies in resisting the impulses of his nature. It is in this sense that poetry, and writing generally, can never be a straightforwardly confessional medium. Poetry is not an upwelling of personal sentiment, or a direct expression of a private experience; its importance lies in the fact that it is a formal exercise. It is an artificial mediation that externalises experience, providing the necessary distance which permits judgement and reflection. The general and transcendental truths to which Imlac refers can only be approached through artificial means — representing, counterfeiting, figuring forth — but when poets affect singularity of thought or image, when they ‘lay on the watch for novelty,’ as Johnson puts it in his critique of the metaphysical poets in the Life of Cowley, they write ‘rather as beholders than partakers of human nature.’90

88 Boswell, 1.206.
89 Rambler, no.156, 5.70.
90 Líves, 1.15.
This is one of the defining tensions in Johnson’s criticism. It is especially evident in his ambivalent attitude toward fiction. Poets, he points out, ‘profess fiction, but the legitimate end of fiction is truth.’\textsuperscript{91} Poetry he defines as ‘the art of uniting pleasure with truth, calling imagination to the help of reason’; the purpose of tragedy is ‘to instruct by moving the passions.’\textsuperscript{92} But in Johnson’s view reason is also constantly besieged by the imagination, a faculty he characterises as ‘licentious and vagrant.’\textsuperscript{93} He recommends writing that remains close to the surface of life and criticises \textit{Paradise Lost} for its want of human interest, but in his famous attack upon realist writers in the \textit{Rambler} he argues that accuracy alone is not sufficient justification for the depiction of vice, since there is always the danger of glamourising bad behaviour and encouraging an imaginative identification with immorality.\textsuperscript{94} As Imlac warns in \textit{Rasselas} disorders of the intellect ‘happen more often than superficial observers will easily believe.’ Indeed, they are inevitable. ‘There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason,’ he states, adding: ‘All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity.’\textsuperscript{95}

What is startling about Imlac’s assertion is its claim that everyone is insane, at least some of the time. Insanity is defined, not as an aberration, but as a common condition. For Johnson, our inclination is toward a form of wilful blindness to the nature of our true self. We have a natural tendency to misunderstand our actions and overrate our individual worth. Milton, notes Johnson, was a poor judge of his own poetry, believing \textit{Paradise Regained} to be his greatest work; and Johnson himself was later embarrassed by his early tragedy \textit{Irene}, — embarrassed particularly by the fact that he had once believed it to be better than it really was. Sanity, in so far as such an elusive concept can be quantified at all, can only be established in hindsight. The very concept of sanity implies a form of psychic policing, a deference to an ideal of sound judgement that evokes an artificial, external standard of clear-eyed perception.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[91] \textit{Lives}, 1.194.
\item[92] \textit{Lives}, 1.211; \textit{Rambler}, no.156, 5.70.
\item[93] \textit{Rambler}, no.125, 4.300.
\item[94] \textit{Rambler}, no.4, 3.19–25.
\item[95] \textit{Rasselas}, 133.
\end{footnotes}
against which subjective perception might be measured. The moral benefit of biography is that it objectifies human behaviour, offering it up at a safe remove for scrutiny in the cold light of reason. We can plainly see the foolishness of the poets' behaviour, and we can see that they are often oblivious to their foolishness, but we cannot assume superiority because the ambitions and desires which lead them astray have their origins in fundamental human traits. ‘To see the highest minds levelled with the meanest,’ writes Johnson, ‘may produce some solace to the consciousness of weakness, and some mortification to the pride of wisdom. But let it be remembered, that minds are not levelled in their powers but when they are first levelled in their desires.’

Johnson’s biographical essays compel us to consider the way in which the critical judgement — which he conflates with moral judgement — operates in the space that is created by carefully policing the distinction between an objective view of reality and the misconceptions of our fallible subjectivity. In an important sense, judgement consists in a willingness to police the distinction, to hold this dual conception of ourselves.

The individual essays in *Lives of the Poets* are allegorised in this sense. As Cafarelli argues, they have a collective unity that is implicit and paratactic, in which ‘the relation between the individual life and the whole sequence is synecdochic.’ A significant feature of the collection is that all of Johnson's poets were dead at the time of writing. He maintained that a biographer must have known his subject personally to give a just account of a man’s life and habits, but he also argued that an author was obliged to respect the sensitivities of the living and that this restricted a biographer’s capacity to be frank. Intrinsic to *Lives of the Poets* is the blunt manner in which it exposes and records its subjects' flaws, but no less important is the fact that all of the poets are dead. This renders each life complete. Each essay thus becomes a closed narrative. They are all epitaphs, and the problem raised by epitaphs is how ‘to give particular and appropriate praise.’ This is because ‘the greater part of mankind have no character at all, have little that distinguishes them from others equally good or bad, and

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96 *Lives*, 1.255.

97 Cafarelli, 35.
therefore nothing can be said of them which may not be applied with equal propriety to a thousand more.\textsuperscript{98}

For Johnson, criticism is a deflected form of self-criticism and a form of self-awareness. We reach for the universal because it gives us the necessary perspective on the specific which allows us to strive to maintain our rationality. The biographical essays in \textit{Lives of the Poets} are, in this important sense, exercises in objectification: they recognise an archetypal quality in the lives of their subjects. When the poets’ behaviour is poor — and it often is — the fact is recorded as a simple moral failure. They are led away from truth by imagining themselves above the common run of men; but the more they believe in their exceptionalism, the more they confirm their humbling sameness by succumbing to the follies of vanity. This idea is not an expression of a Swiftian sense of misanthropy and self-loathing. It points to the importance of self-denial and discipline, of facing one’s essential weakness. The lives of the poets, transformed into literature, assume some of fiction’s useful deniability: they can be grasped with one hand and pushed away with the other.

On the morning of June 17, 1783, Johnson awoke to discover that he had suffered a stroke during the night which left him temporarily unable to speak. Never one to enjoy perfect good health, he was now in terminal decline. Though he was not to die for another eighteen months, he was increasingly stricken with a series of incapacitating ailments. For a man recognised as the greatest talker in an age of conversation, being struck dumb was an especially cruel blow; for a man devoted to the life of the mind, one who placed such importance upon dignified rationality, the prospect of mental incapacity was horrifying. Two days later he wrote to Hester Thrale of his distress:

\begin{quote}
I felt a confusion and indistinctness in my head, which lasted, I suppose, about half a minute. I was alarmed, and prayed to GOD, that however he might afflict my body, he would spare my understanding. This prayer, that I might try the integrity of my faculties, I made in Latin verse. The lines were not very good, but I knew them not to be very good: I
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Lives}, 2.354 [emphasis in original].
made them easily, and concluded myself to be unimpaired in my faculties.99

A great deal of Johnson's personal courage is evident in the matter-of-fact tone in which he informs his close friend of his suffering. There is no suggestion that he is deserving of pity. Johnson's religion gifted him with a literal belief in hell that made the possibility of eternal damnation seem terrifyingly real. The thought of death was fearsome to him in a way that is difficult to comprehend from a secularised perspective. But what strikes about these lines is not merely the sober manner in which Johnson collects himself. It is not his ability to compose lines of verse that he regards as the ultimate test of his intellectual capacity, but the secondary judgement. As long as he can make the necessary critical movement, stepping back from his own creation, dissociating himself from it enough to recognise its inferiority, he knows he is in his right mind. Which is also to say, he knows himself

99 Boswell, 2.474.
For six years, from 1813 to 1819, the essayist and critic William Hazlitt lived in a house in York Street, Westminster, that was owned by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, but which was once the home of the poet John Milton. Hazlitt must have appreciated his situation. A child of the English Romantic movement, he revered Milton’s poetry and had whole passages of *Paradise Lost* by heart. He considered the blind poet to be ‘in originality scarcely inferior to Homer’ and praised the transforming, synthesising power of Milton’s creative intellect: ‘The power of his mind is stamped on every line. The fervour of his imagination melts down and renders malleable, as in a furnace, the most contradictory materials.’

The philosophy of his landlord, however, roused Hazlitt’s deepest antipathy. Bentham’s doctrine of utilitarianism, which approached all ethical questions armed with a simple rationalist formula, jarred with his most fundamental beliefs. Hazlitt never missed an opportunity to argue against it. All of his writings are set against the notion that cold reason, divorced from the natural passions, was sufficient to account for the richness of human

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experience. He saw truth as an active principle. ‘The mind strikes out truth by collision,’ he wrote, ‘as steel strikes fire from the flint.’\(^2\) He argued that pure rationality was, in fact, a form of irrationality, because it was lifeless and inhuman. In this he is quintessentially Romantic: he valued energy and spontaneity; he loathed any attempt to deny the importance of the emotions as a vital, defining part of existence. His criticism often expresses a dislike of formality and systematisation. The word ‘mechanical’, which appears frequently in his writings, always has negative connotations. It signifies a process whose outcome is predetermined, shaped by the limitations of its own method. Milton’s verse may be, as Samuel Johnson complained, harsh and unequal, but for Hazlitt this is the source of its greatness: Milton is not a mere technician, but unites form and content so that the ‘sound of his lines is moulded into the expression of the sentiment, almost of the very image. They rise or fall, pause or hurry rapidly on, with exquisite art, but without the least trick or affectation, as the occasion seems to require.’\(^3\)

Bentham, who lived next door, seems to have been unaware of the identity of his tenant, but Hazlitt certainly knew his landlord. The philosopher was in the habit of taking his exercise in the garden outside Hazlitt’s window, and it is tempting to imagine Hazlitt composing one of his scorching anti-utilitarian essays, penciling notes to himself on the wall above the fireplace (as he was in the habit of doing), as he gazed down from the superior vantage point of Milton’s house at Bentham, dressed his customary open-necked shirt and kneesocks, while the dour old utilitarian performed his daily ‘circumgyrations’.\(^4\)

Several years after Bentham had evicted him for failing to pay the rent, Hazlitt published a playfully mocking portrait of his former landlord that assumes this very perspective. Like so much of Hazlitt’s writing it is a bravura performance. It begins with a suspiciously familiar account of the philosopher’s habits. Without ever mentioning the author’s former proximity to his subject, it offers an intimate glimpse of Bentham strolling in his garden ‘in

\(^2\) Complete Works, 8.208.

\(^3\) Complete Works, 5.61.

eager conversation’ with some eminent guest, ‘his walk almost
amounting to a run, his tongue keeping pace with it in shrill,
cluttering accents.’ Hazlitt chides Bentham for once proposing to
cut down the two large trees that shaded his garden in order to
build ‘a paltry Chrestomathic School’ — a decision that would have
turned the former home of John Milton into ‘a thoroughfare, like a
three-stalled stable, for the idle rabble of Westminster to pass
backwards and forwards to it with their cloven hoofs.’ He attacks
the assumptions of Bentham’s principle of utility, denying that
reason alone can be sensibly applied to ethical questions, which are
contentious precisely because they relate to matters which rouse
the passionate side of human nature. All the while he caricatures
Bentham as an absent-minded professor, permanently distracted
from reality, who ‘regards the people about him no more than the
flies of summer.’ Bentham’s ideas, Hazlitt argues, reduce ‘the
theory and practice of human life to a caput mortuum of reason,
and dull, plodding, technical calculation.’ He ridicules the
philosopher’s obscure style (‘His works have been translated into
French — they ought to be translated into English’), before
summing him up as ‘one of those who prefer the artificial to the
natural in most things, and think the mind of man omnipotent.’
To Hazlitt’s mind there could be few more damning criticisms.

Hazlitt placed this prose portrait at the beginning of perhaps
his most famous work, The Spirit of the Age., in which he gathered a
series of essays on some of the most significant figures of his day,
including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord
Byron, William Godwin, Sir Walter Scott, William Pitt, and
Thomas Malthus. All of the sketches adopt a similar technique. He
attacks his subjects with a robust mixture of analysis, polemic and
caricature. His bracingly ad hominem approach, which was forged
in the crucible of the popular press, is direct and aggressive, but is
nevertheless based on a consistent principle. Hazlitt was an
unusually perceptive student of human nature. He was fascinated
by the way character informed opinion. When he addresses his
subjects he is looking to understand not only their ideas but their
psychology. He wants to understand them as individuals, to
understand how they think. He was, as one critic has put it, ‘a

\[\text{Complete Works, 11.5-16.}\]
psychologically minded man. This informs all his writings. He did not compartmentalise his thinking, did not try to separate his political opinions from his aesthetics or his psychological observations. Each informed the others. He approaches each topic from the decisively subjective perspective of a thinking and feeling man.

Not only in *The Spirit of the Age*, but throughout his writings, Hazlitt uses physical details as a novelist might use them, as a kind of shorthand, as metonymies of character. The prime minister William Pitt, for example, has ‘a nose expressing pride and aspiring self-opinion.’ As ‘the rudder of the face, the index of the will,’ the nose of the dithering, underachieving Samuel Taylor Coleridge is ‘small, feeble, nothing — like what he has done.’ Percy Shelley is ‘sanguine-complexioned and shrill-voiced,’ reflecting his flighty opinions: ‘His bending, flexible form,’ observes Hazlitt, ‘appears to take no strong hold of things, does not grapple with the world around him, but slides from it like a river.’ The poet laureate Robert Southey — the most strident of the political apostates Hazlitt pursued so tirelessly in his writings — is recalled as having a ‘hectic flush upon his cheek, a roving fire in his eye.’

Even the passing description of William Wordsworth as ‘gaunt and Don Quixote-like’ conveys more than the poet’s physical presence by alluding to his notoriously impenetrable egotism, which Hazlitt wrote was ‘in some respects like a madness; for he scorns even the admiration of himself, thinking it a presumption in any one to suppose he has taste or sense enough to understand him.’

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8 *Complete Works*, 17.109.


10 *Complete Works*, 11.78.

11 *Complete Works*, 17.118.

12 *Complete Works*, 5.163.
Hazlitt is a central figure in the English Romantic movement. As a young man he was an acquaintance of the Lake Poets. He was deeply embroiled in the political and aesthetic debates of the day. He was admired by, and profoundly influenced, John Keats; and he also influenced the French novelist Stendhal, a writer to whom he is often compared. But he is, at the same time, a marginal, incorrigible figure: the most irascible of the Romantics. His life was one of hardship and disappointment. His last words, uttered in a Soho rooming house in 1830 — ‘Well, I’ve had a happy life’ — have generally been regarded with incredulity. Born the son of a dissenting Unitarian minister in 1778, he was raised in the small Shropshire village of Wem. For a time he considered entering the ministry, but at some point during his adolescence he seems to have quietly abandoned his religious faith. He chose instead to pursue a career as a painter, but set himself such high standards that he gave up this ambition while still in his twenties, frustrated at his inability to paint as well as Titian. It was then that he turned to journalism. For the remainder of his life he lived the precarious

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13 Keats attended Hazlitt’s lectures on the English poets, and his famous notion of ‘negative capability’ was directly influenced by Hazlitt’s ideas about the natural disinterestedness of the human mind, which are discussed below. ‘Keats was never close to Hazlitt,’ writes his biographer Andrew Motion, ‘but few people had a more powerful impact on his thinking, or on how he expressed himself. It was an influence he embraced freely.’ Indeed, so delighted was Keats with Hazlitt’s swingeing retaliatory missive to William Gifford, the editor of the Quarterly Review, a Tory journal which had savagely attacked both men, that he copied out pages of Hazlitt’s invective in a letter to his brother George. The admiration was mutual: Hazlitt eulogised Keats in his essay ‘On the Aristocracy of Letters’, describing the poet as a talented and independent man who faced a ‘mercenary servile crew’ who ‘recked not of his gift, but tore him with hideous shouts and laughter.’ Andrew Motion, Keats (London: Faber, 1997) 124-5; Robert Gittings, John Keats (London: Penguin, 1979) 277-9, 287-9, 426; John Keats, ‘To George and Georgiana Keats, 19 February 1819,’ Letters of John Keats, edited by Robert Gittings (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 221-223; Complete Works, 8.211. For a detailed consideration of the aesthetic and philosophical affinities between Keats and Hazlitt see: Bromwich, 362-409. For comparative reading that teases out some of the differences in the two writers’ thinking based on their contrasting responses to Shakespeare see: Uttara Natarajan, Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and the Metaphysics of Power (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 107-119.

14 Michael Foot has suggested that the ‘best way to understand Hazlitt is to read Stendhal and vice versa’; while Bromwich observes that ‘in English there is no one even roughly comparable to him; in French there is Stendhal.’ Whelan has noted the thematic parallels between Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris and Stendhal’s L’Amour. Foot cited in J.B. Priestley & R.L. Brett, William Hazlitt. (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) 8; Bromwich, 5; Whelan, 76-77, 89.
existence of a jobbing writer. He was prolific: his collected works extend to twenty-one volumes. He was also brilliant, capable of turning his hand to any topic. He wrote extensively on the visual arts, theatre, literature and philosophy; he produced biographical and autobiographical works; he was a formidable political writer; but most famously he was a superb practitioner of the familiar essay.

Hazlitt’s personal life was mostly unhappy. When it came to women he was goatish, a tendency that got him into trouble on more than one occasion. He was twice married, but both marriages failed and were probably ill-advised in the first place. His friend and fellow essayist, Charles Lamb, giggled uncontrollably during Hazlitt’s wedding to his first wife Sarah Stoddart, later explaining that this was because ‘any awful thing makes me laugh.’

The breakdown of this relationship was hastened by a dramatic mid-life crisis, which took the form of an infatuation with the much younger daughter of his landlady. She, it seems, was openly flirtatious but rejected him when he raised the prospect of marriage. This drove Hazlitt to an anguished fit of jealousy that he documented, in a manner unflattering to himself, in Liber Amoris. The book quickly became notorious, thanks largely to Hazlitt’s political enemies, who seized upon the work as evidence of his depraved nature. It is, however, an unsparring account of the

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15 The most notorious was an incident in Keswick in 1803 that was to dog Hazlitt in later life. He was flirting with a young hoyden in the local tavern, when she loudly denounced him to the general amusement of the tavern's customers. Humiliated, he smacked her on the bottom. The locals then chased him from the tavern with a view to ducking him in the local pond, but he managed to escape with the help of Coleridge and Southey. This escapade became the source of much scurrilous gossip in the hands of his political enemies, but the suggestion that Hazlitt is guilty of anything more than trivial scrape has been debunked by recent biographers. See: A.C. Grayling, The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000) 89–90; Duncan Wu, William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 98–99.

psychology of obsession, the way a mind in the grip of an all-consuming passion can distort reality to its own detriment.\textsuperscript{17}

But the defining disappointment of Hazlitt’s life was political. Like so many of his generation, he was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution. He never wavered from his commitment to republicanism. But he lived through a period of grinding reaction as the monarchies of Europe banded together to crush the egalitarian spirit of the Revolution, confronting and defeating republican France in the Napoleonic wars.

Typically, Hazlitt’s attitude to the politically oppressive climate had a deeply personal resonance. He forever associated his initial flush of optimism, along with its subsequent betrayal, with the formative experience he describes in one of his best-known essays, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’.\textsuperscript{18} One morning in 1798 he rose early and walked ten miles to hear a sermon by Coleridge, who was at that time considering a career as a Unitarian minister. The young Hazlitt was introduced to Coleridge and was dazzled by his intellectual brilliance. Through Coleridge he was admitted into the circle of the Lake Poets, all of them still in the grip of their youthful revolutionary idealism. He was awestruck.

In the years that followed, Hazlitt looked on with dismay as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey abandoned their republican principles to become monarchists and men of the establishment. He never forgave them their political apostasy. He attacked them repeatedly in print, taking every opportunity to remind them of what they once were and of the democratic principles they once believed in. The three disgraced poets appear so ritually in Hazlitt’s writings that they become almost talismanic figures, symbols of the wider political betrayal that so deeply affected him. They become examples of the fatal weakness of human nature.

Hazlitt is a complex, paradoxical character. His biographer Stanley Jones describes him as a ‘realistic romantic idealist.’\textsuperscript{19} In person he was dark and brooding, intense and philosophical. His


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Complete Works}, 17.106-122.

\textsuperscript{19} Jones, 18.
hair was thick and lustrous black. His enemies in the Tory press described him as ‘pimpled,’ but his complexion was in fact pale and clear. He had a reputation, fuelled by his pugnacious journalism, for being quarrelsome, but he was, oddly enough for such a combative writer, rather shy. According to Jones he was ‘withdrawn and agonisingly sincere.’20 Few writers have written as well on the pleasures of solitude and quiet contemplation. He tended to be ‘nervous and self-effacing’ in social situations, only becoming animated when the conversation turned to serious questions of politics or philosophy.21 ‘I know a person,’ Hazlitt wrote, ‘to whom it has been objected as a disqualification for friendship, that he never shakes you cordially by the hand.’ That same person, however, ‘is the last to quit his seat in your company, grapples with a subject in conversation right earnestly, and is, I take it, backward to give up a cause or a friend. Cold and distant in appearance, he piques himself on being the king of good haters, and a no less zealous partisan. The most phlegmatic constitutions often contain the most inflammable spirits — as fire is struck from the hardest flints.’22 Hazlitt knew this type well, of course: he is describing himself.

Coleridge found the young Hazlitt to be ‘brow-hanging, shoe-contemplative, strange’: ‘he delivers himself of almost all his conceptions with a Forceps, yet he says more than any man I ever knew.’23 To the poet John Clare, who encountered the essayist many years later at a London party, Hazlitt was ‘a silent picture of severity.’24 Clare detected a nervousness in Hazlitt’s mannerisms, which he took as a sign of a suspicious nature, but reported evidence of a fiery intelligence that accords with Coleridge’s impression of a young man who ‘sends well-headed and well-feathered Thoughts straight forwards to the mark with a Twang of the Bow string.’25 Hazlitt could evidently be engaging company. Thomas Noon Talfourd met him at the home of Charles Lamb and

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20 Jones, 10.
21 Jones, 14.
22 Complete Works, 8.306.
23 Grayling, 86 [emphasis in original].
25 Grayling, 86.
recorded that, once the essayist had been drawn from his sombre mood by Charles’s sister Mary, he spoke with ease and fluency: ‘he did not talk for effect, to dazzle, or surprise, or annoy, but with the most simple and honest desire to make his view of the subject at hand entirely apprehended by his hearer.’

When roused he would dispute with great passion and persistence. During a stay at Keswick in 1803, he sided with Wordsworth to argue against the existence of a benevolent God, much to the dismay of the believer Coleridge; and on another occasion he came to blows with John Lamb, the elder brother of Charles, after Lamb asserted that Holbein’s colouring was the equal of Vandyke’s. The art-lover Hazlitt was incensed at such a boorish suggestion and made his feelings known. Lamb responded by punching him. When the scuffling pair were separated, Hazlitt retorted: ‘By God, Sir, you need not trouble yourself. I do not mind a blow, Sir! Nothing affects me but an abstract idea!’

Isaiah Berlin, in his book The Roots of Romanticism, gives an overview of what he characterises as ‘the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred.’ The Romantic movement, he proposes, was a direct challenge to the dominant tradition of Western rationalism. Its foundational claims rested on the virtues of an assertive individualism. The typical values to which the Romantics of the 1820s attached importance, Berlin argues, were ‘integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one’s life to some inner light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth sacrificing all that one is, for which it is worth both living and dying’; they ‘were not primarily interested in knowledge, or in the advance of science; not interested in political power, not interested in happiness, not interested, above all, in adjustment to life, in finding your place in society, in living in peace with your government ... common sense, moderation, was very far from their

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26 Jones, 278.  
28 Burton, 285-6 [emphasis in original].  
thoughts. The philosophy of Romanticism grants priority to ‘the notion of the indomitable will: not knowledge of values, but their creation, is what men achieve. You create values, you create goals, you create ends, and in the end you create your own vision of the universe, exactly as artists create works of art. This radically assertive stance, Berlin suggests, manifests itself in Romanticism’s distrust of rules and external checks. For the Romantics, there is ‘no object, there is only the subject, thrusting itself forward … all schemes, all generalisations, all patterns imposed upon it are forms of distortion, forms of breaking, When Wordsworth said that to dissect is to murder, this is approximately what he meant. And because reality, understood in this subjective and self-created sense, resists being captured and tamed, resists being reduced to a system, the best way to approach the task of understanding reality is through myths, preferably modern, which might suggest something of the unfathomable depths of the human psyche. Thus Romanticism comes to regard the creative endeavors of art and literature as being of particular importance, looking to literature, in particular, to discover modern archetypes in characters such as Hamlet, Don Quixote and Faust.

Berlin’s interpretation of Romanticism is, in many respects, a familiar one. It is certainly possible to recognise many of the characteristics he describes in the arguments Hazlitt puts forward in his writings. But Hazlitt’s critical approach problematises Berlin’s summation in two crucial respects, which complicate both the idealistic and the individualistic tendencies of Romanticism. The first is that Hazlitt is preoccupied with the issue of political power and its relationship to the imagination; the second is that the importance he grants to the individual will does not presume that it is indomitable. He assumes that what he refers to as the imagination and the passions are engaged in an ongoing struggle with the limitations that are imposed upon them by brute facts of reality, but also that their effusions allow for the recognition of a common humanity, which in turn justifies his political stance.

For Hazlitt, these issues are deeply entangled. The inflationary principle underlying his criticism is an attempt to

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30 Berlin, 8-9.
31 Berlin, 119.
32 Berlin, 120.
demonstrate that the tangible experiences of the self confirm the validity of the fraternal, egalitarian principles of his republicanism. The values Hazlitt cherishes are not created, strictly speaking; they are revealed. They are extrapolated from the recognition of the shared reality of our being, which needs only to be acknowledged for their essential truth to be grasped. The political choice between monarchism and republicanism he understands not simply as a choice between two systems of government, whose relative merits might be weighed against each other in a spirit of pragmatism: it is a stark choice between a system that acknowledges the fundamental truth of human equality and one that oppresses that truth. A monarchy is not simply a flawed means of governance; it is morally compromised in its very essence, an affront to human dignity. It is unjust, illegitimate and intolerable because it is based on an undemocratic idea that is, in Hazlitt’s view, not merely unpalatable but demonstrably false. And it is literature that provides one of the primary means by which it is possible to understand why the idea of hereditary rule is based on a falsehood. The representations of poetry, drama and fiction — and of art generally — are directly implicated in matters of political principle because they speak to us as individuals, to our personal and immediate comprehension of the world. The arts of painting and poetry, Hazlitt argues, ‘are conversant with the world of thought within us, and with the world of sense around us — with what we know, and see, and feel intimately.’ They suggest a commonality of experience and a shared human dignity that reaches beyond artificial divisions of class and power. In this way, they confirm the fraternity of all humankind. The radicalism of the poems Wordsworth and Coleridge collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, many of which Hazlitt privileged to have heard read by their authors well before they were first published in 1798, lies in the attempt to write poetry in the everyday language of the middle and lower classes. Though Wordsworth’s introduction coyly refers to the poems as experiments, their explicit rejection of the ‘gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers’ is an act of

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33 *Complete Works*, 5.46.
aesthetic iconoclasm that has as one of its aims the democratisation of poetic expression.34

Hazlitt was among the first to grasp the far-reaching philosophical implications of this aspect of Romanticism. He argued that the Lake school of poetry, which had ‘its origins in the French revolution, or rather those sentiments and opinions which produced that revolution,’ was founded ‘on a principle of sheer humanity’; the change in literary sensibility and the shift in political sentiment ‘went hand in hand.’35 Hazlitt’s literary criticism is consistent in its defence of the egalitarian vision he understands to be fundamental to the early poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. It proceeds from the assumption that to write poetry in the language of the common man, to treat everyday experiences as worthy of poetic expression, is an act of artistic recognition that has profound political consequences; his attacks on Wordsworth and Coleridge later in life were ferocious because he felt they had not simply shifted their political allegiance, but were turning their backs on a philosophical truth and a political principle, the demonstration of which can be found in their own work.

The basic orientation of Hazlitt’s literary criticism, then, is not so much anti-rational as it is radically expressive. It presents the critic’s personal responsiveness as a form of political affirmation, its claim to validity relying on the force and clarity of his impressions. Hazlitt’s approach is thus subjective, assertive and unsystematic. But it is not untheorised or unphilosophical. Indeed, he ranks among the most lucid and cogent theorists of the Romantic sensibility. To assert, as George Watson does, that Hazlitt is incapable of analysis, that he is ‘eminently the kind of descriptive critic who flaunts his own personality to the expense of his subject,’ that his language is ‘empty of significance,’ that he displays a ‘hatred of ideas,’ that he uses ‘quotation and misquotation in irrelevant abundance,’ and that his criticism is ‘not saying anything,’ is to commit a series of elementary blunders about the foundations of Hazlitt’s critical endeavour — blunders whose egregiousness is hardly excused by their being based on


longstanding and often maliciously perpetuated mischaracterisations of his work.\textsuperscript{36}

In his lecture ‘On Poetry in General’, Hazlitt defines his subject as ‘the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds expressing it.’\textsuperscript{37} Watson objects to this definition because it is unclear if the impression is that of the poet or reader. The grounds for this objection are themselves unclear. As Hazlitt goes on to explain, his concern is to trace poetry to its origin. In locating this origin in the moment of inspiration, a moment prior to the act of articulation, he treats formal questions as secondary concerns. More importantly, he universalises poetry, fusing the poetic instinct to what he sees as constitutive aspects of human nature. Poetry is a universal language for Hazlitt because it expresses the truth of our being. He thus conflates poetry with

\textsuperscript{36} In making his observation about Hazlitt’s alleged misquotations, Watson takes his cue from a snarky comment by Thomas De Quincey, whose personal animosity toward Hazlitt is well known — although, one cannot help but note in passing, De Quincey nevertheless found Hazlitt’s writing agreeable enough to plagiarise some of it. The interesting history of Hazlitt’s fluctuating literary reputation is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice to say every point Watson makes in his lazily dismissive account of Hazlitt’s criticism — an account that noticeably reflects the prejudices of a mid-twentieth century critical environment influenced by such unsympathetic figures as T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis — has been solidly debunked by recent criticism. The philosophical foundations of Hazlitt’s thought, which is discussed in greater detail below, has been explained by Bromwich, Natarajan and Grayling, among others; while Wu’s biography, which is as fiercely partisan as its subject, traces many of the scurrilous mischaracterisations of Hazlitt’s work back to the politically motivated personal attacks he suffered as a consequence of his outspoken radicalism. Hazlitt’s frequent recourse to quotation and his willingness to adapt his quotations to suit his own purposes is discussed throughout Paulin’s illuminating study of Hazlitt’s prose style. Far from being irrelevant, the rich texture of allusion and quotation that is a marked feature of Hazlitt’s writing is a reflection of his critical principles and a demonstration of the important place he grants to literature in his thinking. It is an indication of the extent of his reading and the profound influence that certain writers, Milton and Shakespeare in particular, had on the development of his thought and sensibility. Watson is, however, correct when he suggests that quotations are unusually abundant in Hazlitt’s writing. Jonathan Bate has calculated that Hazlitt’s Complete Works contains more than 2,400 quotations from Shakespeare alone, excluding instances where Hazlitt is discussing Shakespeare specifically. George Watson, The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964) 124–127; Bate cited in Thomas McFarland, Romantic Crucies: The English Essayists and the Spirit of the Age. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 66n.

\textsuperscript{37} Complete Works, 5.1.
emotional experience: ‘Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, hatred is poetry; contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry.’ We are all poets, according to Hazlitt, even those of us who do not write poetry, because we are all capable of experiencing these heightened emotional states; we can feel them and know them intimately. We can recognise them. The poet ‘does no more than describe what all others think and act.’ When Hazlitt observes that ‘Man is a poetical animal’ he echoes Aristotle’s maxim that man is a political animal, but he appropriates the universalising gesture to emphasise a uniting commonality of experience, rather than a shared instinct for division and calculating self-interest. ‘Nothing is a subject for poetry,’ he argues, ‘that admits of a dispute.’

In claiming this universal power of expression for poetry, Hazlitt looks beyond its formal and mimetic qualities to conceive of poetry as a mode of apprehension. In doing so, he seeks to reconcile his philosophical idealism with his political egalitarianism. Wordsworth wrote of his intention to ‘to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.’ Hazlitt recognised that Wordsworth’s ability to infuse his pastoral imagery with an intensity of feeling, to treat the natural world as the subject of his imaginative projections, was the basis of his originality and the enduring value of his poetry. Despite their political differences, Hazlitt continued to defend Wordsworth’s literary genius on the grounds that Wordsworth ‘exemplifies in an eminent degree the power of association.’

The recognition of this power of association is central to Hazlitt’s literary and artistic sensibility. It is of greater significance than a mere poetic conceit; nor does it necessarily evoke and egotistical self imposing its indomitable will upon reality. Throughout his definition of poetry, Hazlitt emphasises the epistemological basis of his argument: ‘Objects must strike differently upon the mind, independently of what they are in themselves, as long as we have a different interest in them, as we see them in a different point of view, nearer or at a greater difference (morally or physically speaking) from novelty, from old acquaintance, from our ignorance.

38 Complete Works, 5.15, 15n.

39 Wordsworth, 28.

40 Complete Works, 11.89 [emphasis in original].
of them, from our fear of their consequences, from contrast, from unexpected likeness. We can no more take away the faculty of imagination, than we can see all objects without light or shade.41 He suggests, in other words, that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere, that we have no choice but to see reality through the veil of our emotionally inflected perceptions. The associative power of poetry appeals to our imaginations because it reflects this irreducible truth about our subjective existence. It is radical in the etymologically true sense of the word.

The key to Hazlitt's definition of poetry lies in the word *movement*. The essence of poetry is not formal, nor is its static. Poetry expresses a vital truth about our instinctive apprehension of the world but, most importantly, it is concerned with the *transmission* of that truth. Hazlitt's metaphors are telling on this point. ‘The poetical impression of any object,’ he observes, ‘is that uneasy, exquisite sense of beauty or power that cannot be contained within itself; that is impatient of all limit; that (as flame bends to flame) strives to link itself to some other image of kindred beauty or grandeur.’ He writes of how ‘the flame of the passions, communicated to the imagination, reveals to us, as with a flash of lightning, the inmost recesses of thought, and penetrates our whole being.’ Poetry, as the language of the imagination and the passions, represents objects ‘not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power’; it ‘impregnates sensible impressions with the forms of fancy.’ Quoting lines from *Cymbeline*, in which Iachimo says of the sleeping Imogen:

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— The flame o' th' taper
    Bows toward her, and would under-peep her lids
    To see the enclosed lights ’—
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he observes that ‘this passionate interpretation of the motion of the flame to accord with the speaker’s own feelings, is true poetry.’42

Light and illumination are naturalised metaphors for understanding and revelation. But Hazlitt reaches for their

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41 *Complete Works*, 5.8-9.

42 *Complete Works*, 5.3-5.
dynamic manifestations in images of flames and lightning. As Paulin has noted, one of Hazlitt’s defining metaphors for the imagination is that of a furnace: it is an intense, melting, synthesising, fusing faculty. The working of the imagination is here described in similarly physical terms as a ‘moulding’ of reality. Yet Hazlitt’s definition stresses the double movement of the poetic understanding. The poetic image has the ability to encapsulate the emotional truth of a human experience and retains the power to convey that truth by seizing the mind of the reader, by appealing to the instinctively associative faculty of the imagination. Its interactive power is emphasised by the physicality of the verbs ‘penetrate’ and ‘impregnate’. Poetry reflects the subjectivity of our perceptions and the existential isolation this implies, but its visionary quality, its natural tendency to project itself beyond the confines of literal truth, also has the potential to transcend the limitations of the self, to puncture our enclosed understanding, to render intimate experience communicable through the medium of our own emotional responses. It is ‘not only a direct but also a reflected light.’

As Hazlitt argues elsewhere, this understanding of poetry is distinct from the self-interested projection of the poet’s state of mind that is often assumed to be the basis of Romantic poetry. It is antithetical to solipsism. The great fault of the poets of his own time, Hazlitt states, is their tendency to ‘reduce poetry to a mere effusion of natural sensibility; or what is worse, to divest it both of imaginary splendour and human passion, to surround the meanest objects with the morbid feelings and devouring egotism of the writers’ own minds.’ Criticising Byron’s verse, Hazlitt remarks that the passion it expresses ‘is not the passion of a mind struggling with misfortune, or the hopelessness of its desires, but of a mind preying upon itself, and disgusted with, or indifferent to all other things. There is nothing less poetical than this sort of unaccommodating selfishness. There is nothing more repulsive than this sort of ideal absorption of all the interests of others, of the good and ills of life, in the ruling passion and moody

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44 Complete Works, 5.3.

45 Complete Works, 5.53.
abstraction of a single mind, as if it would make itself the centre of the universe, and there was nothing worth cherishing but its intellectual diseases. It is like a cancer eating into the heart of poetry.'\textsuperscript{46} Poetry is significant, then, because it interests us in other people, because it expands the narrow concerns of the self to accommodate the common experiences of all humankind. The flame represents the combustible imagination and the light of understanding, but it is itself a poetic image that evokes the natural sympathy of one mind for another, the instinctive desire for connection, as flame bends to flame.

Hazlitt’s criticism thus stresses the importance of the experience of literature. The Neoclassical imperatives for a work to please and instruct are reconceived in such a way that mere pleasure is replaced with an expansive idea of literary evocation that embraces the full range of emotional experience, while the idea of moral instruction is replaced with the artist’s responsibility to represent the truth of human nature. This becomes the higher morality of literature, the principle it must respect in order to remain true to itself. ‘The most moral writers, after all,’ Hazlitt observes in his lecture on the English novelists, ‘are those who do no pretend to inculcate any moral. The professed moralist almost unavoidably degenerates into the partisan of a system; and the philosopher is too apt to warp the evidence to his own purpose. But the painter of manners gives the facts of human nature, and leaves us to draw the inference.’\textsuperscript{47}

Like so many Romantic critics, Hazlitt found the higher morality of literature exemplified in Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare, he argued, was ‘the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become. He not only had in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively, into all their conceivable ramifications, through every change of fortune or conflict of passion, or turn of thought.’\textsuperscript{48} It is this view of Shakespeare as the disinterested genius of humanity that leads Hazlitt to his concept of character. In his lecture on Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, he draws on the work of

\textsuperscript{46} Complete Works, 5.153.

\textsuperscript{47} Complete Works, 6.107.

\textsuperscript{48} Complete Works, 5.47.
August Wilhelm Schlegel, whom Hazlitt also cites at length in his preface to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, to draw a distinction that is fundamental to his Romantic conception of literature: ‘Shakespeare’s characters are men; Ben Jonson’s are more like machines, governed by mere routine, or by the convenience of the poet, whose property they are.’ In Shakespeare, he goes on to argue, ‘we are let into the minds of his characters, we see the play of their thoughts, how their humours flow and work’; Jonson’s protagonists, on the other hand, ‘are caricatures by dint of their very likeness, being extravagant tautologies of themselves; and his plots are improbable by an excess of consistency.’

This distinction in fact makes two distinctions, both of which echo throughout post-Romantic literary criticism. The first is between *character*, meaning a representation of a psychologised understanding of human nature in all of its elusive complexity, and *caricature*, meaning character reduced to a simplified or exaggerated essence. Hazlitt elaborates on this point elsewhere by drawing a similar contrast between Chaucer and Shakespeare. In the former ‘we perceive a fixed essence of character. In Shakespeare there is a continual composition and decomposition of its elements, a fermentation of every particle in the whole mass, by its alternate affinity or antipathy to other principles which are brought into contact with it. Till the experiment is tried, we do not know the result, the turn which character will take in its new circumstances.’

This dramatic understanding of character as a continuous, anfractuous, interactive process of self-revelation is one of the thematic threads running through *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, which emphasises the mixed motivations and conflicting emotions of Shakespeare’s protagonists. As Hazlitt writes admiringly of *Othello* and *King Lear*: ‘We see the ebb and flow of the feeling, its pauses and feverish starts, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the manner in which it avails itself of every passing word or gesture, its haste to repel insinuation, the alternate contradiction and dilation of the soul, and all “the dazzling fence of controversy”’


50 *Complete Works*, 5.51.
in this mortal combat with poisoned weapons, aimed at the heart, where each wound is fatal.\textsuperscript{31}

The second, related distinction lies in the implied formal contrast. As with Hazlitt’s understanding of character, indeterminacy is preferred to essentialism. The naturalness of Shakespeare’s genius is presented as an effacement of personality: it is an artistic transcendence of self that manifests itself in his unjudgemental sympathy for his characters, which is enabled by his disregard for the formality of classical conventions. His liberated and liberating creativity allows him to depict the vicissitudes of passion with unusual force because the very shape of his dramatic creations inclines toward their emotional rather than their rational content: ‘Shakespeare not only lets us into the minds of his characters, but gives a tone and colour to the scenes he describes from the feelings of their imaginary inhabitants.’\textsuperscript{32} This instinctive coherence of mood is naturally involving; it is the basis of art’s affective quality. Hazlitt observes of \textit{Cymbeline} that the convolutions of its plot ‘are all so many lines of the same story, tending to the same point. The effect of this coincidence is rather felt than observed; and as the impression exists unconsciously in the mind of the reader, so it probably arose in the same manner in the mind of the author, not from design, but from the force of natural association, a particular train of feeling suggesting different inflections of the same predominant principle, melting into, and strengthening one another, like chords in music.’\textsuperscript{33}

The paradoxical effect of being drawn into this dramatic effusion of the sentiments is a form of self-forgetting. By rousing our deepest and most instinctive responses, art takes us out of ourselves. At the beginning of his essay on \textit{Othello}, Hazlitt delivers a rousing fanfare in which he suggests the underlying morality of this expansiveness:

It has been said that tragedy purifies the affections by terror and pity. That is, it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness. It gives us a high and permanent interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such. It raises the great, the

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Complete Works}, 4.259.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Complete Works}, 4.185.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Complete Works}, 4.184.
remote, and the possible to an equality with the real, the little and the near. It makes man a partaker of his kind. It subdues and softens the stubbornness of his will. It teaches him that there are and have been others like himself, by showing him as in a glass what they have felt, thought, and done. It opens the chambers of the human heart. It leaves nothing indifferent to us that can affect our common nature. It excites our sensibility by exhibiting the passions wound up to the utmost pitch by the power of imagination or the temptation of circumstances; and corrects their fatal excesses by pointing to the greater extent of sufferings and crimes to which they have led others. Tragedy creates a balance of the affections. It makes us thoughtful spectators in the lists of life. It is the refiner of the species; a discipline of humanity. The habitual study of poetry and works of imagination is one chief part of a well-grounded education. A taste for liberal art is necessary to complete the character of a gentleman. Science alone is hard and mechanical. It exercises the understanding upon things out of ourselves, while it leaves the affections unemployed, or engrossed with our own immediate, narrow interests. The passage is notable, in the first instance, for being a fine specimen of Hazlitt’s prose at its most robust and direct. Every sentence is crisp and clear; they tumble forth in a cascade of associated ideas. But the most striking aspect of this passage is its explicit battle with Neoclassical precepts. Hazlitt does not attempt to refute them, but rather to explode them, to open them up, so that they might accommodate his expansive, dynamic view. He begins with Aristotle’s description of tragedy as a genre that inspires terror and pity, but goes on to interpret it after his own designs. The crucial aspect for Hazlitt is that tragedy involves us, in every sense of the word. It engages our sentiments but directs them outward in a way that allows us to experience the double movement of the poetic imagination. Each of Hazlitt’s individual statements is laid down with the force of conviction, but collectively they suggest the unresolvable quality of this process. Tragedy excites the passions only to subdue them; it is cathartic and cautionary; it takes us out of ourselves only to bring us back; it allows us to recognise those natural sentiments we share with our

54 Complete Works, 4.200.
fellow human beings and, in doing so, it encourages the acculturation of the individual, a chastening of the effusions of will. In generating an emotional response, it schools the emotions while also affirming them. The drama of tragedy, then, is the drama of the idealistic self in its necessary interaction with reality.

Hazlitt’s literary sensibility is preoccupied with this interactive process and the sense of conflict it implies. On his essay on poetry he observes that ‘the progress of knowledge and refinement has a tendency to circumscribe the limits of the imagination, and to clip the wings of poetry. The province of the imagination is principally visionary, the unknown and undefined: the understanding restores things to their natural boundaries, and strips them of their fanciful pretensions.’ His concern as a critic is not to overthrow reason but to highlight the importance of the faculty of imagination, to nurture it and the radical truth it reveals.

Near the end of his essay on *Hamlet*, he remarks: ‘We do not like to see our author’s plays acted, and least of all *Hamlet*.’ This frequently cited line does not imply a lack of interest in Shakespeare’s achievement as a dramatist. Hazlitt was, among other things, a professional drama critic. He had seen Shakespeare’s work performed scores of times and throughout *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* he regularly refers to specific performances to illustrate his points. His view of character is essentially dramatic. What Hazlitt is suggesting is that the manifold subtleties of Hamlet’s character, the open-ended fluidity and refinement of its intimate discourse with itself (wherein, Hazlitt argues, lies is the genius of Shakespeare’s creation), are inevitably diminished when they are rendered specific and concrete. He makes a related point about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which in performance is invariably transformed from delightful fiction to dull pantomime. ‘The *ideal*,’ he argues, ‘can have no place upon the stage, which is a picture without perspective: everything there is in the foreground.’ For Hazlitt, this is a point whose significance is not merely literary, but philosophical.

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55 *Complete Works*, 5.9.

56 *Complete Works*, 4.237.

57 *Complete Works*, 4.247.
‘Imagination’ is a key term for understanding Hazlitt’s thought. The frequent references to imagination in his writings describe something more complex than is conveyed by everyday usage — not merely the ability to conjure figurative or fanciful notions disconnected from reality, but the active ethical dimension of human consciousness. For Hazlitt, the imagination is that part of the mind which mediates between our inner selves and the external world. It is an innate faculty, a product of the human capacity for abstract thought. Imagination allows us to think beyond the present moment, to conceive of ourselves as beings with a past and a future. This bestows upon us the potential to become masters of our own fate.

The imagination makes us ethical beings because it permits us to reach outside of ourselves and comprehend the suffering of others. This is the basis of Hazlitt’s strong objection to utilitarianism. In his essay ‘On Reason and Imagination’, he points out that slavery was defended on the utilitarian grounds that the suffering of a certain number of people contributed to the prosperity and thus the happiness of a greater number. But, he argues, the moment you understand what it would be like to be one of the slaves — ‘stowed together in the hold of a slave ship, without air, without light, without food, without hope, so that what they suffered in reality was brought home to you in imagination, till you felt in sickness of heart as one of them’ — at that moment, the entire enterprise becomes morally untenable.58 Any attempt to weigh up possible benefits or reason away the suffering becomes abhorrent. ‘Those evils that inflame the imagination and make the heart sick, ought not to leave the head cold. This is the very test and measure of the degree of the enormity, that it involuntarily staggers and appalls the mind ... it very properly carries away the feelings, and (if you will) overpowers the judgement, because it is a mass of evil so monstrous and unwarranted as not to be endured, even in thought.’59

All human beings, Hazlitt argued, have the capacity to both reason and imagine, and these abilities should not be regarded as separate. Nor should one be favoured over the other. They are complementary; the passions must bow to the moderating

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58 Complete Works, 12.47.

59 Complete Works, 12.47.
influence of reason, just as reason must not overlook the truth that is revealed by the passions. Thus, in *A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.*, Hazlitt conflates the two terms into the paradoxical phrase ‘reasoning imagination’, which he defines as the faculty that ‘carries us out of ourselves as well as beyond the present moment, that pictures the thoughts, passions and feelings of others to us, and interests us in them, that clothes the whole possible world with a borrowed reality, that breathes into all other forms the breath of life, and endows our sympathies with vital warmth, and diffuses the soul of morality through all the relations and sentiments of our social being.’

This is linked to Hazlitt’s belief in what he calls ‘the natural disinterestedness of the human mind’. He set out this principle in his first published work, a philosophical treatise entitled *Essay Concerning the Principles of Human Action*, and he returns to it again and again in his writings. The essence of his argument, in the words of the philosopher A.C. Grayling, is ‘that people are interested in the welfare of others in the same way and for the same reasons as they are interested in their own welfare.’ His starting point is the fact that the future does not yet exist. When we picture ourselves minutes or days or years hence, we are projecting our sense of self, which is formed from our memories of the past and our perception of the present, into an imaginary future. ‘Everything before us exists in an ideal world,’ Hazlitt wrote. ‘The future is a blank and dreary void, like sleep or death, till the imagination brooding over it with wings outspread, impregnates it with life and motion.’ A concern with our own future welfare might impress itself upon us with greater immediacy.

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60 *Complete Works*, 9.58.


than the claims of others, but, importantly for Hazlitt, the act of sympathetic identification with our non-existent future self is performed by means of the same imaginative leap that allows us to sympathise with other people — our future self being, in effect, another person. If we act purely from self-interest, without acknowledging this natural interest in the welfare of others, we adopt the self-defeating strategy of narrowing the potential of the will in the service of something that has no real substance. ‘Our interest in the future, our identity with it, cannot be substantial; that self which we project before us into it is like a shadow in the water, a bubble in the brain. In becoming the blind and servile drudges of self-interest, we bow down before an idol of our own making.’

Now, Hazlitt was not a naive man. He knew very well that many people, if they did own this instinctive empathetic ability, were somehow able to suppress it. The slave trade was still a thriving concern in his lifetime. The world provides ample evidence of humankind’s selfishness and cruelty. Hazlitt is idealistic in many ways, but there is a profound strain of pessimism running through his work. There could hardly be a more darkly ironic formula than the one he expressed near the end of his life when he claimed that he believed in the ‘theoretical benevolence and practical malignity of man.’ For Hazlitt, it was a cruel paradox of human nature that the imagination, the very faculty that allows us to empathise with other people, was readily corruptible. The same faculty that granted a man his moral sense inclined him toward subservience. ‘Man is a toad-eating animal,’ he wrote. ‘The admiration of power in others is as common as the love of it in himself: the one makes him a tyrant, the other a slave.’ Power, he said, is a ‘grim idol’ that ‘dazzles the senses, haunts the imagination, confounds the understanding, and tames the will.’ In his essay on Coriolanus he wrote of ‘the logic of the imagination and the passions; which seek to aggrandise what excites admiration and heap contempt upon misery, to raise power into tyranny, and to make tyranny absolute; to thrust down that

63 Complete Works, 9.58.
64 Jones, 33.
65 Complete Works, 7.148.
66 Complete Works, 7.149.
which is still lower, and to make wretches desperate: to exalt magistrates into kings, kings into gods; to degrade subjects to the rank of slaves, and slaves into the condition of brutes. 67

Hazlitt is constantly battling with this paradox of the imagination. He is fundamentally a dialectical writer. He remained remarkably true to his youthful principles and hopes, but time and again in his writings he pitches these principles against the disappointments of his adult life. His expressions of outrage at the political defection of Wordsworth, Southey and, particularly, Coleridge are in part an act of self-excoriation, a testing of his own beliefs. In his greatest essays he sets out to dramatise a vigorous interaction between his inner self and the external world. The critic, as Hazlitt conceives him, is not simply a passive interpreter or peddler of definitions, but someone engaged in a battle for the imagination itself. His job is to impress upon his readers the gulf between the potential and the actual that is revealed by the workings of the disinterested mind. This is an ongoing intellectual struggle, a never-ending process which Hazlitt consistently describes in terms that are active and dynamic — ‘grappling’, ‘forging’, ‘colliding’.

For Hazlitt the essay is a way of acting out this process. It is a form capable of bridging the gap between the formality of written expression and the free-association of the active mind. Inspired by Montaigne — whom he celebrates as ‘the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man’ 68 — and the intimate prose style developed by Rousseau in the Confessions and Reveries of a Solitary Walker, Hazlitt conceives of the essay as a kind of ideal performance, a direct statement of belief that is addressed, without condescension or affectation, to the reader as an equal. It draws its vitality from the language as it is spoken. He aims ‘to write as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes.’ 69 Each essay opens up a dialogue in a form supple enough to move from the simplest observations and reflections to the most complicated philosophical problems.

67 Complete Works, 4.216.
68 Complete Works, 6.92.
69 Complete Works, 8.242.
Virginia Woolf, though she admired Hazlitt's essays, felt compelled to criticise them for their lack of ‘perfection’ and ‘unity’ compared with those of Montaigne or Lamb.\textsuperscript{70} This seems to me to misunderstand them on a fundamental level — although there may be something wilful about Woolf’s criticism. The Modernists were, as a rule, anxious to distance themselves from Romanticism, which to their urbane, avant garde sensibilities was tainted by irrationality and sentimentalism. They preferred to look to the safely distant eighteenth century and beyond for their acknowledged antecedents. But it is revealing that Woolf’s criticism touches on the very aspect of Hazlitt’s work which anticipates some of the preoccupations of Modernism — that is, his fascination with inwardness; the close attention his essays pay to the subtle movements of the author’s mind and his attempt to reflect that movement as closely as possible in the rhythms of his prose. He is interested in setting out, as clearly as he can, not only what he thinks, but how he thinks. The act of thinking itself, the way in which one thought calls up another, interests him. The metaphor of a ‘train of thought’ appears so frequently in his writings that one critic has suggested Hazlitt naturalised its usage in English.\textsuperscript{71} He believed that the natural flow of a man’s thoughts found their own form. A certain open-endedness is thus essential to his conception of the essay. His essays are, as Woolf observed, inconclusive. They are free-flowing discourses that move from one example to another, drawing their evidence from the author’s entire store of knowledge and experience. They often begin with a conclusion in the form of a specific definition or observation or image, before moving outward, into the world, inscribing ever larger circles around their subject. They meander, lead the reader where they will, calling forth whatever arguments or reveries suggest themselves along the way. They digress, break off, turn in on themselves (‘What abortions are these essays!’\textsuperscript{72}), sideswipe the apostates Wordsworth and Coleridge, and resolve themselves however they see fit. Hazlitt’s extraordinarily energetic prose,


\textsuperscript{71} The critic in question is David Bromwich. For his detailed analysis of Hazlitt’s essayistic practice see: Bromwich, 345-351.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Complete Works}, 8.79.
which he unleashes in long flowing paragraphs that run unbroken for pages at a time, takes on a prismatic quality as he regards his subject first from one angle, and then another. He works his way into his argument, works it over, assessing strengths, probing for weaknesses. At each step he takes his own temperature, considers his attitude, his mood. His mind is always acutely aware of its own processes. The result is a kind of internal dialogue, a dramatisation of the argument the author has been having with himself about the issue to hand.

*On the Pleasure of Hating*, for example, begins with the author observing the movements of a spider crawling across the floor of his room. He imagines the terror the tiny animal must feel at being confronted with such a huge creature as himself. He takes note of his own feelings of revulsion and fear. For a moment he considers that it is within his power to crush the spider, but he allows it to live and even lifts the matting on the floor to permit its escape.

This small episode becomes a demonstration of Hazlitt’s principle of disinterestedness. ‘I bear the creature no ill-will,’ he observes, ‘but still I hate the very sight of it.’ He is able both to experience his own fear and simultaneously reflect upon its meaning. He recognises his loathing as something instinctive, but his mind is self-aware and so he does not feel the need to act on the strength of his emotional response. ‘The spirit of malevolence survives the practical exertion of it,’ he reasons. ‘We learn to curb our will and keep our overt actions within the bounds of humanity, long before we can subdue our sentiments and imaginations to the same mild tone.’ This leads him to consider the ambivalent nature of hatred. It is, in the first instance, an energising and potentially progressive force. Without it ‘we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men.’ But there is also a perversity, ‘a secret affinity, a *bankering* after evil in the human mind,’ which leads it to ‘delight in mischief.’

He begins to develop the idea. Hatred is an expression of the innate intellectual restlessness that is part of human nature. It

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73 Complete Works, 12.127.

74 Complete Works, 12.127.

75 Complete Works, 12.128 [emphasis in original].
causes us to become dissatisfied with those things which once gave us pleasure. It is a distorting and destructive principle that corrupts the sentiments. ‘The pleasure of hating, like a poisonous mineral, eats into the heart of religion, and turns it into rankling spleen and bigotry; it makes patriotism an excuse for carrying fire, pestilence, and famine into other lands: it leaves to virtue nothing but the spirit of censoriousness, and a narrow, jealous, inquisitorial watchfulness over the actions and motives of others.’ These thoughts lead Hazlitt inexorably toward the contemplation of his own pessimism and disappointment. In a long concluding paragraph he announces that he is ‘heartily sick’ of his old opinions. Those concepts he believed in — genius, virtue, liberty, love — now appear to him as empty words. They are ‘a mockery and a dream.’ ‘If mankind had wished for what is right,’ he argues, ‘they might have had it long ago.’ But this potential remains unrealised largely due to our ‘innate perversity’ and the ‘dastard spirit’ of our own nature, which creates a world in which ‘hypocrisy, servility, selfishness, folly and impudence succeed, while modesty shrinks from encounter, and merit is trodden underfoot.’

The conclusion is astonishing in part for its furious energy and the stinging slap of its denunciatory rhetoric, but also for the way its misanthropy is made to rebound upon its author. Hazlitt’s caustic pessimism, which might have tended toward exhaustion, is instead fuel to his furnace. He works it into an expression of passionate contempt for the world that threatens to become an all-consuming sense of self-loathing. The passage presents itself as an acting out of the author’s internal struggle to overcome this pessimism. In this, it is not unlike a Shakespearean soliloquy; we might also hear, in the way Hazlitt catches the ebb and flow of his thoughts and feelings, intimations of William James’s ‘stream of consciousness’. In the essay’s final lines, Hazlitt eventually does overcome his feelings of disgust, triumphantly. The very intensity of the passage resists the idea of ennui and belies his initial claim

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76 Hazlitt alludes to lines spoken by Iago in *Othello*: ‘The thought whereof, / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards’ (II.i 333–4). That this unobtrusive reference is not only apt, but deliberate and purposeful is indicated by the fact that later in the same paragraph, he quotes from *Othello* directly, again citing the hateful Iago: ‘That which was luscious as locusts, anon becomes bitter as coloquintida’ (I.iii 349–50). *Complete Works*, 12.130.

77 *Complete Works*, 12.135–6.
that he is disillusioned with his beliefs. To hate passionately one must also care deeply. This becomes the final and most telling ambivalence. ‘Have I not reason to hate and to despise myself?’ he asks. The answer is a decisive yes: ‘Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough.’

It is characteristic that Hazlitt’s ideas should depend so much upon the manner in which they are expressed. His celebrated prose style, which he crafted in opposition to the pompous formalities that passed for fine writing in his day, is itself an expression of his philosophical convictions. Tom Paulin has drawn attention to the extended meditation on the art of prose writing running throughout Hazlitt’s work. This is more than a question of aesthetics; it extends to the function of prose writing as a critical tool. Good prose, Hazlitt believed, should embody the kinetic principle — ‘gusto’ — that he valued in art; it should have energy and forward momentum, but be flexible enough to do justice to the infinite variety of life. In contrast to the poet, whose first allegiance is to the exaggerating and exclusive aspect of the imagination which disconnects the mind from reality, the prose writer must ‘impart conviction’: ‘The principle which guides his pen is truth, not beauty — not pleasure, but power.’ Prose is, above all, a combative medium in which ‘every word should be a blow: every thought should instantly grapple with its fellow.’

It is fitting that one of Hazlitt’s most famous pieces of writing should be an account of a boxing match. ‘The Fight’ describes a bout between Bill Neate and Tom ‘The Gas-man’ Hickman, which took place at Hungerford on December 11, 1821. On the surface it is a brisk and engaging slice of reportage, but Hazlitt’s restless intellectual energy turns the essay into something more evocative. His report develops into an expression of his vigorously dialectical understanding of the power of the imagination.

78 Complete Works, 12.136.

79 Paulin, 91-170.

80 Complete Works, 4.77-80.

81 Hazlitt is here taking Edmund Burke, whom he admired despite their obvious lack of political affinity, as his example of a writer who commands ‘the most perfect prose-style’; his contrasting example of a ponderous, convoluted and impractical prose writer is, of course, Coleridge. Complete Works, 12.10-11, 15.
Though he makes no explicit reference to the fact, it would not have been lost upon Hazlitt that the colloquial term for boxing he adopts throughout the essay — ‘The Fancy’ — is also a philosophical category devised by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In his *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge draws a distinction between the Fancy, which he defines as the part of the mind preoccupied with facts and calculations, and the synthesising, creative aspects of consciousness, which he calls (like Hazlitt) Imagination. Hazlitt and Coleridge do share some basic philosophical assumptions. Both men, for example, strongly reject Locke’s empiricism, which proposes that the human mind is a *tabula rasa*. But Hazlitt was scathing about Coleridge’s weakness for obscurantism and mystical abstraction. In his slashing notice of *Biographia Literaria*, published in the *Edinburgh Review* in August 1817, he seizes upon Coleridge’s admission that ‘even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in... metaphysics, and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me. History, and particular facts, lost all interest in my mind.' Here, Hazlitt goes on to argue, is the fatal flaw that derailed his brilliant but dilatory former friend: ‘His metaphysics have been a dead weight on the wings of his imagination — while his imagination has run away with his reason and common sense. He might, we seriously think, have been a very considerable poet — instead of which he has chosen to be a bad philosopher and a worse politician.' In a sense, ‘The Fight’ is yet another of Hazlitt’s retorts to Coleridge, though it makes no mention of him. The essay’s demonstration of Hazlitt’s ideal of the engaged mind, one that is flexible, pragmatic and always alert to the inexhaustible variety of the world around it, contrasts with the wayward poet’s detachment from reality. In Coleridge’s system Fancy is of a lesser order than Imagination; but Hazlitt wants to show how the active mind always retains a firm grip on those ‘particular facts’ which left Coleridge uninterested.

So much of Hazlitt’s writing is a direct reflection of his mood, and in ‘The Fight’ he is buoyant and cheerful. The essay is alive with detail: the bright moon that appears to grace his overnight journey from London; the warm sun on his back and the field’s dewy grass on the morning of the fight. Swept up by the fraternal, democratic spirit of the occasion Hazlitt writes warmly

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81 *Complete Works*, 16.117 [emphasis in original].

83 *Complete Works*, 16.137.
of the desire to communicate that flows from his good humour: ‘Give a man a topic in his head, a throb of pleasure in his heart, and he will be glad to share it with the first person he meets.’ This upbeat mood colours his perceptions, giving a welcome hue to his surroundings. Even as he sits atop a mail coach, travelling though the ‘drizzling rain’ — a situation that would normally have him feeling ‘cold, comfortless, impatient’ — his sense of anticipation makes him content: ‘Such is the force of the imagination!’

But if a fight provides Hazlitt with the definitive metaphor for his prose style and his ideal of intellectual engagement, it is also a symbol of the reality of power. In a dispute over opinion, he reflects, it is possible to triumph through sheer impudence, but the FANCY (Hazlitt capitalises the word throughout) is the most practical of all things. Confidence is ‘half the battle, but only half’; once the fight has begun the only thing that matters is how well each man wields his fists. Tom Hickman, it transpires, is loud and boastful. He tries to intimidate his opponent verbally before the bout. This rouses Hazlitt’s disapproval. Magnanimity and bravery, he cautions the arrogant fighter, ‘should be inseparable.’ Hazlitt is surprised to learn that Hickman is the favourite, despite being smaller and lighter than Neate. Hickman comes into the fight on the back of several wins, but Hazlitt thinks the punters are being influenced by his bluster, foolishly taking the boxer’s own assessment as an accurate measure of his ability: ‘The amateurs were frightened at his big words, and thought that they would make up for the difference between six feet and five feet nine. Truly, the FANCY are not men of imagination. They judge of what has been, and cannot conceive of any thing that is to be.’

The fight is an epic, lasting into ‘the seventeenth or eighteenth round,’ but Hazlitt captures it in a single giddying paragraph. After the lengthy description of his journey from London, with its affectionately ironic musings upon the virtues of

84 Complete Works, 17.73.
85 Complete Works, 17.75.
86 Complete Works, 17.79.
87 Complete Works, 17.79.
88 Complete Works, 17.80.
the English character and the capriciousness of fate, the pent up anticipation is released in one breathless rush of excitement. Hazlitt, strictly a pugilist of letters, had never before witnessed a fight and his account rears at the raw physicality of the contest, at seeing ‘two men smashed to the ground, smeared with gore, stunned, senseless, the breath beaten out of their bodies; and then, before you recover from the shock, to see them rise up with new strength and courage.’

His account climaxes in a fearsome description of Hickman’s face the moment after he is stunned by a blow from Neate in the twelfth round: ‘I never saw anything more terrific than his aspect just before he fell. All traces of life, of natural expression, were gone from him. His face was like a human skull, a death’s head, spouting blood. The eyes were filled with blood, the nose streamed with blood, the mouth gaped blood. He was not like an actual man, but like a preternatural, spectral appearance, or like one of the figures in Dante’s Inferno.’

‘The Fight’, which came close to being rejected for publication because Hazlitt’s editors thought it might be too coarse for general consumption, is framed as a simple morality tale. The triumph of the stolid Bill Neate is depicted as a victory for the virtues Hazlitt has been celebrating throughout the essay: decency, humility, frankness and courage — with both fighters given full credit for the latter. Tom Hickman, Hazlitt writes, ‘has lost nothing by the late fight but his presumption; and that every man may do as well without.’

But the essay’s subtext, its insistence that facts are ‘stubborn things’, is an expression both of Hazlitt’s sense of realism and his preoccupation with the relationship between the intellectual and the physical. The fight is analogous to a frank and fearless exchange of opinions conducted in good faith, but unlike an argument it is capable of being resolved decisively.

Hazlitt takes up this question in another of his most frequently anthologised essays, ‘The Indian Jugglers’. It begins with Hazlitt being amazed by the skill of a troupe of performers. He observes how their fluent movements have become second nature to them, ‘as if the difficulty once mastered naturally resolved itself

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89 Complete Works, 17.82.

90 Complete Works, 17.83.

91 Complete Works, 17.84.
into ease and grace.’ The jugglers’ ability, he argues, is like a mathematical truth; the line between success and failure is clear. This precise mechanical skill is in contrast to the untidy and inconclusive nature of intellectual dispute. In a debate ‘there is no such power or superiority’. Compared to the jugglers, Hazlitt feels his writing to be a poor thing. He describes his occupation as ‘pouring words like water into empty sieves, rolling a stone up a hill and then down again, trying to prove an argument in the teeth of facts.’ He denounces his own essays for their ‘errors’, ‘ill-pieced transitions’, ‘crooked reasons’ and ‘lame conclusions.’

At first glance ‘The Indian Jugglers’, which proceeds through a long sequence of digressions (Hazlitt admired Laurence Sterne), seems, in spite of its wonderfully fluent prose, to be casually, almost lazily, put together. But, as David Bromwich has pointed out, its underlying structure is a straightforward dialectic. It first praises the virtues of mechanical ability, which achieves perfection within specified limits. It then works its way around to consider the superiority of artistic genius, which in striving always to reach beyond itself reveals its imperfections but also expresses a deeper sense of truth and beauty. Finally, Hazlitt moves beyond these opposed perspectives, subsuming them both under the category of ‘greatness’. This, he argues, is possessed by those with the ability to ‘impress the idea of power on others,’ to seize the imagination, to change the world by altering the way it is perceived, making it appear in a new light or demonstrating some new and profound truth.

The essay then breaks off its discussion to append an obituary for a man named John Cavanagh, which Hazlitt introduces as if he had merely stumbled upon it in the Examiner, even though it is his own work. Cavanagh, we learn, was a champion at fives, a form of handball played on a three-sided court. Hazlitt was himself an enthusiastic and competitive fives player and he is lyrical in his praise of Cavanagh’s prowess, describing him as indisputably the greatest player the game had ever seen: ‘His eye was certain, his hand fatal, his presence of mind

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92 Complete Works, 8.78.
93 Complete Works, 8.79.
94 Bromwich, 351.
95 Complete Works, 8.84–6.
complete.\textsuperscript{96} This seemingly incongruous panegyric, an essay within an essay, becomes another of Hazlitt’s extended analogies between the physical and the intellectual. He does not only rank Cavanagh against other fives players but compares him to various writers and politicians; and, like the description of the fight between Neate and Hickman — ‘little cautious sparring — no half-hits — no tapping and trifling, none of the petit maitreship of the art’\textsuperscript{97} — the celebration of Cavanagh’s technique evokes Hazlitt’s prescription for effective prose writing: ‘His style of play was as remarkable as his power of execution. He had no affectation, no trifling ... His blows were not undecided and ineffectual — lumbering like Mr Wordsworth’s epic poetry, nor wavering like Mr Coleridge’s lyric prose, nor short of the mark like Mr Brougham’s speeches, nor wide of it like Mr Canning’s wit, nor foul like the Quarterly, nor let. balls like the Edinburgh Review.’\textsuperscript{98}

The wider significance of Cavanagh’s obituary is the way it collapses the distinction between mind and body, and in doing so makes an implicit claim for Hazlitt’s own art — the art of the essay. Cavanagh played with a perfect fusion of instinct and cunning. ‘He had equal power of skill, quickness, and judgement. He could either outwit his antagonist by finesse, or beat him by main strength.’\textsuperscript{99} To play fives, Hazlitt observes, is to be totally within the moment, to have complete presence of mind. For Hazlitt this is an ideal state. Elsewhere he argues that the pleasure of painting springs from the way it simultaneously exercises the body and the intellect\textsuperscript{100}; similarly, the fives player, through a combination of physical exertion and mental agility, achieves a unity in which his entire being is directed toward a single goal. The essayist, no less than the artist or sportsman, is always striving to enter into this ideal state. He should possess both power and subtlety. Experience taught Hazlitt that sound logical reasoning on its own is not enough to convince; to argue a case successfully, your interlocutor must somehow be made to feel the validity of your argument. He

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{96}Complete Works, 8.97.
  \item \textsuperscript{97}Complete Works, 17.82.
  \item \textsuperscript{98}Complete Works, 8.87 [emphasis in original].
  \item \textsuperscript{99}Complete Works, 8.87.
  \item \textsuperscript{100}Complete Works, 8.11.
\end{itemize}
was also conscious of the fact that language is as capable of moving one away from a truthful perception of reality as toward it. When he sets out to criticise William Pitt, for example, he notes the way the politician’s ‘artful use of words’ and ‘dexterity of logical arrangement’ allow him to remain uncommitted to any specific idea or principle.\textsuperscript{101} His critique of Samuel Johnson takes a similar line, arguing that the regularity of Johnson’s prose and its consistently lofty tone (regardless of the topic, wrote Hazlitt, Johnson is ‘always upon stilts’\textsuperscript{102}) takes no account of the variety of his subject matter and so strips away the nuances of his thought. The language of Hazlitt’s essays is, by contrast, always striving to embody the imagination, to inhabit the physical reality it describes, to convey the truth of his perceptions through its jostling ideas, its vivid descriptiveness, and the way it adapts its form to its subject: the percussive alliteration of his account of the fight, the ease and fluency of his praise for the Indian jugglers, the swiftness and accuracy of his celebration of Cavanagh’s unsurpassed skill. Hazlitt came to essay writing partly as a matter of convenience, but the flexibility of the form suited him. In his hands the essay is, as its etymology instructs, an attempt, a concentrated burst of intellectual energy that seeks to transmit the spark of understanding from one mind to another.

When Hazlitt observes that Wordsworth liked to compose as he walked up and down a straight garden path, while Coleridge preferred to compose as he clambered over uneven ground, he means to tell us something about the two writers both as poets and as men.\textsuperscript{103} The image is carefully chosen to suggest that each man’s verse is an expression of his whole being, drawn from his physical self as well as his character. It is one of the manifestations of Hazlitt’s Romanticism that he regarded his own essays no less as an extension of his personality. Hazlitt the essayist is as intense and forthright as he was in person, as athletic and competitive as he was on the fives court. He is one of those writers who, regardless of the subject to hand, always writes about himself. Tom Paulin has described his extensive and diverse body of work as a ‘disjointed, epic autobiography — a kind of prose Prelude’ — which sets out to

\textsuperscript{101} Complete Works, 7.322.

\textsuperscript{102} Complete Works, 6.101.

\textsuperscript{103} Complete Works, 17.119.
'dramatise consciousness as a form of combative self-exposure.'

Yet Hazlitt never seems solipsistic. In addition to the intense inwardness that often characterises his writing, it is his clear-eyed engagement with the world that gives his greatest essays their authority. Hazlitt was compelled to navigate the rough seas of early-nineteenth century journalism, which steeled his resolve and gave his work a polemical, pamphleteering edge. The true author, he wrote, 'plucks up an argument by the roots' and 'tears out the very heart of his subject.'

His preparedness to do this while confronting the paradoxes of his own character gives his work a toughness and a directness that many other Romantic writers lack — a toughness that can make his writing seem startlingly modern. His prose style, though it was seen by many of his contemporaries as wilfully perverse, produced some of the sharpest, most energetic writing in the English language, and gave the world some of its greatest examples of the art of the essay.

104 Paulin, 45-6.

105 Complete Works, 12.279.
Matthew Arnold may well be the most influential critic in the English literary tradition. He has been called ‘the prototype of the modern critic, the man who created the role of the critic as we still know it today.’ He was, as his biographer Park Honan observes, ‘the leading critic of his age’ and his essays ‘set the characteristic viewpoint — and many of the terms — for criticism in the next century.’ He now belongs to that elite category of thinkers whose works have become so widely disseminated, so taken for granted, that hardly anyone bothers to read them anymore.

This is partly because his influence has less to do with anything he said about specific literary works than with the way he conceptualised and advocated a general notion of culture. In this sense, he is not an influential critic in the same way that, say, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Roland Barthes are influential: he did not change the way we read or think about literature itself. He is influential because he proposed that high culture generally, and literary culture specifically, might be used in a particular way and

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toward a particular end. And he is influential because his ideas were taken up and put into practice. In a fascinating and far-reaching social experiment, which has lasted more than a century and is only now unravelling, the study of modern literature has been granted a prominent place in the secular liberal education systems of the Western world. In the later years of the nineteenth century, literary studies was elevated to the status of an independent university discipline, and in the early decades of the twentieth century it became a standard feature of secondary education. That the appreciation of great literature might have a refining or civilising influence is an idea that predates Arnold. But it was Arnold who most famously wedded the notion of acculturation to a civic purpose. As a result, he is often seen as the intellectual father of English criticism’s ‘social mission’ and given credit for the historical fact that the study of literature was institutionalised with something like this end in mind. Strictly speaking, this perception is not an entirely accurate reflection of Arnold’s stated opinions. He was, in fact, wary of the proposals to transform literary studies into a stand-alone discipline that were put forward during his lifetime. But when people assume they know what he had to say they are right, in a sense. As the man whose name is most closely associated with the idea that a well-developed literary sensibility among the general population might be conducive to social cohesion, he stands for something. He has become, one could say, symbolically rather than intellectually compelling.

Such assumed familiarity is an ambiguous achievement. As Lionel Trilling remarked half a century after Arnold’s death, it is possible for a writer to reach a level of notoriety where ‘what he actually said is falsified even when he is quoted correctly.’ This can occur as a ‘result of a single aspect of a man’s work serving as a convenient symbol of what other people want to think.’ By the early decades of the twentieth century, Trilling observes, it was already common for Arnold’s subtle critical dialectic to be

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misrepresented and for his work to be reduced to a number of pious and ridiculous phrases.³

This fate is not unique to Arnold. There are many examples of influential writers and thinkers whose complex ideas have been reduced to simplistic but widely disseminated assertions (negative capability; the willing suspension of disbelief; existence precedes essence; the medium is the message; the death of the author; there is nothing outside the text⁶). But Arnold bears more than the usual responsibility for the fact that his name is associated with a handful of key phrases and concepts. The best that has been thought and said in the world; sweetness and light; let reason and the will of God prevail; to see the object in itself as its really is — these famous lines, which do indeed have something of a pious and ridiculous ring to the modern ear, were not plucked from the obscure depths of Arnold’s writings and highlighted by latter-day interpreters: Arnold himself turned them into personal catchphrases. They all appear dozens of times in his work.

This practice of reiteration was part of a calculated, if somewhat risky, rhetorical strategy. Arnold wrote with a strong sense of conviction and purpose. There is a sense in which he might have embraced T.S. Eliot’s cutting assessment of him as ‘rather a propagandist for criticism than a critic, a popularizer rather than a creator of ideas.’⁷ He saw himself as public advocate and had an astute politician’s instinct for how to present himself effectively in that role, understanding that, when it came to carrying an argument in the public realm, insistence and rhetorical impact are often more important than careful reasoning and evidence. He recognised that ideas need to be expressed in pithy and memorable ways in order to gain wide currency. He thus placed considerable faith in what Trilling calls ‘the magical power of his critical formulas.’⁸ One of the inevitable consequences of this rhetorical strategy is to enter into an uneasy bargain with the forces of generalisation and simplification. To become a public

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⁸ Trilling, 145 [emphasis in original].
advocate is to invent and embrace a public persona, to put oneself forward as a living representative of an abstract idea, and in doing so enable, and even encourage, a caricatured perception of oneself. And Arnold is particularly susceptible to this process of misrepresentation and caricature because his ideas can often seem abstract to the point of vagueness. He rarely defines his most cherished concepts in specific terms, preferring to explain them by reference to each other. How do we achieve sweetness and light? By attending to the best that has been thought and said in the world. What is the ‘best’? It is that which allows reason and the will of God to prevail. And how do we identify reason and the will of God? By seeing the object in itself as it really is.

This deliberate reluctance to define his ideals in concrete terms contributes to Arnold’s slippery political identity. His belief in the edifying qualities of high culture would today align him with the forces of conservatism and elitism, and it is in this spirit that his name is often evoked. His biographer Nicholas Murray has complained that, for many critics, Arnold’s name has now become synonymous with ‘a notion of cold cultural arrogance, an elitist disdain for mass culture, rightly rejected in a democratic age,’ even though the substance of his cultural theorising is, in fact, ‘wholly at odds with the popular view.’ And it is true that the tenor of Arnold’s writing is, for the most part, pragmatic and forward looking. He expresses a conservative sense of the importance of tradition as a unifying social force, an almost Edmund Burke-like belief in the organic nature of society, but he also accepts and even welcomes the necessity of change. As a young man he worked as the private secretary to the prominent Whig MP, Lord Landsdowne, and he holds to a Whiggish faith in social progress through reform, even as he voices his disquiet at the state of Victorian society and reprimands activists who are agitating for political change. He is always looking for ways to guide and ameliorate the social developments he sees taking place around him. In his introduction to Culture & Anarchy, he describes himself as a Liberal who has been ‘tempered by experience, reflection and

Yet he is not a liberal in any conventional sense of the word. *Culture & Anarchy* is, in part, a reply to the classically liberal arguments set out in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Arnold’s declared enemies are the materialism and individualism of his age, both of which he associates with the Philistinism of the middle class and, by extension, the ideological liberalism that expresses their political interests. He has a particular problem with ‘doing as one likes’ — a phrase he lifts from *On Liberty* and mocks by repetition and ironic approval — and Mill’s suggestion that truth can emerge unscathed from unfettered public debate he finds unconvincing. For Arnold, the opposite is the case. Society must first be steeped in the best ideas before intelligent discussion can occur. Reflection must precede action. He believes the clashing of ideas and interests serves only to polarise opinions, pushing people into entrenched and unmoderated positions they would not otherwise hold. He tells of meeting a Nonconformist who praises the zeal and activity that has resulted from the differences of opinion between his town’s two churches. ‘Ah, but my dear friend,’ Arnold responds, ‘only think of all the nonsense which you now hold quite firmly, which you would never have held if you had not been contradicting your adversary in it all these years!’

Culture, as Arnold conceives it, is the antithesis of confrontation. The metaphors he uses to describe it are fluid and benign. Ideas should flow; they create a ‘stream’. He defines culture as a ‘social idea’ whose purpose is harmony and whose end is harmonious.

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11 Mill defines three key areas of individual liberty which he argues must be respected in a free society: freedom of conscience, freedom to develop one’s own tastes and pursuits, and freedom of association. The second of these he defines as the liberty ‘of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong.’ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty,* *On Liberty and Other Essays*, edited by John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 16-17. For further consideration of the major points of similarity and difference between the liberalism of Arnold and that of Mill, see: Trilling, 259-265; Edward Alexander, *Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1965) 232-266; R.H. Super, *The Time-Spirit of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1970) 51-59.

12 *Complete Prose*, 5.244.
equality. It sits beyond mere politics and, most importantly, it acts as a solvent to narrow, class-based interests. One of its primary functions is to resist what he considers the complacent and self-congratulatory tone of English nationalism. The basic orientation of Arnold's thought can be gleaned from the fact that he regards *culture* as more or less synonymous with *criticism*. The definition of the former in *Culture & Anarchy* is almost identical to the definition of the latter in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'. Both aim to see the object as it really is and to foster an ideal openness to new ways of thinking. Culture, like criticism, is thus an activity — a *process* akin to the German concept *Bildung*, which describes a form of personal development through education. It is a way of orienting oneself and interacting with the world. As Honan points out, culture is conceived in Arnold's writings as a 'psychological attitude which implies a refusal to be locked in, finally enrolled, or seduced by any idea except the idea of mental freedom'. The motivation behind *Culture & Anarchy*, Arnold explains, 'is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.'

So when Arnold speaks of the 'best' he is not necessarily describing an ossified category of the unquestionably meritorious; he means, at least in part, that which is most *useful*, that which is best suited to present needs. The willingness to apply the critical principle of disinterestedness is, in this sense, more important than the object on which it is exercised. 'If a man without books or reading,’ Arnold argues, ‘or reading nothing but his letters and

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13 *Complete Prose*, 5.113.

14 *Complete Prose*, 3.258, 261; 5.233-4, 252.

15 Honan, 346.

16 *Complete Prose*, 5.233-4.
newspapers, gets nevertheless a fresh and free play of the best thoughts upon his stock notions and habits, he has got culture.\textsuperscript{17}

An illustrative contrast might be drawn on this point between Arnold’s understanding of disinterestedness as a critical principle and that of William Hazlitt. For Hazlitt, the ‘natural disinterestedness of the human mind’ is a clearly defined philosophical concept: it refers to an innate faculty that we possess by virtue of the power of the imagination — the imagination being the ability of the human mind to project its understanding beyond its immediate impressions and narrowly selfish concerns. On these grounds, disinterestedness becomes the foundation for Hazlitt’s epistemology and his ethics. For Arnold, disinterestedness is nothing so rigorous. It is a general stance or attitude. Arnold’s disinterestedness resembles irony in the way that it stresses the importance of maintaining a critical distance from any given proposition, the way it deliberately evades certainty and resolution. It is unsystematic by definition and cultivates a studious ambivalence whose purpose is to chafe against received or settled ideas, without necessarily proposing any clear alternative notions. Both Hazlitt and Arnold place disinterestedness at the centre of their critical practice, but where Hazlitt understands it as a pathway to the clear apprehension of settled truths, which can then provide the basis for an unambiguous political stance, Arnold is constantly backing away from direct political engagement. Where Hazlitt is committed and forthright, Arnold prefers to remain playfully aloof. He is deeply suspicious of passion and enthusiasm, suspicious of partisanship. He wants to be above the fray.

Arnold’s critical ideal is thus to maintain a sense of level-headed objectivity. As he wrote of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, whom he considered the ‘perfect critic’, there is virtue in combining mental independence and lucidity with ‘the merit of happy temper of disposition.’ Sainte-Beuve, he argued, was ‘a critic of measure, not exuberant; at the centre, not provincial; of keen industry and curiosity.’ Most importantly, the French critic possessed a ‘single-hearted devotion to truth’; he was not dogmatic or inflexible: ‘I am accustomed,’ wrote Sainte-Beuve, ‘incessantly to

call my judgements into question anew, and to re-cast my opinions the moment I suspect them to be without validity.\textsuperscript{18}

For Arnold, it is the function of criticism and culture to keep this overriding principle uppermost in our minds, to remind us of the ways in which our opinions often rest on unquestioned assumptions and are reinforced by habits of thought — which is to say, are not supported by thought at all. The line that he attempts to walk in his critical writings is, in this sense, delicately balanced. Because culture is an indistinct and non-instrumental concept, the critic who takes its upon himself to promote culture as a solution to political and social problems places himself in an awkward position. He must proselytise about the virtues of not proselytising. Arnold’s ironic persona and his habit of lapsing into vague generalities are an attempt to negotiate this awkwardness. One of the declared ambitions of culture is to help us realise our ‘best selves’, in an individual and a collective sense. This is presented as a deliberately ambiguous political goal and, as an undefinable and doubtless unrealisable concept, it also leaves Arnold’s criticism open to charges of political inconsequence — and indeed he was criticised for displaying what appears to be a squeamishness or naivety about the harsh realities of politics.\textsuperscript{19}

Though he claims to be in favour of reform, he often seems to want to defer any moment of decision indefinitely, to avoid the kind of confrontation that is often necessary to bring about real change. To his notional political allies, the liberal reformers, his message is consistent: yes, we must reform — but not quite yet. ‘I exhorted my young literary and intellectual friends, the lights of liberalism,’ he wrote, passionately defending the merits of dispassion, ‘not to be rushing into the arena of politics themselves.’\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps the most damning observation in Trilling’s

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\item \textsuperscript{18} Arnold praises the French writer Joseph Joubert, whom he compares to Coleridge, in similar terms, celebrating Joubert’s ‘ardent impulse for seeing the genuine truth on all matters.’ \textit{Complete Prose.}, 11.115-117; 3.189.
\item \textsuperscript{19} For an analysis of the criticisms levelled at Arnold’s attacks on English Philistinism and how these informed the development of his ideas, see: Sidney Coulling, \textit{Matthew Arnold and His Critics: A Study of Arnold’s Controversies} (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974) 137-180.
\item \textsuperscript{20} \textit{Complete Prose.}, 11.54.
\end{itemize}
largely sympathetic study is that ‘Arnold’s criticism retires before the brutal questions of power.”

Arnold is a key English critic, in part, because he is inclined to be cautious, moderate and, in certain respects, conventional. He helped to shape the dominant critical tradition and he sits comfortably within it. As M.A.R. Habib observes, Arnold’s ‘world view is deeply humanist, and he writes in a tradition of humanism that [runs] through figures such as F.R. Leavis and survives to this day.’ Much of the enduring interest of his work lies in the way in which it appropriated an already extant tradition of public criticism and gave it a new direction and sense of purpose. His criticism can be seen to make use of many ideas that have become commonplace, and many that were already commonplace in his own time. Some of his best-known catchphrases are, in fact, borrowed: ‘sweetness and light’ is taken from Jonathan Swift’s Battle of the Books; ‘to make reason and the will of God prevail’ is, as he explains at beginning of Culture & Anarchy, one of Bishop Wilson’s Maxims. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, Arnold’s thought draws freely on the ideas of Burke, Coleridge, John Henry Newman and Thomas Carlyle. Though he distanced himself from the legacy of the Romantic poets, his view of literature’s refining or civilising properties has clear antecedents in English and continental Romanticism. Like many neo-Romantic thinkers, he is worried by the oppressively mechanical, materialistic,
rationalising spirit of the age that Carlyle was deploiring as early as 1829.\textsuperscript{25} He positions himself as a staunch opponent of the pinched utilitarianism that Charles Dickens was to personify in the figure of Thomas Gradgrind. ‘Faith in machinery,’ Arnold states in \textit{Culture \& Anarchy}, ‘is our besetting danger.’\textsuperscript{26}

But Arnold’s critical writings are more directly targeted, more politically engaged, and more original than their generalisations, their vagaries and paradoxes, and even their conventionality might suggest.\textsuperscript{27} His place at the forefront of what has been called the social mission of English criticism rests, to a significant extent, on his idiosyncratic historical consciousness. His true claim to originality lies in the precise nature of his conviction that questions of culture and cultural authority had come to straddle one of the faultlines of modernity itself. Many of his arguments derive from his belief that the social and political pressures of his time were unprecedented.

One of the most pressing political issues in nineteenth century England was democratic reform. The burgeoning middle class, the beneficiary of the era’s mercantilism and industrialisation, was becoming an increasingly powerful force in the nation’s social and political life. The long nineteenth century, extending from the French Revolution in 1789 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, was marked in England by series of political movements and organised campaigns — by abolitionists,

\textsuperscript{25} Carlyle was an important early influence on Arnold’s thought, particularly his ideas about the importance of poetry. As R.H. Super observes, ‘Arnold’s saturation in Carlyle … is hard to exaggerate, in the political as in the spiritual aspect of his writings.’ This influence extended to Arnold’s rhetorical techniques, in particular his use of elevated rhetoric and mockery. Later in life, Arnold’s attitude toward Carlyle became ambivalent, as he came to believe that Carlyle’s criticism lacked the balance he aspired to and was tainted by ‘self-will and eccentricity.’ Thomas Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times,’ \textit{The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays}, edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2007) 42-43; Ian Hamilton, \textit{A Gift Imprisoned: The Poetic Life of Matthew Arnold} (New York: Basic Books, 1999) 55-59; R.H. Super, \textit{The Time-Spirit of Matthew Arnold} (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1970) 37-39.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Complete Prose}, 5.96.

\textsuperscript{27} A rebuttal of the idea that Arnold was a politically disengaged aesthete, incorporating a summary of the various practical reforms he supported, can be found in: P.J. Keating, ‘Arnold’s Social and Political Thought,’ \textit{Writers and Their Backgrounds: Matthew Arnold}, edited by Kenneth Allott (London: G. Bell \& Sons, 1975) 210-213.
by Chartists, by suffragettes — that called for an end to various forms of institutionalised discrimination. Numerous reforms were introduced during this period that chipped away at restrictions on voting rights. For some Victorian thinkers, such as Carlyle, the very thought of universal suffrage was repugnant. To grant political rights to the disenfranchised lower classes was to undermine established social hierarchies and invite chaos. Arnold was like many of his contemporaries in that he regarded the atomisation of society as a potential danger of the push toward individual rights and democracy. His criticism is motivated by the familiar modern anxiety that the centre will not hold, that mere anarchy will be loosed upon the world. And he was writing to the moment, responding to the changes as they were occurring. In 1867, the year Arnold began writing *Culture & Anarchy*, Benjamin Disraeli introduced a reform bill that enfranchised almost a million voters, most of whom were working class; that same year, unruly mass demonstrations damaged the railings of Hyde Park. Chris Baldick has argued that, understood in the light of its immediate historical context, *Culture & Anarchy* can be read a work haunted by the spectre of mass violence. And it is true that Arnold alludes frequently to the civil disturbances throughout the work and his conclusion makes it absolutely clear that he believes ‘monster processions in the streets and forcible irruptions into the parks’ should be ‘unflinchingly forbidden and repressed,’ even when they are in support of a worthy cause.

But what prevents his view from being merely reactionary and anti-democratic in the manner of Carlyle is Arnold’s acceptance of the inexorability of democratisation. He believed the tide of history was running decisively in favour of democracy. The significance of the French Revolution — an event that shadows many of his arguments, particularly the key works ‘

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29 Raymond Williams makes a similar observation about Arnold’s underlying attitude toward the working class, arguing that, in the wake of the Hyde Park demonstrations, Arnold ‘feared a general breakdown, into violence and anarchy.’ Baldick, 35; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 133.

30 *Complete Prose*, 5.223.
Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ and *Culture & Anarchy* — was not simply that it marked the beginning of a period of political upheaval, or that its repercussions were continuing to influence the politics of nineteenth century Europe; it was that it compelled a decisive shift in our understanding of the nature of history itself. It had proved that an intellectual revolution can and will have vast social and political consequences. We therefore neglect the movement of ideas through society at our own peril. Arnold assumes that, in the modern democratic era ushered in by the French Revolution, it is simply not possible to be complacent about cultural issues, to regard the social order and the manifestations of culture as natural or timeless, because it has been proved they are not natural or timeless. Furthermore, ideas will ultimately determine our political fate, whether we like it or not: ‘the essence of an epoch of expansion,’ he wrote, ‘is a movement of ideas; and the one salvation of an epoch of expansion is a harmony of ideas.’\(^{31}\) Culture, then, is not simply the cure that Arnold is proposing; it is also the condition under which we all must live.

Arnold's thought thus evokes the conventional humanist opposition between culture and nature. He regards nature as a neutral concept. As Trilling observes of Arnold's poem *Empedocles on Etna*, Arnold implies a view of the world in which ‘man is part of Nature and there is no morality, in the human sense, to be found in her.’\(^ {32}\) Culture, on the other hand, refers to the created realm of value. It is concerned with ‘the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality.’\(^ {33}\) It is therefore related to the ideal of civilisation, which Arnold defines as ‘the humanisation of man in society. Man is civilised when the whole body of society comes to live with a life worthy to be called *human*, and corresponding to man's true aspirations and powers.’\(^ {34}\) It follows that culture is opposed to anarchy in the realm of politics, because the fate of the individual and the fate of society are conjoined. Neither can realise its full potential without the full cooperation of the other; they survive and flourish simultaneously or not at all. Given that democratisation is ineluctable in Arnold's

\(^{31}\) *Complete Prose*, 5.126.

\(^{32}\) Trilling, 87.

\(^{33}\) *Complete Prose*, 5.94.

\(^{34}\) *Complete Prose*, 8.370 [emphasis in original].
view, the pressing issue is not whether democracy is, in itself, positive or negative. Since it is a logical development of the rise of civilisation, it ‘merits properly neither blame nor praise.’ The issue is how to foster a social context in which order is preserved and the great mass of ordinary people are provided with the opportunity to become civilised, and to participate in the public life of their civilisation: ‘The question is about the common bulk of mankind, persons without extraordinary gifts or exceptional energy, and who will ever require, in order to make the best of themselves, encouragement and directly favouring circumstances.’

It is with these assumptions in mind that Arnold surveys his society and finds it wanting. Underpinning his analysis is his division of English society into three broad categories. The primary target of his criticism is the rising middle class — the class to which he claimed to belong. ‘The master-thought by which my politics is governed,’ he declared, is ‘the thought of the bad civilisation of the English middle class.’ Borrowing a term from Heinrich Heine, Arnold dubbed the members of this class (somewhat notoriously) ‘Philistines’ and argued that their failings derived, to a large extent, from the same qualities that had made them so successful. The Philistines prized individual freedom, self-reliance and practicality. Their great shortcoming was that they worshipped material advancement to the detriment of all else.

His secondary target is the ‘Barbarians’, his mocking term for the English aristocracy. He is no less critical of their failings. These derive primarily from their inability to recognise the imperatives of the historical moment. The Barbarians, he argues, may possess sweetness (meaning manners and refinement), but they have no light (meaning intelligence). Politically, they are merely obstructive — a dead weight. The English aristocracy ‘has no ideas, but it has a policy, — to resist change.’ This self-serving inertia makes them

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35 Complete Prose., 2.7.
36 Complete Prose., 2.8-9.
37 Complete Prose., 5.139.
38 Complete Prose., 9.137.
40 Complete Prose., 5.26.
ill-equipped to address the reality of the modern world. ‘One has often wondered,’ Arnold wrote, ‘whether upon the whole earth there is anything so unintelligent, so unapt to perceive how the world is really going, as an ordinary young Englishman of our upper class. Ideas he has not, and neither has he that seriousness of our middle class, which is, as I have often said, the great strength of this class, and may become its salvation.’

Beyond these two powerful competing classes stands the Populace: the great mass of people who have none of the material advantages of the Philistines and Barbarians, who have historically been excluded from political power, but whose claims to be heard can no longer be ignored. The sense of urgency that informs Arnold’s criticisms of the Philistines and the Barbarians is not simply driven by a disdain for their intellectual deficiencies and their cultural shallowness; it derives from his perception that they were avoiding or were ignorant of the very real and very practical issues raised by this new political context.

In dividing his society into three broad categories Arnold sought to highlight what he saw as a dangerous divisiveness. Each class was, in its own way, guilty of what he regarded as the abiding sins of his time: intellectual insularity and an adherence to a narrow, self-interested political agenda. The insularity of English society was exemplified for Arnold in the fact that ‘the central idea of English life and politics is the assertion of personal liberty.’ He believed that the French Revolution had succeeded in orienting the modern world decisively toward a pursuit of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, but that it had done so without heeding the various ways in which these principles may not be compatible. Now, there is nothing wrong with personal freedom, he argues in *Culture & Anarchy*; it is obviously a virtue. But it is not the only virtue, nor is it sufficient on its own to provide a basis for social cohesion. One of the key implications of Arnold’s thesis in *Culture & Anarchy* is that unless the inherent tension between the civilised ideals of freedom and equality can be managed effectively, the casualty is likely to be fraternity. In priding itself on its respect for individual liberty ahead of all other concerns, the English nation deludes itself about the nature and the urgency of its social

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“Complete Prose,” 5125.

^ Complete Prose, 5.117 [emphasis in original].
and political problems: ‘Freedom, I said, was one of those things which we thus worshipped in itself, without enough regarding the ends for which freedom is to be desired. In our common notions and talk about freedom, we eminently show our idolatry of machinery.’

So Arnold’s delicately balanced critical position might be summed up like this. He wants to promote a society in which learning and culture are valued for their non-instrumental qualities, for their ability to foster sensible detachment, rational objectivity and intelligent reflection. But he also wants to claim an instrumental role for culture in bringing the benefits of wisdom and reflection to that society. He wants to promote equality and embrace social change, but does not want to encourage potentially divisive or destructive political conflict: material change must be driven by, and in parallel with, an enlightened and harmonious revolution in consciousness. He does not want to advance a system or ideology of his own, or be corralled into one, and he is highly conscious of the fact that he is criticising his own society and, in particular, his own class. He is not preaching to the choir. Indeed, he recognises that the substance of his criticism is such that it is likely to meet with instinctive and strong resistance (as indeed it did), for he is attacking his society precisely for those things it most prides itself on: its commonsense practicality, its aggressive individualism, its reflexive hostility to art and intellectualism, its devotion to materialism and technological progress, its sense of complacency about its achievements and its political ascendancy.

Arnold writes in full awareness of the inherent difficulties of arguing such a case. And from this awareness he derives what Stefan Collini calls his ‘highly developed sense of audience.’ He often chooses to express his ideas in a manner that is humorous and playfully evasive, addressing his interlocutors directly in order to tease them. ‘And here I think I see my enemies waiting for me with a hungry look in their eyes,’ he writes at one point in Culture.

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43 Culture & Anarchy, 74.

44 Collini’s chapter on ‘The Arnoldian voice’, to which my own account is indebted, provides a particularly lucid consideration of the importance of Arnold’s ironic persona to the framing of his criticism. Collini, 1-17.
& Anarchy. ‘But I shall elude them.’

He often quotes himself — ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ and ‘The Study of Poetry’, perhaps his two most famous essays, both begin this way — referring to his earlier remarks and the responses they have generated in order to foreground the fact that his arguments are contributions to a discussion that is ongoing. This serves to emphasise that he is reiterating his core ideas in the face of considerable opposition, which, by virtue of its unwillingness to accept his ideas, only acts as further confirmation of Arnold’s thesis that English society is resistant to culture. The episodic structure of Culture & Anarchy is determined by this process of argumentation. As Honan observes, the book depicts Arnold engaged in an ‘intimate dialogue with his critics — a feature which makes it puzzling to read unless one bears in mind that its later chapters reply to what the critics had said of the earlier ones.’

The teasing, ironic persona and the persiflage Arnold declared it was ‘necessary to use’ in order to make his point are responses to the peculiar demands of his self-appointed task. ‘Arnold’s tone of voice,’ observes Collini, ‘was at once his chief weapon and his most distinctive quality’; his use of irony constitutes the ‘most important, if also potentially the most troublesome, feature of his style.’ In irony he finds a refuge from the aggressive simplifications that characterise public discourse and an appropriate way to affirm his basic purpose. But the trouble with irony as a mode of expression is that it depends for its effectiveness on its ability to create a sense of collusion. It invites the reader to join with the writer in occupying the high moral ground and to validate his knowing sense of superiority. As an alternative to reasoned argument, or at least a way of promoting the underlying reasons for one’s argument, such a strategy is clearly problematic. Fred Inglis expresses a commonly held and not wholly unjust impression when he states that ‘Arnold repudiates philistinism not by argument but by condescension.’ As a result,

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45 Complete Prose., 5.124.

46 Honan, 347.


48 Collini, 9, 15.

49 Inglis, 25.
Arnold can sometimes seem to be smug and smart-alecky, and his jaunty style can seem dated in a way that Hazlitt's or even Johnson's styles do not. For many, he remains thoroughly resistible. ‘More readers,’ observes Collini, ‘have been irritated by Arnold than by almost any writer of comparable distinction.’

One of the most striking examples of Arnold’s self-consciousness about his public persona and his use of irony as a provocation — a kind of rhetorical guerilla tactic — is his curious little book *Friendship’s Garland*, or to give it its full title:

*Friendship’s Garland*

*Being the Conversations, Letters, and Opinions of the Late Arminius, Baron von Thunder-ten-Tronckh*

*Collected and Edited with a Dedicatory Letter to Adolescens Leo, Esq., of the “Daily Telegraph”*

*By Matthew Arnold*

It is a minor work, and one that tends to divide opinion even more sharply than the rest of Arnold’s writings. But it is of interest because it sets out, in a rather colourful fashion, some of the basic ideas underlying his critical stance and, by virtue of its overtly satirical approach, provides an insight into his self-consciousness about his public persona. Indeed, the premise of the book relies for its effectiveness on the reader having certain preconceived notions about Arnold and the ideas he is advocating.

*Friendship’s Garland* is a companion piece to the better-known *Culture & Anarchy*. The two works were composed at around the same time in the late 1860s, and they are thematically harmonious, with the former reiterating many of the latter’s arguments, albeit in a different and somewhat simplified form. Both were composed

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50 Collini, 10 [emphasis in original].

51 Murray calls it Arnold’s ‘funniest book’, though he concedes that its humour is not to everyone’s taste; while Honan ranks it alongside *Culture & Anarchy*, describing the two books as ‘textured, brilliant masterpieces’ that are ‘always fresh, never to be put aside.’ Morris Dickstein, on the other hand, calls it ‘unreadable, a feeble piece of facetious topicality.’ Murray, 223, 258; Honan, 334; Dickstein, 9.
as a series of magazine articles, as part of an ongoing exchange with Arnold’s critics, before being published as separate books. *Culture & Anarchy* appeared in 1869 and *Friendship’s Garland* in 1871, but they were subsequently reissued as a single volume in his lifetime.52

*Friendship’s Garland* grew from Arnold’s response to the responses to an essay he published in *Cornhill Magazine* in February 1866 called ‘My Countrymen’. The essay and its sequels were not well received. The *Spectator* ridiculed Arnold for his ‘dogmatic mock humility, his airy scorn,’ and dismissed his message as ‘useless but beautiful’; while in *Blackwood’s Magazine* Margaret Oliphant complained that ‘the fun is very ponderous’ and that it had ‘the terrible defect, worse than any other viciousness, of not being in the very least funny,’ before suggesting that for those ‘who take a cynical pleasure in seeing a man make himself look ridiculous, there will be good sport in this little volume.’53 She had a point. Arnold, however, remained convinced of the urgency of his message and the appropriateness of his mode of expression. Privately, he claimed that ‘there are certain things which it needs great dexterity to say in a receivable manner at all; and what I had to say I could only get said, to my thinking, in the manner I have said it.’54

Arnold begins ‘My Countrymen’ writing in a reasoned but quietly ironic way, observing that he has recently had occasion to travel on the continent and that, seen from a foreign perspective, England’s position may not be as secure as many of its inhabitants assume. ‘I must say,’ he declares with mock surprise, ‘that the foreign opinion about us is not at all like that of the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Star*.’55 The opening essay also introduces one of the key ideas in *Friendship’s Garland*: the problem that, as he was to write in *Culture & Anarchy*, ‘in our political system

52 For a summary of the genesis of *Friendship’s Garland*, its publication history and its reception, see: *Complete Prose*, 5.359-362.


54 *Letters*, 3-9.

55 *Complete Prose*, 5-7.
everybody is comforted.’ This is the meaning behind the sarcastic dedication to the *Daily Telegraph* and, more broadly, it is one of the central planks of Arnold’s social critique. He believed that British politics and the current social order did not simply encourage a form of class-based insularity; it also ensured that each class was fed a steady diet of what he called ‘clap-trap’ and that this exacerbated the modern tendency toward insularity and cultural fragmentation. ‘Clap-trap’ is another example — alongside the more famous concepts of Philistines and Barbarians — of Arnold’s unfortunate habit of investing pejorative terms with technical meanings. By clap-trap he does not simply mean indiscriminate nonsense; he means, specifically, flattering nonsense that appeals to self-interest. In other words, he is suggesting that the working class listens only to its own political leaders and reads only its own newspapers, and that the same can be said of the middle class and the aristocracy. Each class is thus told only what it wants to hear. Each has a reflexive hostility to ideas that challenge its assumptions; its sources of information reflect and reinforce its prejudices. When, near the end of *Culture & Anarchy*, Arnold describes English public life as a ‘Thysteaän banquet of clap-trap,’ it is this tendency he means to deride. The reference to Thyestes, who in Greek mythology is tricked by his vengeful brother into eating his own sons, underscores Arnold’s belief that the spectacle is not merely grotesque and appalling, but that it perpetuates a potentially disastrous form of internecine conflict. The *Daily Telegraph*, which is subjected to some sustained mockery in *Friendship’s Garland*, was read primarily by the middle class, by Philistines. This was also Arnold’s primary audience and his satirical target, and his intention is to shake them out of their complacency without alienating them, to remind them of ‘the profitableness of trying to see ourselves as others see us.’

*Friendship’s Garland* takes this piece of advice and literalises it. The method of argument Arnold employs is a variation on his basic contrasting and relativising technique. The substance emerges from reports of imaginary conversations with various ‘foreigners’ about the state of England — foreigners whose

56 *Complete Prose.*, 5.150.
57 *Complete Prose.*, 5.227.
58 *Complete Prose.*, 5.7.
opinions turn out to be rather close to Arnold's own. Indeed, he places into their mouths all of his own sharpest criticisms of English society. They first attack the self-interested conservatism and anti-intellectualism of the Barbarians, suggesting that aristocracies 'cannot deal with a time for intelligence; their sense is for facts, not ideas. The world of ideas is the possible, the future; the world of aristocracies is the established, the past, which has made their fortune, and which they hope to prolong.' The foreigners then point out the shallow and narrow-minded materialism that is characteristic of the life of the Philistines, and suggest the inadequate and spiritually stifling quality of such an existence: 'What brings about, or rather tends to bring about, a natural, rational life, satisfying the modern spirit? This: the growth of a love of industry, trade, and wealth; the growth of a love of the things of the mind; and the growth of a love of beautiful things. There are body, intelligence, and soul all taken care of. Of these three factors of modern life, your middle class has no notion of any but one, the first.' The foreigners go on to paint a generally unflattering portrait of the national character, criticising Arnold, who slips into the role of a representative Englishman for the purpose, on the grounds of his 'inaptitude for ideas, and aptitude for clap-trap; you can never see two sides of a question.' This is contrasted with an appreciative view of intellectual life on the continent: 'France has intelligence enough to perceive the ideas that are moving, or are likely to move, the world; she believes in them, sticks to them, and shapes her course to suit them.'

The subsequent chapters of Friendship's Garland extend the basic conceit that Arnold is merely reporting the view from abroad. They take the form of a correspondence between Arnold and a character named Arminius, who is identified as a Prussian baron descended from characters in Voltaire's Candide. With the introduction of the fictional persona of Arminius, the tone of the book becomes more openly satirical and Arnold's persona also changes. Instead of playing the role of a somewhat rueful conveyor of unwelcome news, he now pretends to be an affronted patriot

59 Complete Prose, 5.17.
60 Complete Prose, 5.22.
61 Complete Prose, 5.22.
possessed of what Arminius describes as a ‘blind adoration of everything English,’ and affects indignation at the presumption of this foreigner who dares to criticise English society.\footnote{Complete Prose., 552.}

*Friendship’s Garland* covers much familiar Arnoldian ground, but the flavour of its broad humour is perhaps best conveyed by its exchange about education, a subject on which Arnold was well-informed and held strong views. Over the course of several letters, he gives Arminius a guided tour of the English education system, beginning with a description of the upper-class education received by a peer and a clergyman — an education that is based on ‘the grand, old, fortifying, classical curriculum,’ but whose personal and practical value is uncertain.\footnote{Complete Prose., 570.} ‘Did they know anything when they left?’ Arminius asks of the beneficiaries of this method of education. Arnold records the ensuing debate:

> “But you surely don’t need me to tell you, Arminius, that it is rather in training and bracing the mind for future acquisition, — a course in mental gymnastics we call it, — than in teaching any set thing, that the classical curriculum is so valuable.” “Were the minds of Lord Lumpington and Mr. Hittall much braced by their mental gymnastics?” inquired Arminius. “Well,” I answered, “during their three years at Oxford they were so much occupied with Bullingdon and hunting that there was no great opportunity to judge. But for my part I have always thought that their both getting their degrees at last with flying colours, after three weeks of a famous coach for fast men, four nights without going to bed, and an incredible consumption of wet towels, strong cigars, and brandy-and-water, was one of the most astonishing feats of mental gymnastics I ever heard of.”\footnote{Complete Prose., 570.}

There would appear to be some academic shortcomings, then, with the fortifying classical education.

Arnold then turns to the alternative: the practical, scientific education received by the middle-class Bottles at Lycurgus House Academy. Bottles is taught by Archimedes Silverpump, PhD, who has ‘modern views’ about education: he stresses the utility of
knowledge and favours ‘forming the mind through observation and experiment.’ The consequences of this rationalistic approach are demonstrated when we encounter Bottles himself and he enthuses about the education he has received: ‘Original man, Silverpump! fine mind! fine system! None of your antiquated rubbish — all practical work — latest discoveries in science — mind constantly kept excited — lots of interesting experiments — lights of all colours — fizz! fizz! bang! bang! That’s what I call forming a man.’

Poor Bottles! His education appears to have been so stimulating that he now has trouble forming a sentence. And when Arminius asks what kind of man Bottles has become as a result of his studies with the ‘infernal quack’ Silverpump, Arnold is forced to concede that he has become the very embodiment of a Philistine: ‘Bottles has certainly made an immense fortune; but as to Silverpump’s effect on his mind, whether it was from any fault in the Lycurgus House system, whether it was with a sturdy self-reliance thoroughly English, Bottles, ever since he quitted Silverpump, left his mind wholly to itself, his daily newspaper, and the particular Baptist minister under whom he sate.’

The satire in Friendship’s Garland is crude and the humour is laboured, but Arnold is raising several substantial issues. He is not simply caricaturing what he sees as the damaging consequences of the class system, while mocking the nationalistic tendency to reject out of hand any criticisms that come from external sources; he is also making a point about the disarray of the English education system. In 1851, Arnold accepted the position of Inspector of Schools, a post he was to hold for 35 years. He had extensive, first-hand knowledge of the different curricula and pedagogical methods that were being employed in English schools and how these compared to schools on the continent. He was arguing for a universal, standardised education system at a time when no such system was in place. He believed, as R.H. Super has observed, that ‘the cause of public education was one important area in

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66 Complete Prose, 570-1.
67 Complete Prose, 571.
68 Complete Prose, 571.
69 For a summary of the historical context of Arnold’s views on education, see: Collini, 70-74.
which English political and social life might be made effectively to harmonize with the main current of the “modern spirit,” with (as he came to call it) the *Zeitgeist*. In the unregulated, piecemeal school system of his day he saw tangible evidence of the inadequacy of English culture and the potential for social dislocation. His depiction is deliberately absurd, but the issue is real enough.

What makes *Friendship’s Garland* revealing of Arnold’s critical intelligence is that it does not simply want to expose the shortcomings of the system. That is, it does not simply make the political point about the need for educational reform; it also attempts to dramatise the moment of realisation, the moment when the system is seen through the eyes of an outsider, the moment when false assumptions collapse. To this end, it cultivates a comedy of bathos. Playing the proud Englishman, Arnold approaches each point raised by Arminius confident that existing institutions will vindicate his nationalistic pride in them, only to have his confidence undercut when they are subjected to the kind of critical scrutiny that allows him to see them as they really are.

None of Arnold’s other critical essays are openly satirical in quite the same way, but *Friendship’s Garland* provides an exaggerated demonstration of a characteristic movement of his thought. Underlying his critical practice, which is also to say his rhetorical practice, is a form of relativism. He repeatedly implores his audience to consider an alternative frame of reference, to consider the virtues of an external viewpoint. But he also structures his arguments by playing these alternative frames of reference against each other. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857, he argued that ‘no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures.’ Much of his rhetoric thus relies for its effectiveness on a compare-and-contrast technique, which he is apt to deploy at every level of his argument. He uses it, most conspicuously, to highlight the weaknesses and internal divisions of English society, to imply that the Philistines and Barbarians may have something to learn from each other. His evocation of broad,

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71 Complete Prose., I.20-1.
abstract concepts — such as the revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality; or sweetness and light; or the two competing tendencies of Western civilisation he calls Hellenism and Hebraism (the former refers to intellectual curiosity and aesthetic cultivation; the latter describes the instinct for right conduct and morality) — is also meant to suggest that these are not absolutes, that they exist in necessary tension, and that they can and should interact, complement and correct each other.

Contrasting generalisations are also established on an international level, often by way of comparisons between French and English society. These comparisons evoke national stereotypes, which Arnold exploits to perform a nimble dance that combines ingratiating flattery with the presentation of unpalatable home truths. (Whenever Arnold becomes effusive in his praise, a critical counterpunch is never far away.) The English are granted the virtues of common-sense and practicality, but are condemned for being anti-intellectual; the French, on the other hand, are praised for their embrace of the modern movement of ideas, while being chastised for their fits of impractical and disruptive enthusiasm. This contrast informs his argument in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, in which Arnold proposes that there ‘is the world of ideas and there is the world of practice; the French are often for suppressing the one and the English the other; but neither is to be suppressed.’

In his essay on ‘Democracy’, Arnold personifies the contrast as a way of advocating a strong role for the state in guiding and ameliorating democratic reform. The conditions in both nations, he argues, need to be seen in the light that each sheds on the other:

> This is the great use which two unlike characters may find in observing each other. Neither is likely to have the other’s faults, so each may safely adopt as much as suits him of the other’s qualities. If I were a Frenchman I should never be weary of admiring the independent, individual, local habits

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72 *Complete Prose*, 3.265.

73 This belief in the positive attributes of state intervention is one of the key differences between Arnold’s liberalism and that of John Stuart Mill. Where Arnold was inclined to regard the state as the organic manifestation of the people it governed, Mill was considerably more wary (and more conventionally liberal) when it came to the potential dangers of state power.
of action in England, of directing attention to the evils occasioned in France by the excessive action of the State; for I should be very sure that, say what I might, the part of the State would never be too small in France, nor that of the individual too large. Being an Englishman, I see nothing but good in freely recognising the coherence, rationality, and efficaciousness which characterise the strong State-action of France, of acknowledging the want of method, reason, and result which attend the feeble State-action of England.74

The same contrast plays a significant role in *Culture & Anarchy*, where Arnold cites with approval the prediction of the Duke of Wellington, the vanquisher of Napoleon, that England would undergo ‘a revolution by due course of law.’ He goes on to argue that this is precisely what is happening to English society. A social revolution will undoubtedly result in great changes, he observes, ‘for a revolution cannot accomplish itself without great changes; yet order there must be, for without order a revolution cannot accomplish itself by due course of law.’75 When the English have a revolution, they do it properly and without a fuss, thank you very much. The French, subjected to the dialectical movement of Arnold’s rhetoric, are as useful as an example of how to go about things as they are an example of how not to go about things.

Crucially, Arnold’s relativising habit of mind shapes his historical consciousness and, in doing so, becomes a way to stake out his basic philosophical position. He presents himself as a clear-eyed interpreter of contemporary events largely on the strength of his historicised view of them. In ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, for example, he argues that the creation of a literary masterpiece requires more than the sudden appearance of an individual writer of genius: it requires a concurrence of ‘the power of the man and the power of the moment.’76 He goes on to argue that the creative outpouring of the English Romantic poets, who did not live in a cultural atmosphere as intellectually fertile as that of the Elizabethans or the ancient Greeks, had something premature about it. Their poetry, he suggests, had ‘plenty of energy,  

74 *Complete Prose*, 2.16-17.
75 *Complete Prose*, 5.135-6.
76 *Complete Prose*, 3.265.
plenty of creative force,’ but ‘it did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety.’ On this basis, he suggests that his contemporaries should work toward the creation of a rich intellectual milieu in which creativity might flourish; they should develop their critical faculties before their creative instincts.

This willingness to speak of historical eras in general terms and evoke the Zeitgeist in the service of his argument is meant to imply the far-sightedness of Arnold’s views. In an image designed to convey the precarious and ephemeral quality of the present moment, to suggest that the English nation is subject to forces larger than itself and that its enduring preeminence is not assured, Arnold proposes in ‘My Countrymen’ that history is ‘a series of waves, coming gradually to a head and then breaking, and that, as the successive waves come up, one nation is seen at the top of this wave, and another of the next.’ As with the references to the contrasting national characters of England and France, this historical awareness is meant to cut two ways. While the present may seem — and in certain respects is — superior to past eras, it is the ability to acknowledge the contrast that allows for a critique of the present.

In the essay ‘A Psychological Parallel’, for example, Arnold describes a witchcraft trial held in 1664. From the safe distance of the rational nineteenth century, he is able to join with his readers in recognising that witchcraft is, of course, utter nonsense. The trial is thus presented as a demonstration of the fact that ‘to live in a certain atmosphere of belief will govern men’s conclusions from what they see and hear,’ and that, as in the case of the judge, Sir Matthew Hale, ‘a man of veracity, judgement and mental power, may have his mind governed, on certain subjects, by a foregone conclusion as to what is likely and credible.’

Yet the principle Arnold wishes to demonstrate is not simply that the limitations of an individual’s understanding will be circumscribed by the intellectual limitations of the historical moment. He also wants to suggest, through the example of a

77 Complete Prose., 3.262.
78 Complete Prose., 5.30.
79 Complete Prose., 8.116, 121.
seventeenth century Cambridge theologian named John Smith, that this determination is not absolute. Smith believed in witchcraft and preached against it, but his writings ‘insist in the profound natural truth of Christianity, and thus base it upon a ground which will not crumble under our feet.\textsuperscript{80} Arnold observes that, in the process of denouncing witchcraft, Smith speaks of its evil as an aspect of human nature, a state of being rather than an external or supernatural force. This is something we can understand, suggests Arnold. It makes Smith a useful example, because it is possible to see in hindsight the extent to which he was mistaken in his assumptions and that he was nevertheless a man of ‘veracity and intelligence’, a man who gave ‘the error adopted by him a turn, an aspect, which indicates its erroneousness. Not only is he of help to us generally, in spite of his error; he is of help to us in respect of that very error itself.’\textsuperscript{81}

The parallel Arnold draws is with the teachings of St. Paul, who believed in the resurrection of Christ in a literal sense, but also spoke of resurrection as ‘a spiritual rising which could be appropriated and enacted in our own living experience.’\textsuperscript{82} Arnold goes on to argue that, on these grounds, Paul ‘bears unconscious witness to [Christianity’s] unique legitimacy,’ because he endorses the popular yet false view of the miraculous foundations of his religion, as well as what Arnold considers the ‘true’ understanding — namely, the view that the essence of Christianity is an emotional or spiritual truth that is given metaphorical expression in religious texts.\textsuperscript{83} Arnold’s historical essay thus becomes a consideration of the position of religious belief in his own time and, specifically, the problem that the supernatural occurrences that apparently underpin Christianity’s claims to truth can no longer be regarded as credible (Arnold often slips into the first-person plural when referring to things ‘we’ can no longer believe in). He criticises the Anglican Church in the name of defending the higher truth of religion, arguing that their articles require ordained ministers to affirm as literal truth things that no rational person could possibly

\textsuperscript{80} Complete Prose., 8.123 [emphasis in original].

\textsuperscript{81} Complete Prose., 8.127.

\textsuperscript{82} Complete Prose., 8.128.

\textsuperscript{83} Complete Prose., 8.129.
endorse as being truthful.\textsuperscript{84} Against this Arnold proposes that there is a different kind of affirmation to be found in Paul's teachings, and by extension Christianity. Even though Paul makes claims that are objectively incredible, it is possible, if one interprets his work in an appropriately critical spirit, to separate the enduring and profound features of his message from those assertions that are mistaken. Arnold proposes, in essence, that the distancing effect of history, and the relativised perspective this grants us, can become a means of discovering values that are ahistorical.

One of the implied consequences of Arnold's attempt to negotiate the long, withdrawing roar of waning religious belief is the secularisation of religion. His aim is to reconcile religion with the rational spirit of post-Enlightenment modernity. In Arnold's hands, religion thus becomes conflated with, and in a sense subsumed by, his broad notion of culture. Like culture, it speaks to the whole of our being, rather than the narrowly rational part of our nature. It is an inward experience, a means of personal development, that finds its external manifestation in the institutional form of the Church of England, whose purpose Arnold redefines, in rather bureaucratic terms, as ‘a national society for the promotion of goodness.’\textsuperscript{85} Even though many of the declarations in the Anglican prayer book must now be downgraded from assertions of literal truth to metaphors, he proposes that they nevertheless ‘retain a power, and something in us vibrates to them.’ There is consolation to be found in them as a form of poetry: ‘we can feel them, even while we no longer take them literally; while, as approximations to a profound truth, we can use them.’\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} Arnold was as concerned about the potential for sectarianism to damage the fabric of English society as he was about the destructive consequences of class conflict. He considered Literature and Dogma to be his most important work, and devoted considerable energy to the business of embroiling himself in the theological disputes of his day. These disputes, which are rather arcane, need not concern us here, other than to note that they are one of the principal reasons why large sections of Arnold's substantial output as a prose writer are now not only horribly dated but almost unreadably boring. On this point, it is perhaps also worth observing that when, in the mid-twentieth century, less than half a century after Arnold's death, Lionel Trilling edited an anthology of Arnold's writings called The Essential Matthew Arnold, he did not bother to include any of Arnold's copious musings on the subject of religion.

\textsuperscript{85} Complete Prose, 8132.

\textsuperscript{86} Complete Prose, 8135-136 [emphasis in original].
Arnold is hardly alone among Victorian thinkers in his preoccupation with the conflict between scientific rationalism and religious faith. Indeed, his downgrading of religion from proposition to metaphor, from objective truth to a structure of feeling, is a standard move for those who would like to cling to religion for sentimental reasons but are reduced to embarrassed throat-clearing by the awkward question of its empirical validity. The essence of Arnold’s argument is that religion, and specifically the national religion, should be preserved and promoted because it is an effective means of inculcating morality, not because it is credible in itself. James Wood is surely right to suggest that this particular brand of lily-livered compromise ‘positively deserves Nietzsche’s decisive hammer. Yet there is an audacity to Arnold’s claim that resides less with its demotion of religion than with its promotion of literature. In his late essay ‘The Study of Poetry’, in which he sets out his famous concept of ‘touchstones’, Arnold entertains the idea that that poetry, as the most refined form of literary expression, may in fact be better placed to perform the social functions of religion than religion itself, because it is not encumbered with religion’s allegiance to implausible truth claims. ‘Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact,’ he argues, ‘and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is the world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.’ In other words, if we can think of religion as a form of poetry, we can also think of poetry as a way of addressing that same sense of human longing as religion and, in the process, think of it as affecting our moral being, albeit in an indistinct way.

The greatest poetry, Arnold asserts on many occasions throughout his writings, is ‘a criticism of life’. It should appeal to our moral being and not simply our aesthetic sense. The extent to which it fulfills this task is presented as a measure of its worth. In his essay on Wordsworth, Arnold proposes that ‘the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,

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— to the question: How to live? Questions of morality, he argues, are often presented as being 'bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day.' Poetry that revolts against narrowness and pedantry, or else regards moral questions with indifference, can have its appeal, but Arnold contends that such poetry will not be truly great: 'the best cure for our delusion is to let our minds rest on that great and inexhaustible word life, until we learn to enter into its meaning. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life.\textsuperscript{90}

There is a conspicuously question-begging aspect to Arnold's argument. If you do not know what is signified by the catch-all term life, he is not going to tell you. 'The best poetry is what we want,' he asserts; 'the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can.'\textsuperscript{91} Yet when he comes to define the precise qualities of the best poetry, he speaks only in the vaguest terms, commending verses of the 'highest poetical quality' that resound with truth and seriousness. Rather than attempting to conceal this fundamental evasiveness, Arnold embraces it. His touchstones are explicitly presented as a way of bypassing the need for technical explanations. They suggest the powerlessness of the critic to account for true artistic greatness: 'Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples; — to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than be being perused in the prose of the critic.'\textsuperscript{92}

At its ultimate point, Arnold's criticism refines itself out of existence. This is the great paradox of Arnold as a literary critic. The idea of touchstones, as it is set out in 'The Study of Poetry', is intended to refute what he calls the two fallacious methods of critical estimation: the historical and the personal. Both tend to

\textsuperscript{89} Complete Prose., 9.46.

\textsuperscript{90} Complete Prose., 9.46 [emphasis in original].

\textsuperscript{91} Complete Prose., 9.163.

\textsuperscript{92} Complete Prose., 9.170-1 [emphasis in original].
cloud the judgement, he argues, because they confuse worldly or partial considerations with the true, universal value of poetry. We can overrate a poem because we have a sentimental attachment to it; we can also overrate a poem because it is known to have been influential or has a reputation as a ‘classic’. Arnold claims it is possible to move beyond these considerations to arrive at a real estimate. Yet, to the extent his criticism does not simply gesture toward the ineffability of true greatness, it appeals directly to the long perspective afforded by history and to our sense of personal responsiveness. With cavalier disregard for any potential difficulties that might arise in a comparison between the ancient Greek of Homer and the twelfth century French of *Chanson de Roland*, he proposes that one has merely to juxtapose the two to recognise that the latter, though a significant work in an historical sense, is obviously inferior to Homer, whose lines are of another order of poetry altogether.93 The poets whose lines Arnold takes as his touchstones — Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton — are, reasonably uncontroversially, classics: they are authors whose work has stood the test of time. Arnold does not, however, commend them on these grounds. They are useful because we can (it is assumed) recognise in their lines the very ‘highest poetical quality’ that Arnold refuses to define in specific terms. Arnold proposes that, if we keep choice extracts from their enduring works in mind, we can determine the relative worth of other poets by means of a comparative method that assesses them against the supra-personal, supra-historical standards of truth and seriousness his touchstones represent.

Arnold is famous for making arguments for the enduring worth of culture, but at least as interesting as the arguments themselves is the fact that he felt it necessary to make them. As a response to the intellectually destabilising forces of modernity, they are perhaps inevitable. Terry Eagleton has observed that the inflation of the idea of culture into a means of bridging the gap between intimate experience and social existence is ‘part of the story of a secularised age, as from Arnold onwards, Literature — of all things! — inherits weighty ethical, ideological and even political tasks which were once entrusted to rather more technical or

93 *Complete Prose*, 9.168.
Having grasped the non-naturalness of cultural value, of cultural hierarchy, the relativising implications of historical change and the waning relevance of religion, Arnold sought to create a space in which values and distinctions might yet be sustained. His conflation of literature and religion, his granting to literature a privileged aesthetic and intellectual space, in which its application of ideas to life somehow disentangles itself from sublunary concerns and the need for intellectual justification, is an attempt at reconciling the two broad aims of culture he set out in *Culture & Anarchy*: to promote perfection as ‘an inward condition of the mind and spirit’ that counters the dominant materialism of the age, and as ‘a general expansion of the human family’ that corrects the atomising tendencies of individualism. It is not quite accurate, as is sometimes thought, that Arnold believed literature could simply replace religion, but he did feel that science was destructive of religion without taking account of the non-rational impulses of human nature. In his essay ‘Literature and Science’, he argued for the enduring worth of outdated cultural forms and their educative value on the grounds that scientific knowledge is instrumental. It does not address the human instinct for morality and beauty. (Typically, Arnold does not offer evidence for his claims about human nature: he makes his point asserting and reasserting it.) Arnold might have conflated literature and religion with a view to allowing religion to adapt and survive, to remain relevant in a modern, democratic, scientifically informed society, but in the process he created an idea of literature as a quasi-religious concept, a conceptual space that, in its unresolvability and its engagement

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95 *Complete Prose*, 5.95 [emphasis in original].

96 George Watson suggests that ‘T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling have surely falsified [Arnold’s] purpose in suggesting that he ever sought to substitute poetry for religion.’ The contentious word here is ‘substitute’. Arnold was not so naive as to think that poetry could replace religion; he did, however, conflate them in a highly provocative manner. Both naturally fall under his umbrella term ‘culture’. In *Culture & Anarchy* he argues that religion and culture have a shared interest in ascertaining what constitutes human perfection and in trying to make it prevail. Yet he also goes on to imply that culture can be thought of as subsuming religion. The religious side of man is a ‘worthy and divine’ thing, but ‘it is not the whole of man’; culture, he argues, ‘goes beyond religion’ in its concern with all aspects of human development. George Watson, *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964) 142; *Complete Prose*, 5.974, 252.
with a public argument about cultural identity, becomes distinctly modern in the sense that is essentially secular. It highlights the split between our public and private selves; it embraces the inherent tension this creates. This balance between private and collective experience is precarious, and in many respects it seems highly implausible that poetry could ever shoulder Arnold’s burden. Eagleton’s incredulity is justified in the sense that the likely success of such a project is doubtful to say the least. ‘High culture,’ he notes, ‘is one of the least significant of cultural weapons, which is the kernel of truth of the illusion that it is entirely free of ideology.’ But part of the reason Arnold’s implausible solution gained such traction is that there is indeed a sense in which culture is the modern agora, as well as being a source of individual identity. And it is not ideological, in the sense that it is not monolithic or unidirectional. The idea of culture worked, albeit in a limited way, because, despite its gestures toward the ineffable, culture is not ultimately ineffable, literature is not ineffable — nor are our responses to it. Its potency really does not rest on any one doctrine.

The caricature of Arnold as a snobbish Victorian, who regarded the prospect of democracy with trepidation and promoted an exclusive notion of culture because the great unwashed could not be trusted to read the right books and think the right thoughts has its grain of truth. He is certainly a cultural snob by contemporary standards. To read him arguing for the use of force till right is ready and ridiculing someone named Wragg for the ugliness of his surname is to encounter a genuine, if submerged, strain of social intolerance that runs though his thinking. The suggestion that Arnold’s arguments are politically evasive, and perhaps even naive, is also justified in the sense that he does often seek to avoid difficult practical questions. Baldick, following Lionel Trilling, has suggested that Arnold was trying to treat social classes as if they had no distinct interests, when it is precisely their interests and the conflicts between them which make them classes. This method of “disinterestedness” gives each class a tribal nickname (Barbarian, Philistine, Populace) and then reduces social conflict to a series of imperfections within each

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97 Eagleton, The Idea of Culture., 54.
tribe’s soul, thus bypassing the question of their social relations.  

But such assessments underestimate the important place Arnold gives to the notion of equality in his thinking. One of his clearly stated if infrequently acknowledged political goals was the abolition of class divisions based on wealth and hereditary privilege. The radicalism of this aspect of his thought tends to be overlooked. Nor should Arnold’s political courage in stating this view be underestimated. In his essay on ‘Equality’ — the text of a lecture he delivered to an audience of Barbarians at the Royal Institution in February 1878 — he begins with a crowd-pleasing argument, one that slyly appeals to the social and nationalistic prejudices of his privileged audience, against what he calls ‘French equality’ — that is, an equality based on the idea of an abstract natural right. ‘It cannot be too often repeated,’ he announces: ‘peasants and workmen have no natural rights, not one’ — only to add immediately that, of course, by the same logic, ‘kings and nobles have none either.’ A century and a half later, it is still possible to hear the harrumphs of approval followed by the sharp intake of breath.) He goes on to tell his comfortable audience that society is perfectly justified in placing legal restrictions on the right to property in the name of the common good, and that ‘it is easy to see that our shortcomings in civilisation are due to our inequality; or in other words, that the great inequality of classes and property, which came to us from the Middle Age and which we maintain because we have the religion of inequality, that this constitution of things, I say, has the necessary effect, under present circumstances, of materialising our upper class, vulgarising our middle class, and brutalising our lower class. And this is to fail in civilisation.’ He rounds out his speech by telling his audience that they are ‘deficient in openness and flexibility of mind, in free play of ideas, in faith and ardour,’ and that the Barbarians of the aristocracy, and not simply the Philistines of the middle class, are hindering the progress of British society. Though Arnold devotes

98 Baldick, 35-6; Trilling, 253.
99 Complete Prose., 8.284-5.
100 Complete Prose., 8.299.
101 Complete Prose., 8.302, 304.
part of his speech to criticising ‘socialistic and communistic schemes’ for their acceptance of too low a standard of material wellbeing, it is not too much of a stretch to see, in his interest in cultivating material equality and his strong belief in the benefits of state intervention as a way of encouraging social progress, a socialistic element in his idiosyncratic mixture of liberalism and cautious conservatism. And it is an indication of Arnold’s ability to judge an audience and craft his message accordingly, to tease and flatter them as a way of smoothing the path for some of his less palatable suggestions, that he subsequently expressed surprise at its favourable reception, ‘even by those who might have considered themselves or their interests attacked by it; but the world is growing very liberal.’

Arnold presents an unusual combination of influences. He was, as Harold Bloom has observed, ‘a Romantic poet who did not wish to be one.’ He was both an artist and a critic, which is not uncommon in itself, but his career is unusual for the apparent sharpness with which it appears to delineate the two roles: he turned increasingly to social and literary criticism as his poetic muse abandoned him. He was also an early prototype of the modern literary academic. When he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857, he turned an honorary position that entailed modest academic responsibilities into a springboard for his wide-ranging critical project. He was the first man to hold the position to deliver his lectures in English (traditionally, the Professor of Poetry lectured in Latin), and he did not limit himself to a consideration of English poetry — innovations that suggest he was attempting to harness the institutional authority his position granted him and reach beyond his limited academic audience.

Most unusually for a man who is remembered as an influential literary critic, Arnold was, for much of his adult life, a government bureaucrat. His interest in education gave a practical, applicable gloss to his stance.

‘The English have never gotten over Arnold,’ observes Geoffrey Hartman, ‘and Trilling’s biography of the latter suggests

102 Letters, 4.398.
104 Honan, 291-2; Murray, 156.
the reason. Arnold reconceived literary criticism as an English type of intellectual life — casual, eclectic, undogmatic — opposed to the French disease of turning out instant ideologues. And despite the contradictions and evasions of his arguments, Arnold got a number of things right. He was largely right about the democratisation of society and the social benefits of universal education; he was right about the public sphere and the tendency of unfettered public debate to generate clap-trap. We live in a society in which clap-trap, in the specific Arnoldian sense, is endemic, a society in which the role of the state as a means of cultivating social equality is often viewed with reflexive hostility. On these questions, at least, Arnold can still claim a degree of relevance.

The Principles of Modern Heresy

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965)

T.S. Eliot’s frequently cited description of his ‘general point of view’ as ‘classictist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion’ appears in the preface to For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order, a slim volume he published in 1928. Less often cited is the qualification that follows: ‘I am quite aware that the first term is completely vague, and easily lends itself to claptrap; I am aware that the second term is at present without definition, and easily lends itself to what is almost worse than claptrap, I mean temperate conservatism; the third term does not rest with me to define. The uncommon reader who is interested in these scattered papers may possibly be interested by the small volumes which I have in preparation: The School of Donne.; The Outline of Royalism.; and The Principles of Modern Heresy.’

‘The “three small books” referred to by the author in his Preface,’ deadpans a publisher’s note to the 1970 edition, ‘were unfortunately never written.’ Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly. Though at least one of his biographers has treated the offhand declaration of intent as straightforward and genuine, and

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2 For Lancelot Andrewes, 6.
it has been established that at one stage Eliot thought to turn his 1926 Clarke Lectures (posthumously published as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*) into the first book of his proposed trilogy, the statement can be read in context as being of questionable sincerity.\(^3\) Eliot did not have his small volumes ‘in preparation’ at the time and perhaps had no intention of writing them. The declaration seems to have something of the quality of a pinched joke, delivered with Eliot’s characteristically steely sense of irony. The purpose of *For Lancelot Andrewes*, he states, is ‘to dissociate myself from certain conclusions which have been drawn from my volume of essays, *The Sacred Wood*.\(^4\) The arch qualification he appends to his famous self-definition is a caution against neatness of identification. He does not resile from the categories, but will accept them only on his own terms.

The rhetorical move is typical of Eliot’s manner. Dissociation is a favourite debating tactic. It seems no one ever disagreed with Eliot without first misunderstanding him. Often in his critical writings he returns to statements made in previous works, which appear to be straightforward and clearly articulated, to express his surprise that they have been taken at face value. He then moves to qualify his opinions without ever going so far as to renounce them. ‘Some years ago,’ he wrote five years after the publication of *For Lancelot Andrewes*, ‘in the preface to a small volume of essays, I made a sort of summary declaration of faith in matters religious, political and literary. The facility with which the statement has been quoted has helped to reveal to me that as it stands the statement is injudicious. It may suggest that the three subjects are of equal importance to me, which is not so; and it may suggest that I accept all three beliefs on the same grounds, which is not so; and it may suggest that I believe that they all hang together or fall together, which would be the most serious misunderstanding of all.’\(^5\)

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\(^4\) *For Lancelot Andrewes*, 7.

In the late, elegaic essay ‘To Criticize the Critic’ he is still professing his irritation at the currency of his tripartite self-definition, though not enough to repudiate it. The distinction between Romanticism and Classicism he feels is less important to him than it once was. ‘I should not now,’ he states, ‘call myself a “royalist” tout court, as I once did: I would say that I am in favour of retaining the monarchy in every country in which a monarchy still exists.’

The backhanded admission that the American-born Eliot once favoured monarchies for countries without them is remarkable enough, but what is striking about these qualifications is that, in fact, they qualify very little. He states that his earlier remarks are injudicious, but not incorrect; over the years his views may have modified, but their orientation has not. One of the difficulties in approaching Eliot’s critical writings is that, like Matthew Arnold before him, he is at bottom deadly serious but often chooses for strategic reasons to express himself in the guise of an ironist. It is a distinctive feature of his criticism, both literary and social, that it makes frequent and overt use of the ritual deprecatory gestures of personal modesty as a way of smoothing the path for his ideas. This somewhat disingenuous sense of self-deprecation plays across the surface of his prose in its teasing, elusive shifts in tone. There are few writers capable of combining, in the space of two sentences, lofty dismissal (‘clap-trap … worse than clap-trap’), obsequiousness (‘the uncommon reader’), false modesty (‘these scattered papers … small volumes’), and a dab of unctuous piety (‘does not rest with me to define’). To understand the intent behind Eliot’s criticism, no less than his poetry or drama, it is necessary to be alert to his use of what his biographer Lyndall Gordon describes as a ‘confessional strategy useful to a cautious and shy sensibility: to dramatise his most serious ideas as irrational, even ridiculous.’ In his criticism, this distancing strategy manifests itself in his frequent insistence that his writings are merely a collection of casual, unsystematic and probably unimportant observations, and is backed up by his expressions of


surprise at the extent to which his modest definitions have been taken up and debated. The benefit of this strategy is that it enables Eliot to make his case forcefully, even polemically, but leaves him free to retreat to higher ground when his ideas are attacked. In a commemorative essay, published shortly after Eliot’s death in 1965, Stephen Spender remembered writing to Eliot in 1933 to apologise for his harsh review of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Eliot was gracious in reply, stating that he thought Spender’s criticisms mild. ‘He then goes on to point out,’ writes Spender, ‘that some of my attack is based on my not understanding when he is being ironic. “In short, your only weakness consists in taking the lectures too seriously.”’

How seriously, then, should we take Eliot’s criticism? The circumstantial evidence suggests he took this aspect of his writing very seriously indeed. He was a dedicated and prolific critic from the very beginning of his career. Well before his poetry made him famous, he was reviewing regularly for publications such as the *Nation*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New Statesman*. Over nearly half a century he wrote scores of articles and delivered dozens of public lectures. He was editorially involved in the influential modernist journal the *Egoist*, and in 1922 became the founding editor of *Criterion*, the journal through which he was to marshall his literary influence for the better part of two decades. His dedication to *Criterion*, particularly in its early incarnation before Eliot became a full-time publisher with Faber & Faber in 1925, required great effort in the face of considerable personal difficulty and brought him no financial reward. In a letter to the poet Harold Monro in May 1924, using almost the same words as a letter to his brother written the previous day, Eliot gave a succinct description of the exhausting labour of editing the literary review while holding down a full-time job: *Criterion* he wrote, ‘is run without an office, without any staff or business manager, by a sickly bank clerk and his wife: the latter has to be on her back half the time and the former has conducted all his work in the evening in his own sitting room, after a busy and tiring day, and subject to a

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thousand interruptions: without even a desk until he bought a second hand one at Christmas!9

This level of sustained dedication does not suggest a man who regarded the practice of literary criticism and the fostering of an amenable critical culture as incidental or secondary diversions. Like many ultimately successful writers, the young Eliot was alert to the importance of cultivating his reputation and influence. Establishing his critical authority alongside his reputation as a poet was a sincere ambition. His published correspondence reveals a young man who was attuned to the critical milieu of post-war London and preoccupied with the issue of how best to negotiate it; a man conscious of his standing within the English literary world. He reassured his concerned mother, who was worried about the viability of her son's literary aspirations, that writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* — financially unrewarding though it is — is 'the highest honour in the critical world of literature,' and in 1919 he informed his brother that his reputation was 'based on writing very little but very good.'10

Initially at least, he was enthusiastic about the discipline that reviewing imposes, declaring that it was 'good practice in writing, and teaches one speed both in reading and writing.' His forays into literary journalism also instilled in him the habit of composing on a typewriter, which influenced the crisp prose style that became a hallmark of his critical writings: 'I find I am sloughing off all my long sentences which I used to dote upon. Short, staccato, like modern French prose. The typewriter makes for lucidity, but I am not sure that it encourages subtlety.'11

Eliot later came to feel that his lapidary style gave his prose 'a rather rheumatic pomposity'12 and his awareness that he did not always live up to his ideals of critical excellence, that he had at times failed to strike an appropriate compromise between the conflicting demands of quality and quantity, was a source of genuine ambivalence. The practice of reprinting old essays he


11 *Letters*, vol.1, 144.

12 *Letters*, vol.2, 506.
described early in his career as ‘a form of book making to which I am averse.’ In 1919, referring to an unpublished manuscript, he confessed to his friend John Quinn that he was ‘not at all proud of the book — the prose part consists of articles written under high pressure in the overworked, distracted existence of the last two years, and very rough in form.’ This dissatisfying method of working became the pattern nevertheless. Many of the essays that make up his first book of literary criticism, *The Sacred Wood*, were completed with similar haste in the early months of 1920. All of Eliot’s subsequent criticism, though invariably purposeful, was occasional. His numerous books of criticism are, without exception, collections of essays or lectures; all of them were composed, to a greater or lesser extent, under pressured circumstances.

Eliot knew how to make an impression. He had strong views about literature and he asserted them confidently. His early criticism, in which his urbane manner is deployed to great effect, is defined by its precocious iconoclasm, which he practises with an insouciance that borders on chutzpah. *Hamlet*, he calmly declares in one of the most influential of his early essays, ‘is most certainly an artistic failure.’

In the first paragraph of ‘The Perfect Critic’, the opening essay in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot proposes that ‘modern criticism is degenerate.’ That the only evidence offered in support of this claim is two lines from an unidentified newspaper article does not diminish the radicalism of the critique that follows. He casts his eye across such influential critics as Dryden, Coleridge, Sainte-Beuve and Arnold, and finds them all wanting. The essay establishes a number of key themes that come to define Eliot’s criticism, most significantly his preoccupation with the apparent disconnect between emotion and thought that he regards as symptomatic of modern civilisation. There are, he argues, two

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13 *Letters*, vol.1, 355.
14 *Letters*, vol.1, 266.
15 Ackroyd, 99.
17 *The Sacred Wood*, 2.
evident tendencies in contemporary literary criticism: the impressionistic and the abstract or technical. Neither he finds satisfactory. The former understands the work of art on the basis of the critic's emotional response, which is apt to become confused with personal associations and suppressed creative wishes that have nothing to do with the work itself. The latter approach is hampered by the modern fragmentation of knowledge, which he claims has created an indistinctness of terminology, a tendency for words to acquire vague emotional associations rather than precise meanings. The duty of the critic, Eliot argues, is not to legislate, but to inquire and elucidate. To do this, he must wrestle his understanding away from indulgent and misleading personal responses; he must free himself from what Eliot characterises as 'the pernicious effect of emotion.' Only then can he realise the promise of Arnold's ideal of disinterestedness; only then can he see the object as it really is.

The ideals of objectivity and comprehensiveness are central to Eliot's criticism. He consistently venerates the concepts of unity and order. Where the bad critic will merely offer incoherent expressions of emotion, the impressions of the perfect critic will organise themselves into a coherent structure. The critic, Eliot argues, must strive 'to see literature steadily and see it whole.'

This appeal to the idea that literature is a graspable and coherent totality provides him with a critical rationale and a structuring principle. By claiming to be in favour of objective standards of critical assessment, he lays claim to a more expansive frame of reference than his rivals. On this basis, he positions himself in The Sacred Wood as an anti-Romantic, a scourge of sentimentality and vagueness. His early essays are a sustained assault on the critical legacy of the nineteenth century, an attempt to dislodge the common assumption, associated with the lingering influence of Romanticism, that poetry is best understood as a medium of self-expression. The significance of the individual poet, he proposes in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', is a function of the relationship between the poet's work and the edifice of poetic tradition. He explicitly rejects William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility,' turning

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18 The Sacred Wood, 13.

19 The Sacred Wood, xv.
on its head the idea that the meaning of a poem has its origin in the confessional pouring forth of the poet’s personal sentiments. ‘No poet, no artist of any art,’ he argues, ‘has his complete meaning alone.’ Each new poem adds to the extant tradition and, in doing so, it subtly alters the structure and thus changes the meaning of that tradition, but the worth of the poem will ultimately be determined by the place it comes to occupy within the encompassing order.

Importantly for Eliot, the creative process is understood as an escape from the limitations of subjectivity. Though the poet begins with the raw materials of his perceptions and emotions, he extinguishes his personality (a negative term for Eliot) in the act of creation. A poem is to be understood as an objective structure. The only way for an artist to express an emotion, Eliot proposes in his essay on *Hamlet*, is to find ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.’

The term Eliot coined to encapsulate this idea — the ‘objective correlative’ — gained wide currency, and its success says something about the potent originality of his early criticism. He had sound instincts when it came to the most effective rhetorical means to advance his critical agenda. As Louis Menand has shown, Eliot was able to draw upon a stock of received notions about literature, which he successfully refashioned after his own designs: ‘his best-known critical judgements were arrived at by giving a traditional aesthetic vocabulary untraditional jobs to do.’ Nor should the element of ‘front’ in his criticism be underestimated. He proved adept at a winning phrase (‘there is no method except to be very intelligent’); he could fashion the kind of aphorism that seems incontrovertible before you have even had a chance to consider whether or not it is true (‘immature poets imitate; mature poets steal’); and he could sum up a writer with a witty, Wildean

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20 The Sacred Wood, 49.

21 The Sacred Wood, 100 [emphasis in original].

inversion (Henry James had a mind so fine no idea could violate it).33

But Eliot also made his key points with great acuity and his targets were carefully chosen. *Hamlet* was a major influence on the historical development of Romanticism; there was symbolism in the act of taking it down a peg or two. By explaining its artistic ‘failure’ on the basis of a precisely defined literary concept, rather than his personal response to the play, Eliot reorients the practice of literary criticism, refocusing its attention on the point at which the critical and the creative faculties intersect. He is not, in practice, a systematic critic; he does not undertake any comprehensive consideration of literature as an independent structure of meaning in the manner of Northrop Frye. But his ability to crystallise an argument, to hone it to the point where it acquires a technical specificity, gives his criticism its air of intellectual authority. With Eliot the role of the critic begins to shade into that of the theorist. The objective correlative is offered not as an observation or an impression, but a theory of artistic creation, a way of understanding the process of communication and the foundations of literary significance. It implies that literature is not simply a vaguely affirming humanistic pursuit, but a discrete object of study that has its own internal imperatives, which can and should be grasped through the application of an analytical intelligence.

The emphasis on depersonalisation in Eliot’s criticism and his argument that the ideal critic will often be an artist are attempts to bridge the divide between aestheticism and rationality, to reconcile the emotional and the intellectual by finding an objective form for a subjective experience. He grants literature an autonomy that wrests the work away from its entanglement with such transient concerns as the artist’s state of mind or its immediate political context. This is a note that sounds with particular insistence in Eliot’s early essays. The literary critic should not confuse his role with that of the social critic. The literary work is not to be understood as a means of inculcating morality or as indirect way of

33 The latter sounds rather like an insult, which is one of the reasons why the line is so memorable (and so often quoted), but in context Eliot’s observation is intended as a compliment to James’ novelistic intelligence. *The Sacred Wood*, 11, 125; T.S. Eliot, ‘In Memory of Henry James,’ *Egoist*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1918) 2.
discussing wider issues: ‘when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing.’

In pursuing these lines of argument, Eliot adopts the dutiful air of a man setting the house in order, clearing up the multiple confusions left for him by his critical predecessors. He gained a reputation for being exacting in no small part because he made a show of deploiring the inexactitude of others while appearing to be fastidious about his own definitions. There is surely no other critic who has felt so frequently compelled to make absolutely clear what he is not saying. Yet one of the defining features of his early forays into literary criticism is Eliot’s own willingness to indulge in vague hand waving. His early essays can seem almost comically ambitious in their readiness to leap from apparently casual or incidental remarks to bold assertions that are as sweeping as they are radical. From the very beginning of his career, despite his declared allegiance to an ideal of literary autonomy, he sought to locate his ideas about literature in an intellectual and cultural context that assumed the widest of historical perspectives.

In ‘Euripides and Professor Murray’, for example, Eliot uses a short theatre review to launch a withering attack on a prominent

24 The Sacred Wood, viii.
25 Eliot’s fondness for the word mind is one particularly noticeable manifestation of this tendency toward a vague loftiness of expression. The word appears countless times throughout his critical essays and is commonly used to make summary and often dismissive judgements about individual writers. Dryden has ‘not quite a free mind’; the mind of Sainte-Beuve is ‘limited in interest’; Donne has ‘a trained mind’ (even though he lacked ‘spiritual discipline’); Voltaire has a ‘destructive mind,’ in contrast to the ‘essentially constructive mind of Machiavelli’; while Hazlitt (who, as a vociferous republican and high-Romantic, was never going to get a fair hearing from Eliot) is condemned for having ‘the most uninteresting mind of all our distinguished critics.’ This habit of expression is also given a general application. Eliot distinguishes between ‘first-order minds’ and ‘minds of the second order’; he argues that a good critic should have ‘a really appreciative mind’ and that the theories of Thomas Hobbes are ‘very soothing to lazy minds.’ The term is even applied in a broad, collective sense, as when Eliot speaks of W.B. Yeats as an ‘example of the modern mind.’ Used in this peremptory manner, the term is intrinsically condescending. The assessment of individual writers is implicitly based on a judgement of their work, but the connotations of the word mind blur the distinction between a criticism of their intellectual stance and a general assessment of their character and intellect. In doing so, it suggests personal mastery. It implies that Eliot has grasped the essence and, most of all, the limitations of these writers. It implies that he has their measure. He thus claims for himself a position of superiority that has allowed him to see through them and make his categorical pronouncements. The Sacred Wood, xiv, xvi, 12, 13, 15; For Lancelot Andrewes, 16, 36, 45; After Strange Gods, 43; Selected Essays, 309.
classicist, before broadening his argument into a general cultural critique. The essay begins backhandedly, with Eliot complimenting the actress Sybil Thorndike on her performance as Medea, which he praises as a triumph over modern theatrical conventions and Professor Gilbert Murray’s inadequate verse translation. He goes on to argue that Murray, whom he characterises as ‘the most popular Hellenist of his time,’ has no feel for ancient Greek and had rendered Euripides in ‘a vulgar debasement of the eminently personal idiom of Swinburne’. In the space of a few pages, he points up a few choice examples to demonstrate what he regards as Murray’s considerable literary shortcomings and, having established his superiority as a classicist, begins tossing off a random series of critical judgements:

Incidentally we do not believe that a good English prose style can be modelled upon Cicero, or Tacitus, or Thucydides. If Pindar bores us, we admit it; we are not certain that Sappho was very much greater than Catullus; we hold various opinions about Vergil; and we think more highly of Petronius than our grandfathers did.

This is a young man’s criticism. The tone is affected, condescending, cocky. The ironic manner is self-regarding. What it primarily conveys is a sense of the author being rather pleased with himself. The judgements are stretched between a desire to intimidate with erudition and a jejune pomposity. Such confident assertions certainly sound like the opinions of a man who knows what he is on about, though they say nothing of substance about the authors in question. They are a display of critical plumage, a rhetorical show of mastery. The faux-casualness of that initial ‘incidentally’ and the lugubrious sarcasm conveyed by the stress on the word very imply that these are the kinds of idle thoughts that might well occur to one in the mid- to late-afternoon as one reclines in one’s silk dressing gown and cravat while smoking a cigarette in a long-stemmed holder and sipping at one’s breakfast martini.

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26 *The Sacred Wood*, 73.

27 *The Sacred Wood*, 76–7 [emphasis in original].
Yet the casual mockery Eliot directs at anyone ignorant or foolish enough to demur is contextualised by what he sees as the urgent cultural question raised by Murray’s inferior translation. The plural pronoun ‘we’ is generational and the line is being drawn in both aesthetic and philosophical terms. Not the least of Murray’s failures is that he is ‘a very insignificant follower of the pre-Raphaelite movement.’

He is, in other words, a relic of the nineteenth century, a doddery late-Romantic who does not realise his time is up. The essay’s call for a rediscovery of classical literature is made on the grounds that a reappraisal is necessary for ‘the foundation of the literature we hope to create.’

The encompassing issue is a general malaise, of which Murray’s out of date ideas are merely a symptom. The classics, Eliot argues, have ‘lost their place as a pillar of the social and political system.’

Our understanding of them has been distorted by a host of historical developments and philosophical novelties, the precise significance of which the essay does not quite get around to explaining before it arrives at the ringing call to arms that brings it to a close:

If we are to digest the heavy food of historical and scientific knowledge we have eaten we must be prepared for much greater exertions. We need a digestion which can assimilate both Homer and Flaubert. We need a careful study of Renaissance Humanists and Translators, such as Mr. Pound has begun. We need an eye which can see the past in its place with its definite differences from the present, and yet so lively that it shall be as present to us as the present. This is the creative eye; and it is because Professor Murray has no creative instinct that he leaves Euripides quite dead.

The conclusion makes use of a gesture that Eliot often makes in his criticism. He calls for the adoption of what is, in effect, a supra-temporal perspective, a transcendence of the limiting assumptions of the present. He echoes the sentiment in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ when he argues that the poet must

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28 *The Sacred Wood*, 75.
29 *The Sacred Wood*, 73.
30 *The Sacred Wood*, 73.
31 *The Sacred Wood*, 77.
acquire a historical sense of ‘the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together.’

Implicit in this suggestion that the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions of the present are limited and inadequate is the idea that Eliot’s own views, however indistinct they might appear at times, are more far-sighted than those he derides. This is implied by virtue of the simple fact that he claims to have seen through them, though how one acquires a similarly supra-temporal perspective remains unclear. His concept of tradition elevates this question-begging rhetorical move to the level of theory. Yet the problem, as Eliot defines it, is also decisively of its time. It is a direct consequence of our shared intellectual inheritance, of the ‘heavy food of historical and scientific knowledge’ that shapes the present. In this sense, as René Wellek has observed, Eliot ‘has a double standard, a double conception of time. On the one hand, he recognizes the necessities of time and often judges works according to their contribution to the “progress” of language and poetry, and on the other hand, he affirms an eternal standard.’

The creative eye that Eliot champions thus contains an inherent duality, which manifests itself in his embrace of seemingly contradictory positions. His aesthetic arguments are radical and conservative, apolitical and political. He argues that literature is at once independent of its historical context and a symptom of it. Eliot’s ultimate aim is always to resolve these conflicting tendencies, but in practice the best he can do is hold them in tension, since the comprehensive eternal standard is by definition inaccessible and thus can only be evoked in a hypothetical, gestural way. This tension is the thread that runs through all of Eliot’s critical writings. His characteristic method of argument is not to appeal to facts, or the superiority of his reasoning, even though he often adopts a stance of intellectual superiority; his basic critical method is, rather, to assert the priority of his values. It is this preoccupation with claiming priority, this habit of expression, that unites his early literary criticism with his later forays into cultural

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31 *The Sacred Wood*, 49.

commentary. It is also the rock on which his criticism ultimately founders.

Eliot gained the critical influence he desired, and spectacularly so. Craig Raine has described him as ‘the most influential and authoritative literary arbiter of the twentieth century.’\(^{34}\) This is not an exaggeration. It is difficult to overstate the authority granted to Eliot’s critical pronouncements during his heyday. As early as 1931, Edmund Wilson could write that as a critic Eliot occupied ‘a position of distinction and influence equal in importance to his position as a poet.’\(^ {35}\) Though his writings were occasional and apparently modest in ambition, observed Wilson, Eliot ‘has probably affected literary opinion, during the period since the war, more profoundly than any other critic writing in English’: his short essays, ‘sent out without much publicity as mere scattered notes on literature, yet sped with so intense a seriousness and weighted with so wide a learning, have not only had the effect of discrediting the academic clichés of the text-books, but are even by way of establishing in the minds of the generation now in college a new set of literary clichés.’\(^ {36}\) The Irish-American critic Denis Donoghue, whose education coincided with the rise of the New Criticism that flourished Eliot’s wake, remembers *The Sacred Wood* as the first book of literary criticism he ever read, ‘pencil in hand and taking notes,’ absorbing its chiseled maxims so thoroughly that he ‘stopped thinking of them as quotations.’\(^ {37}\) In the post-war years, having been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, Eliot commanded a wide audience that extended well beyond the narrow confines of the academy and the literati. He was constantly in demand as a public speaker. In 1956, nearly 14,000 people turned out to hear him deliver a lecture on ‘The Frontiers of Criticism.’\(^ {38}\)


\(^{36}\) Wilson, 92, 94.


\(^{38}\) Gordon, 436.
Eliot is still regarded as a major twentieth century poet, but his influence as a critic has waned considerably since his death in 1965. There are various reasons for this. At least some of the decline in interest in his criticism can be attributed to a general shift in critical practices within the academy. The theoretical approaches that came to dominate literary studies in the latter decades of the twentieth century sought, often quite aggressively, to discredit and displace the apparently unsystematic and impressionistic criticism represented by influential figures, such as Eliot and F.R. Leavis, whose work evoked a post-Arnoldian sense of literary exclusivity. Eliot wrote primarily about poetry with a sideline in Elizabethan drama, and these are certainly worthy subjects. He all but ignored the dominant literary form of the twentieth century, the novel. This is his prerogative. But as older, narrower notions of literary appreciation have given way to a more open-ended understanding of cultural value, his critical preoccupations have come to seem rarefied and narrow. His donnish mannerisms have not aged particularly well and his hopes for a resurgence of interest in verse drama proved to be unfounded. His literary significance is also closely associated with the aesthetic rupture of Modernism. Much of the authority of his criticism derived from its ability to explain that rupture, to articulate the new aesthetic of his own time. It is perhaps the case that, over the years, the confident radicalism of Eliot’s critical assault on the legacy of Romanticism, which undoubtedly gained authority from the fact that Eliot was one of the most visible and influential of modernist poets, has diminished in importance in such a way that the underlying conservatism of his views has become more apparent. A significant part of the discontent with Eliot’s criticism is founded on an ideological critique, and not just its dated methods and assumptions.

Perhaps the most serious damage to Eliot’s critical reputation has been done by persistent accusations of anti-Semitism. The issue was raised during his lifetime by a number of critics, including Lionel Trilling.39 Since his death, concerns have been expressed by, among others, George Steiner, James Fenton and Christopher Ricks. The most vigorous prosecution of the case against Eliot is Anthony Julius’s controversial 1995 study T.S. Eliot,

Anti-Semitism and Literary Form. Julius, a lawyer by profession, adopts a stance that is openly adversarial. He rejects all mitigating interpretations, arguing that the various derogatory references to Jews that can be found in Eliot's poetry and prose are not merely the expressions of casual prejudice of a kind that was common for a man of Eliot's patrician background, but are an integral part of Eliot's literary practice.

Julius's argument is overstated. The handful of anti-Semitic references in Eliot's work are plain to see; their precise implications have been disputed at great length. But they are too few and too widely dispersed to occupy the central place in Eliot's work that Julius grants them. Raine, who along with Donoghue is among Eliot's staunchest defenders on this question, has demonstrated that some of the evidence frequently cited against Eliot is not as unambiguously damning as it has sometimes been portrayed. Certainly, Eliot's political and social views were as idiosyncratic as his character was complex. He was a man who was, on a personal level, instinctively reserved and notoriously difficult to read. He regarded himself as an 'old fashioned Tory,' describing his social and political views as 'reactionary and ultra-conservative.' Though he admired the French reactionary Charles Maurras — the ultra-rightist and anti-Dreyfusard who supported the Vichy regime in World War Two — from whom he borrowed the triumvirate of royalism, Classicism and Catholicism, Eliot never gave his support to fascism, unlike a number of other


prominent modernist writers. When it was put to him in 1956 that he was an anti-Semite, he strongly rejected the imputation. The occasional expressions of bigotry that appear in his published correspondence are disdainful and snobbish rather than virulent. Compared to some of literature's dedicated haters — Dostoevsky or Céline, for example — Eliot would seem to be something of a milksop. This is not to excuse any of his statements, merely to place them in an appropriate context. There are several anti-Semitic references in Eliot's verse that, even if we grant him his poetic licence, are in rather poor taste; he made a number of remarks in his critical writings that are reprehensible. But the weight of evidence does not appear to support the case that anti-Semitism was for Eliot a major preoccupation.

There is, however, a sense in which the infrequent expressions of anti-Semitic sentiments in Eliot's work are of more than incidental significance. The detailed and sometimes heated arguments that the issue has generated do not need to be rehashed, but if we approach the issue with a view to illuminating Eliot's critical writings in particular, it can bring us close to the essence of his underlying philosophy. This can be explained by reference to the most notorious and inexcusable of his remarks: his argument, advanced in a public lecture in 1933 and published the following year in the book *After Strange Gods*, that a healthy society requires that a nation's population 'should be homogenous':

> where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.42

There have been a number of attempts to offer mitigating readings of these lines, none of which are convincing. They allow little room for ambiguity. Eliot's argument is clear and, it would seem, sincere. It is also disgraceful. In response to Ricks's disgusted reading of these lines, Raine has stressed that, strictly

speaking, Eliot is not advocating intolerance, but arguing against excessive tolerance — a reasonable if modest point, though it hardly negates the force or the implications of the words homogenous, adulterate, undesirable and unity of religious background.

Raine does, however, offer a more substantial argument in support of his interpretation that Eliot is advocating a society that allows for ‘a degree of tolerance’. The lectures in question, he points out, take up the issue of tradition. It is a concept that has an important place in Eliot's criticism. Of the most influential of his early essays, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, is an attempt to understand literary creativity in an evolving context in such a way that change and continuity might be reconciled. After Strange Gods, in which Eliot claims to speak in the role of a moralist rather than a literary critic, seeks to extend this idea into the social realm. Tradition, Eliot argues, is not merely the maintenance of dogmatic beliefs, nor is it necessarily hostile to change. It involves ‘all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of “the same people living in the same place.”’

None of the critics who sought to condemn Eliot, observes Raine, recognised the allusion contained in this line. The quotation comes from the ‘Cyclops’ episode of Ulysses — James Joyce's 'great and famously tolerant novel,' as Raine describes it — where the words are uttered by Leopold Bloom himself. Raine takes this as a point in Eliot's favour. The line from Ulysses is Bloom's

definition of a nation, offered to the bigoted Citizen whose rampant anti-Semitism wishes to expel the Semite interloper from the Irish nation. Leopold Bloom is a free-thinking Jew. And his definition, which is also his defence of his right to live in Ireland, is a definition that the allegedly anti-Semitic Eliot is happy to share. This insight should give us pause, both specifically and generally. By consciously alluding to Leopold Bloom, and marking the allusion with inverted

43 Raine, 158 [emphasis in original].
44 After Strange Gods, 12.
45 After Strange Gods, 18.
commas, Eliot effectively includes free-thinking Jews in his recipe for a unified culture.  

Raine considers this piece of evidence to be ‘crucial and decisive’. But his interpretation is not wholly convincing. Given that Eliot chooses to be explicit when he advocates homogeneity, religious unity and blood kinship, and given that he is explicit in characterising free-thinking Jews as undesirable, the suggestion that he is signalling his generous willingness to tolerate a small number of free-thinking Jews in his ideal society by the implicit means of a literary allusion needs to be approached with a degree of scepticism. Eliot greatly admired *Ulysses*, but his admiration was largely based on the novel’s formal innovations, particularly the mythical parallel that Joyce uses to structure the narrative, which Eliot regarded as having ‘the importance of a scientific discovery’; he interpreted this technical breakthrough after his own designs, as Joyce’s attempt to impose order on the chaos of modern life. He did not necessarily endorse the humane, forgiving vision at the heart of Joyce’s book. In the context of Eliot’s lecture, the origin and the implications of the quote from *Ulysses*, which was banned in the United States until 1933, are by no means self-evident. Eliot could not have expected an American audience in April of that year to recognise the obscure reference or grasp any implications that might follow from the awareness of its original context. Furthermore, Raine’s interpretation rests on the assumption that Eliot is citing Bloom’s words approvingly and unironically. But it is far from clear that this is the case. In the first instance, as a definition of a nation, ‘the same people living in the same place’ is ridiculously vague and inadequate, and obviously so. This is acknowledged in *Ulysses* itself. When Bloom comes out with the line everybody laughs. Aware that he has expressed himself clumsily, he immediately corrects himself by adding, no less amusingly: ‘Or also living in different places.’ Though Joyce’s sympathies clearly lie with Bloom’s naive generosity of spirit and

46 Raine, 158.


not with the Citizen’s violent nationalism, it does not follow that Bloom’s muddled definition is meant to be taken seriously. Nor does it necessarily follow that, in citing the line, Eliot is embracing Bloom’s benign tolerance. Given the overtly comical nature of the statement, it would be strange indeed if Eliot were presenting it with a straight face. Even if for a moment we take Bloom’s definition at face value, it is not at all harmonious with the concept of nationhood that Eliot is proposing. Indeed, it is, in important respects, antithetical to Eliot’s explicitly stated view. He argues in After Strange Gods that a nation must be founded on an enduring sense of tradition based on a shared religious, racial and cultural heritage, an idea he also develops in later works. That is, a nation must be based on a deep affinity, a form of collective identity that is more substantial and enduring than the mere historical accident and the acceptance of heterogeneity that is implied by the phrase ‘the same people living in the same place.’ Bloom is indeed a free-thinking Jew: he represents the modern secular pluralism, the humanism, that Eliot finds objectionable and is explicitly arguing against. His woolly but accommodating formula expresses a social liberalism that rejects the essential elements of Eliot’s monocultural vision. Raine, in his eagerness to get his subject off the hook, might hear an expression of identification and a definition that Eliot is ‘happy to share’; but I’m afraid I hear a distancing and rather chilly irony. Eliot, it seems reasonable to assume, recognises that Bloom’s definition of nationhood is absurd. Thus, it would seem he is most likely not citing it with approval but in a spirit of dry mockery, incongruously but knowingly juxtaposing it with the contradictory notion of ‘blood kinship’ to highlight its sentimental vagueness and inadequacy, to deride what he regards as the hollowness of such worm-eaten liberal notions.

The position After Strange Gods occupies among Eliot’s critical works is problematic. Its controversial status has granted it a significance greatly in excess of its inherent qualities. It is unique among Eliot’s books for the fact that he refused to allow it to be republished, a gesture that has been widely recognised as a significant retraction on his part, and perhaps even a tacit admission of the baseness of the sentiments expressed in its most notorious passage.
But there is also a mundane explanation for Eliot’s unwillingness to have the work reprinted. The three lectures that form the substance of the book were composed in great haste in early 1933, at a time when his disastrous first marriage was disintegrating. The text bears the marks of the personal pressure under which it was composed. It is by far the worst written of Eliot’s critical works. His reasoning is shoddy throughout and there is a noticeable falling away in the quality of the writing over the course of the lectures. The third chapter contains little resembling a coherent line of argument and one of Eliot’s most consistently effective rhetorical weapons — his poise — abandons him. The characterisation of D.H. Lawrence as a kind of decadent literary savant represents Eliot’s criticism at its absolute worst. His superior tone drips with false pity and condescension, and he frequently descends into a crude and derisive sarcasm.

Eliot acknowledged some of these shortcomings in a 1940 letter to J.V. Healy, who had written to take issue with Eliot’s remarks about ‘free-thinking Jews’:

The whole tone of After Strange Gods is of a violence which I now deprecate, and I am sure that it contains many statements or assertions which I should now wish to qualify: but I do not think that the sentence which was in question is one of them. At least, having given the explanation which I have given you, I can only express regret at the possibilities of mis-interpretation.49

The apologia is a classic Eliotian hedge. He claims the book is deficient in its tone rather than its substance; it contains unspecified remarks that he would qualify, but not repudiate; he has regrets, but only because he has perhaps been misunderstood. His attempts to justify his assertions in his correspondence with Healy are, as Julius has highlighted, confused and certainly inadequate. Yet Julius, in placing Eliot’s anti-Semitism at the centre of his concerns, also overlooks a key point. He cites Eliot’s claim that without ‘its traditional practices, observances and Messianism, [Judaism] tends to become a mild and colourless form

49 Cited in Christopher Ricks, T.S. Eliot and Prejudice. (London: Faber, 1988) 47.
of Unitarianism’ and expresses surprise at the comparison. He goes on to propose that the connection may lie in the fact that both religions met with discrimination in the United States and that, as a consequence, they developed strong ties. He observes, however, that ‘though Unitarians were energetic proselytisers amongst Jews, they attracted few Jewish converts. Given that the theological link between the two is the common denial of Christ’s divinity, Eliot’s comparison is evidence of his inability to conceive of Judaism in anything other than negative terms.’

This misses the point. It approaches but does not arrive at what is, for Eliot, the important issue. Raine comes closer to the mark when he argues that Eliot’s primary objection is free-thinking, and that Eliot singles out the Jews because ‘given the Diaspora, free-thinking Jews are less likely than free-thinking Christians to retain the vestiges of their religion. This is surely uncontroversial even if arguable.’ In fact, the point is thoroughly contentious — there would appear to be no lack of vestiges in the work of Philip Roth or Howard Jacobson, for example — and, for reasons outlined above, it makes something of a nonsense of Raine’s own interpretation of Eliot’s reference to Leopold Bloom. But it points to the essential insight that the basis of Eliot’s stance is religious. As James Wood observes: ‘Christian orthodoxy was his rock: all unorthodoxies issued from enemy territory.’ Throughout Eliot’s post-conversion criticism, he treats his religious belief as a philosophical position that must be defended. This often gives his arguments an orientation, even when it is not his explicit concern. Julius’s observation that few Jews converted to Unitarianism is, in this context, an irrelevance. Eliot is deaf to the prejudicial implications of his remarks not because, as Raine has proposed, he was so free from prejudice that it did not occur to him that they could be interpreted as such, but because he regards them as illustrative of a larger philosophical quarrel with modernity itself.


51 Julius, 204.

52 Raine, 160.


54 Raine, 151.
quarrel in which he considers both secularised Judaism and Unitarianism to be adversely implicated, and for much the same reason. Eliot confuses a shabby racial prejudice with his intellectual position, but there seems little reason to doubt that, however misguidedly, he saw it as an intellectual position and that, considered as part of his broad critical stance, he considered the racial aspect to be secondary to his encompassing concerns. Eliot objects to free-thinking Jews for their individualism, cosmopolitanism and secularism. As with the Unitarianism he was reacting against in converting to Anglo-Catholicism, the major point of contention for Eliot is the implicit agnosticism tending to atheism, the rejection of absolutist metaphysics in the name of such tepidly humanistic notions as moderation, decency, rationality and democratic tolerance.\(^5\) As he observed to Sidney Schiff in 1924, three years before his official conversion: ‘I see no necessary connexion between democracy and Christianity. Christianity as I see it is anti-democratic.’\(^6\)

He makes his position on the cultural politics of his religious views clear in his lecture ‘Catholicism and International Order’, delivered the same year as the lectures that became After Strange Gods. The liberal tendencies of the modern world, he argues, are fundamentally anti-Christian. Catholics should have modest expectations but their ideals should be absolute: ‘any programme a Catholic can envision must aim at the conversion of the whole world. The only positive unification of the world, we believe, is religious unification; by which we do not mean simply universal submission to one world-wide ecclesiastical hierarchy, but cultural unity in religion — which is not the same as cultural uniformity.’\(^7\)

The distinction between unity and uniformity is another manifestation of the fundamental conflict Eliot felt between universalism, which he associates with timelessness, and the untidy particularity of material reality. But the adherence to a monocultural ideal is explicit and his pronouncements are unequivocal. There is no question he understood the social

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\(^5\) In 1931, writing about his Unitarian upbringing, Eliot claimed that he was ‘brought up outside the Christian fold.’ T.S. Eliot (editor), The Criterion: 1922-1939. 18 volumes (London: Faber, 1967) 10.771. See also: Ackroyd, 304; Gordon, 18-20.


\(^7\) Essays: Ancient & Modern., 124.
implications of his argument and understood this as a logical extension of his theological views: ‘I think that the virtue of tolerance is greatly overestimated,’ he wrote, ‘and I have no objection to being called a bigot myself.’

*After Strange Gods* can be read, in this light, as a pivotal work. It is of interest not simply because the very looseness of its argument suggests a view of the instinctively cautious Eliot at his most unguarded, but because it can be seen as the fulcrum between his early literary criticism and the turn toward cultural criticism that is a feature of his later writings. Though Eliot’s literary, socio-political and religious views are often entangled in his criticism, *After Strange Gods* is notable for being explicit in its attempt to synthesise them. In extending Eliot’s conception of an evolving but continuous literary tradition into the social realm, it clearly anticipates some of the socio-political concerns of *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes toward the Definition of Culture*. It also reconfigures the opposition between Classicism and Romanticism, which is of central importance to much of Eliot’s early literary criticism, as a theological distinction between orthodoxy, which he explicitly links to his concept of tradition, and heterodoxy or heresy, from which the book derives its subtitle: *A Primer of Modern Heresy*. Having established this opposition, Eliot proceeds to make a series of mostly uncharitable judgements about a number of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century writers, with a view to illuminating his philosophical concerns. The hapless Lawrence, whose characters Eliot finds lacking in all moral and social sense, is presented as ‘an almost perfect example of a heretic’; Ezra Pound is teased for being ‘attracted to the Middle Ages, apparently, by everything except that which gives them their significance’; W.B. Yeats is an ‘example of the modern mind,’ whose allegiance to poetry without the support of true religion makes him susceptible to mystical quackery and sentimentalism; George Eliot’s work is found to be tainted by ‘the dreary rationalism of the epoch’ and, though ‘we must respect her for being a serious moralist,’ we are advised to ‘deplore her individualistic morals’; Thomas Hardy’s ‘extreme emotionalism’ is condemned as ‘a symptom of decadence’; and George Meredith is contrasted unfavourably with Gerard Manley Hopkins, who ‘has the dignity of

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58 Essays Ancient & Modern., 129.
the Church behind him, and is consequently in closer contact with reality.\textsuperscript{39}

Eliot states that his investigations are ‘not concerned with the author’s beliefs, but with orthodoxy of sensibility and with the sense of tradition.’\textsuperscript{60} He presents himself, in other words, as a disinterested arbiter of whatever it might be worthy of inclusion in his tradition, an arbiter whose judgements are, in this instance, theologically principled rather than literary or personal. Yet his assessments are also offered as a work of social criticism with an explicit ideological purpose — namely, to highlight what Eliot calls ‘the struggle of our time to concentrate, not to dissipate; to renew our association with traditional wisdom; to re-establish a vital connexion between the individual and the race; the struggle, in a word, against Liberalism.’\textsuperscript{61} The deliberate conflation of his literary, socio-political and religious viewpoints manifests itself in the sheer crudity of his judgements. Despite his claim to be unconcerned with the beliefs of the writers he mentions, this is obviously an aspect of his moral condemnation of Lawrence, Yeats and George Eliot: they are being chastised for their beliefs as clearly as Hopkins is being praised for his beliefs. His dismissal of Hardy reverts to the terms of his earlier attacks on Romanticism, making explicit the argument that Hardy’s literary failures spring from his sentimentalism and his corresponding lack of thought, which Eliot sees as inevitable by-products of an historical era that discourages individuals from submitting to an objective belief system. In After Strange Gods, more overtly than in any of Eliot’s other critical works, his literary judgements can be seen to be ideological in the narrowest, unhappiest, most prejudicial sense of the term. Though the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy affects to broaden the scope of his literary criticism, in practice Eliot’s perspective becomes narrowed and coarsened by the the dichotomising metaphysics. It is ultimately the same pretense of

\textsuperscript{39} Joyce, interestingly, not only escapes condemnation but receives praise for the orthodoxy of his sensibility. This is peculiar, since Joyce regarded himself as a heretic. Eliot might have admired Joyce and grasped something of his literary significance on a formal level, but there is little evidence in his critical writings that he was a perceptive reader of Joyce’s fiction. After Strange Gods, \textsuperscript{38, 41, 43, 54, 55, 48.}

\textsuperscript{60} After Strange Gods, \textsuperscript{38} [emphasis in original].

\textsuperscript{61} After Strange Gods, \textsuperscript{48}. 
historical far-sightedness and theological superiority that leads to his nasty remarks about free-thinking Jews that leads Eliot to condescension of a broader scale. His conclusion that ‘most people are only very little alive’ is an expression of spiritual snobbery that does him no credit whatsoever. I cannot agree with critics, such as Raine and Peter Dale Scott, who have suggested that Eliot’s cultural anxiety — his ‘doubt about the validity of a civilization,’ as Scott puts it — informs a social criticism that is offered as a ‘defense of liberalism as an attitude’ even though it presents itself as a ‘critique of it as an ideology.’ Eliot’s stated views are illiberal to their core; they are at their most consistent and comprehensive when they are negating socially liberal principles.

Though Eliot denies that he believes in Classicism, royalism and Anglo-Catholicism for the same reasons, there is a disingenuous aspect to his denial. In a characteristic piece of foxing, he immediately adds that ‘there are connections for me I of course admit, but these illuminate my own mind rather than the external world.’ And there is, rather obviously, a consistent principle that unites these three views. Each rejects, within its particular frame of reference — art, politics, metaphysics — the idea that individualism is a sufficient basis for any theory. Each confirms the fundamental Eliotian principle of personal submission to a higher authority; each sees meaning in structural terms. ‘I cannot accept any such theory,’ he wrote in response to the criticism of I.A. Richards, ‘which is erected upon purely individual-psychological foundations.’

Eliot’s adherence to this general principle predates his official conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, which merely gave an institutional form to a pre-existing tendency. He is absolutely consistent in his belief that it is necessary to give oneself over to an institution or tradition or concept that is larger than oneself, to

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61 After Strange Gods, 60.


63 After Strange Gods, 60.

have one's will subsumed. This is presented as a social, philosophical and artistic principle. In his early essay on "vers libre", Eliot proposes that the term itself is a misnomer because 'there is no freedom in art': verse draws its life from the tension between fixity and flux, such that 'freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.'

Three years later in *The Sacred Wood*, he observes: 'When we understand necessity, as Spinoza knew, we are free because we assent.'

In the early 1920s, this idea manifested itself in his advocacy of a version of Classicism as an alternative to what he regarded as the stale Romanticism informing much of the poetry and criticism of the time. In 'The Function of Criticism', published in 1923, he states that 'men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves.' His critical rival John Middleton Murry — who was prescient enough to predict Eliot's religious conversion four years before it happened, largely on the basis of Eliot's critical stance — had been arguing against Eliot's aesthetic views. He had proposed that Catholicism 'stands for the principle of unquestioned spiritual authority outside the individual' and that this 'is also the principle of Classicism in literature.' Eliot's response is revealing, both in its substance and in the manner in which he presents his case. Having stated that he disagrees with Murry's definitions of the contested concepts of Romanticism and Classicism, Eliot then makes a rather condescending show of accepting them for the sake of argument, adding the non-qualifying qualification that this is 'not all there is to be said about either Catholicism or Classicism.' Yet rather than seeking to develop a more nuanced or conciliatory understanding, Eliot proceeds to polarise the issue. He acknowledges complexity only to sweep it aside; he implies that Murry is guilty of *reductio ad absurdum*, only to indulge in the practice himself. The difference between his Classicism and Murry's liberal humanist allegiance to Romanticism is presented as a stark choice between 'the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and

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67 *The Sacred Wood*, 11.


69 *Selected Essays*, 26.
the chaotic'; what Murry allows us to see, according to Eliot, is that 'there are two attitudes toward everything, and that you cannot hold both.'\textsuperscript{70} Though their dispute is ostensibly about literature, Eliot extends the scope of his argument beyond literary questions, outlining a set of clear imperatives that he considers analogous: 'If, then, a man's interest is political, he must, I presume, profess an allegiance to principles, or to a form of government, or to a monarch; and if he is interested in religion, and has one, to a Church; and if he happens to be interested in literature, he must acknowledge, it seems to me, just that sort of allegiance which I endeavoured to put forth in the preceding section' — that is, his own notion of literary tradition.\textsuperscript{71}

There is a knowingly rhetorical quality to Eliot's absolute pronouncements. As Jason Harding has pointed out, the debate with Murry, which ran for several years in the pages of \textit{Criterion}, and Murry's rival publication \textit{Athenaeum}, is a compendium of Eliot's preferred debating tactics, including his 'penchant for imprisoning opponents within dichotomizing \textit{ad hominem} arguments,' and his adoption of a modulated tone that moves between condescension and 'an unsympathetic, at times sarcastic, reluctance to entertain his opponent's position seriously.'\textsuperscript{72} The tone of Eliot's later criticism is far less combative, but the habit of framing arguments in absolute terms never left him. In \textit{The Idea of a Christian Society}, we are presented with a choice between a Christian state or a pagan one; \textit{Notes toward the Definition of Culture} proposes that we have a culture grounded in religious tradition or we have nothing. 'If Christianity goes,' he argues, 'the whole of our culture goes.'\textsuperscript{73}

Eliot's rhetorical propensities do not necessarily distort his views. He often exaggerates or simplifies for effect; his manner is frequently arch. Edward Lobb has observed that Eliot's prose style

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Selected Essays}, 26.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Selected Essays}, 27.

\textsuperscript{72} Not to mention Eliot's fondness for the 'glancing insult' that, as George Watson observed, so often has him 'killing off his literary and theological enemies in a parenthesis.' Jason Harding, \textit{The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Inter-War Britain.} Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 4, 38; George Watson, \textit{The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism.} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964) 168.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Notes toward the Definition of Culture.}, 122.
'combines assertion and reticence to a remarkable degree ... the largest statements [are made] but the logic of the argument often remains elusive'; he proposes that Eliot regarded criticism as a branch of rhetoric rather than philosophy, and cites Hugh Kenner's suggestion that 'Eliot's characteristic donnish style originated in parody.' Yet Eliot also means what he says. His parodic demeanour and the theatrical quality of his absolute pronouncements are the masks that let him confess the truth of his opinions; his ironic manner grants him the freedom to be sincere. He does not merely regard his disagreement with Murry as a minor wrangle about aesthetics or a struggle for critical authority (which is also to say rhetorical authority), though he clearly understands it as both of these things. He sees the literary argument as an extension of his broad philosophical and political agenda. The hapless Murry represents everything he abhors: 'I have never found any writer,' he confessed to Fredric Manning, 'whose views were so antipathetic to me as Murry's.' The derision he aims at Murry's notion of the 'inner voice' evokes the mocking spirit of Matthew Arnold in the suggestion that the inner voice 'sounds remarkably like an old principle which has been formulated by an elder critic in the now familiar phrase “doing as one likes”'. The possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust. This voice, he argues, may for convenience be given a name: 'and the name I suggest is Whiggery.' So one can have Classicism, or one can have Romanticism, which also entails Whiggery and lusty football fans — take your pick. 

Eliot’s dislike of Romanticism is a manifestation of his philosophical rejection of individualism, which he associates more broadly with the concept of humanism. This is the basis of his reactive stance against modernity, his idealisation of the supposed order and philosophical coherence of the Middle Ages compared


75 *Letters*, vol.2, 394.

76 *Selected Essays*, 27.

77 *Selected Essays*, 29.
to the chaos of the modern world, his lack of faith in the ability of scientific and technological advances to improve the lot of humankind, and his distaste for all forms of democratic or progressive politics. In Eliot's lexicon, 'humanitarian' has negative connotations. Western civilisation he believes to be in a protracted state of decay; the cultural inferiority of the present moment is an article of faith. He understands this as a general cultural failure — culture being understood as an organic whole, the collective expression of a society's values and preoccupations. Such a conception of culture necessarily blurs the distinction between aesthetics and politics. Eliot, with an air of scrupulous integrity, often sought to maintain this distinction when addressing the work of specific writers, but when his criticism is moved to speak in general cultural terms the distinction collapses and his work displays a factitious causality. Attacking the atheist and socialist Bertrand Russell in the pages of Criterion, in 1924, for example, Eliot argued that 'the aristocracy of culture has has abdicated before the demagogy of science. ... Democracy appears whenever the governors of the people lose the conviction of their right to govern: the claims of the scientist are fortified by the cowardice of the men of letters.' This is, to put it bluntly, tendentious nonsense. There is no reason Eliot's claims that culture is aristocratic and science is demagogic should be granted automatic assent. The two baseless assertions in the second sentence — endorsing unrepresentative government and scientific ignorance, respectively — hardly gain authority by being presented as a non sequitur.

Like Arnold, Eliot habitually thinks in relative terms about his own historical moment; he associates what he sees as the indifferent health of the prevailing culture with the state of the political system and, in particular, the waning influence of religion in social life. The crucial difference is that Arnold's criticism tries to establish a conciliatory and ameliorative relationship with the forces of modernity, even though it remains wary of change, and this prevents it from being reflexively negative; Eliot, when he turns his attention to cultural questions, can only bring himself to view recent developments with dismay. Things are bad and they are only getting worse. As he observes in Notes toward the Definition of

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78 The Criterion., 2.233.
Culture: ‘We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity.’

Residents of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century had some good reasons to feel pessimistic about their civilisation, of course. Eliot’s confession in 1939 that political conditions had led to a ‘depression of spirits so different from any other experience of fifty years as to be a new emotion’ was clearly warranted under the circumstances. But as George Orwell pointed out in his 1948 review of Notes toward the Definition of Culture, there is little justification for the unequivocal manner in which Eliot makes his negative assessment. To accept such a comprehensive narrative of cultural decline it is necessary to define the ideal of civilisation in a way that discounts such material factors as living conditions, increased life expectancy, political enfranchisement and advances in scientific knowledge. Yet this is a clear implication of Eliot’s position. He places his ideal of cultural unity and order above these tangible achievements.

As a number of commentators have observed, Arnold’s shadow falls heavily across much of Eliot’s criticism. An oedipal struggle with Arnold’s critical legacy is particularly evident in the criticism Eliot wrote in the 1920s and early-1930s. The Sacred Wood and The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism both address Arnold’s ideas explicitly, while ‘The Function of Criticism’, though it does not mention Arnold by name, contains several unambiguous allusions to his work, the most obvious being the title.

Eliot was always careful to distance himself from Arnold, often referring to his predecessor in a tone of ironic condescension he learned from Arnold himself. Yet, as Adam Kirsch has argued, Eliot ‘takes over many of the intellectual concerns that were

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80 The Criterion., 18.274.


famously Arnold's. Both men complain that they live in an age unsuitable to poetry, that their culture is fragmented. Both look back longingly to a golden age (Arnold to Greece, Eliot to the Christian Middle Ages). Seen from a distance, Eliot looks very much like Arnold’s heir.  

This ambiguous relationship with his influential predecessor is one of the keys to Eliot’s criticism. Eliot is indeed Arnold’s critical heir, but he is not an ideological fellow traveller. He is an Arnoldian critic who strongly disagrees with the progressive elements of Arnold’s agenda. He is a philosophical opponent of secular humanism whose critical mode was bequeathed to him by an English tradition of liberal humanist literary criticism in which Arnold looms as a major figure. One of the defining features of Eliot’s critical project is its attempt to appropriate Arnold’s critical vocabulary and aura of authority, with a view to re-orienting it politically. This is one of the reasons why Eliot’s criticism can sometimes seem to be contradictory. Following Arnold, critics who have argued for a transcendent notion of literary value have generally had to keep two sets of books. They must account for literature’s groundedness, its connection to and effect on a social reality. At the same time, they must affirm an idea of an aesthetic autonomy that is not merely a function of social or historical conditions. Eliot develops his own version of the common critical practice of having two separate courts of rhetorical appeal, to which he may refer at his own discretion. One of his primary techniques for asserting the autonomy of poetry is to reject the idea, commonly associated with Arnold, that poetry has a social, moral or political function, that it might act as an adequate substitute for religion. But Eliot also accepts the Arnoldian view that developments in poetic sensibility are a reflection of their historical and cultural origins, and often makes generalised assertions on this basis. His famous concept of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ is an example of this historicising tendency. His argument that something happened in the seventeenth century to divorce thought from feeling links developments in poetic techniques to their specific cultural moment. The claim that the change can be attributed in large part to the baleful influence of Milton and Dryden implies that formal developments in literature

81 Kirsch, 67.
reflect deeper changes in understanding; while the vague suggestion that it ‘also had something to do with the Civil War’ implicates wider political developments.84 Just as his definition of tradition and his notion of Classicism — which he defines as ‘a moment of stasis, when the creative impulse finds a form which satisfies the best intellect of the time, a moment when a type is produced’85 — seek to reconcile the flux of temporality with the idea of an eternal order, Eliot’s dissociation of sensibility historicises in the name of an overarching historical understanding. It implies a view that looks beyond the limitations of the present. The possibility of a disinterested gaze is suggested in the inherent duality of the understanding, the ability to inhabit and accept the tension between the two conflicting views.

The essentially Arnoldian origins of this internal conflict between a critical understanding of literature that is at once historical and ahistorical, political and apolitical, are enshrined in Eliot’s high-minded but ambiguous conception of Criterion’s mission. Eliot argued that a literary review ‘must protect its disinterestedness, must avoid the temptation to appeal to any social, political or theological prejudices.’86 He regarded Criterion as an exclusive publication, and was indeed successful in keeping its circulation below 1000 for much of its seventeen year existence. His intention was to be international in outlook and to publish a wide variety of writing by the best writers. Potential contributors were wooed with the argument that ‘Criterion does not aim at a very large circulation, but aims solely at publishing the highest class of work.’87 Yet Eliot also saw Criterion as a political vehicle, albeit of an unusual and reified kind. The word he frequently uses in his commentaries to describe the journal’s editorial position is ‘tendency’. He recommended the journal to Charles Maurras with the argument that its body of opinion was closely aligned with that of l’Action Française, adding the qualification:

84 Eliot later clarified this assertion, not especially helpfully, by explaining that it is ‘unwise to say it was caused by the Civil War, but that is is a consequence of the same causes that brought about the Civil War.’ Selected Essays, 288; Selected Prose, 132.

85 The Criterion, 2.232.

86 The Criterion, 4.4.

The Criterion n'est pas une revue de caractère directement politique. Nous ne nous occupons point des activités politiques. Nous nous abstenons complètement du jeu futile des partis; nous ne sommes partisans d'aucun gouvernement. Nous ne parlons pas politique. Nous ne nous présentons pas aux scrutins. Nous sommes simplement en train de labourer une philosophie générale d'ou découlera une influence lente dans la politique, la théologie et la littérature. The Criterion est d'aveu simplement une revue littéraire.

[The Criterion is not a review of a directly political character. We do not deal with political activity. We stand completely aloof from the futile games of the parties; we do not lend support to any government. We do not discuss politics. We do not seek elected representation. We are solely engaged in working out a general philosophy which will exert a gradual influence on politics, theology and literature. The Criterion presents itself solely as a literary review.]

Its political agenda was to be general, indirect and overarching. It sought to ‘create a favourable atmosphere,’ to be ‘independent of party politics,’ yet ‘leagued with an ideal rather than with the actual Tory party’; it was to be ‘a Conservative review founded rather on Aristotle than on the views of Viscount Younger.’ And the problem of negotiating this dualism, this awkward attempt to be at once political and apolitical, proved to be definitive. In the late-1940s, reflecting on the legacy of Criterion, Eliot continued to describe its aims in phrases that closely resemble some of Arnold’s best-known critical formulas. The journal sought to maintain ‘the highest standards both of thought and expression’; it delighted in ‘the free play of the intellect.’ Yet, as Eliot conceded in one of his characteristically disarming moments of candour, this disinterested ideal was difficult to sustain in practice: ‘I think that in the later years it tended to reflect a particular point of view.’

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90 Notes toward the Definition of Culture, 117, 118.
91 Notes toward the Definition of Culture, 118.
‘I think probably my best critical essays,’ Eliot observed in an interview, ‘are essays on the poets who had influenced me, so to speak, long before I thought of writing essays about them. They’re of more value, probably, than any of my more generalized remarks.’92

The self-assessment is astute. Early in his career, Eliot wrote almost exclusively about poetry and drama; he argued for the integrity of literature and, with the example of Arnold uppermost in his mind, the independence of literary criticism. The literary critic, he argued, should resist the temptation to involve himself in social and political issues. Against his own advice, his subsequent criticism busied itself with the question of ‘the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times.’93 He was, despite himself, drawn back into Arnold’s realm of cultural politics. Though he continued to assert that the critic’s ideological preferences should not cloud his literary judgement, these were always somewhat clouded in his work and they became ever more noticeably clouded as he grew older. Eliot was largely successful in arrogating Arnold’s critical authority, but the compulsion to argue in Arnoldian terms was ultimately to his own disadvantage. Over the course of his career, the inherent contradictions and the ideological vagueness of the critic’s cultural position, which Eliot inherited from Arnold, became increasingly difficult to reconcile with his absolutist tendencies. It has been one of the arguments of this essay that there is a deep underlying continuity between Eliot’s literary and cultural criticism, between his pre- and post-conversion writings. Yet it is also the case that his most effective and influential critical writing was the product of the first part of his career. ‘Few of those who admire Eliot,’ observes Peter Dale Scott, ‘have done so for his social and political criticism.’94

The comparative failure of Eliot’s later writings can be attributed, in part, to their generalised aspect. His early literary criticism, though not wanting for comprehensive assertions, is often closely engaged with the work of specific poets. Eliot could

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93 *The Sacred Wood*, viii.

94 Scott, 60.
be unfairly dismissive of writers who offended his sensibility, but he was an erudite, appreciative and, most of all, attentive reader of works that were of particular interest to him. The idea that the critic should not simply isolate lines of poetry so that we might join with him in admiring or deploiring them, but that he should analyse them with the forensic eye of a poet who has a natural interest in understanding, with a degree of technical specificity, how they make use of images, symbols and metaphors, how they unite sound and sense — that is, the notion of close reading that the New Critics went on to develop in the 1940s and 50s — really begins with Eliot.

This focussed, tangible quality gives his early criticism its credibility. His argument that according to his theory of depersonalisation ‘art may be said to approach the condition of science’ conflates the critical and the creative act by implying that both involve systematic attempts to address the problem of evoking emotion, and that both are to be undertaken by similarly precise means. The striking originality of Eliot’s poetry and his early criticism are complementary features of the same literary project: each explains and validates the other. His 1921 essay ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ is a brilliant piece of revisionist criticism, not because its claim about the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ that supposedly came to afflict European civilisation in the mid-seventeenth century is original or even historically credible (in fact, the idea is highly questionable), but because Eliot uses the poets in question to explain what he regards as the pressing artistic problems of his own time. That is, he looks to the metaphysical poets with a view to illuminating, and in an important sense solving, the modernist crisis of meaning and expression.

Eliot is a quintessentially modernist artist in the sense that his poetry describes a world that is fragmented, disoriented and incoherent; he experiences the crisis of civilisation as a crisis of form. His work expresses a debilitating awareness that received modes of artistic expression have been hollowed out, that their expressive potential has been destroyed. This disenchantment extends to language itself. ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’

Selected Essays, 17.
despairs J. Alfred Prufrock, the protagonist of Eliot’s first major poem. More than two decades later, in *East Coker*, Eliot writes:

> So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres* —
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
> Undisciplined squads of emotion.

The poet, enclosed by war, is engaged in his own form of warfare — a guerilla war that he realises is both imperative and futile. He must start from nothing, inventing new forms of expression, all the while knowing that his raids on the inarticulate can only fail, for the very substance of his attempts to articulate his emotions, his words — his ‘shabby equipment’ — betrays those attempts. As words are mastered, their imagined significance evaporates, any connection with the poet’s intentions disappears. In a terrible paradox, the fixity of form appears to destroy the possibility of content. Here, as elsewhere in Eliot’s writings, the imprecision of words is linked to the elusiveness of the poet’s emotional state. These exist in a dependent, yet mutually corrosive relationship: the necessary attempt to unite words and feelings merely reinforces their disconnection. This is the problem faced by the modernist poet, who encounters a world of unprecedented complexity, a world whose confusions manifest themselves in his inchoate emotions. Much of the formal radicalism of Eliot’s poetry — its recourse to fragmentation and pastiche, its multiple voices, its deliberate opacity of meaning — is an attempt to overcome this problem: it is not an attempt to destroy meaning, but to locate meaning in a context in which meaningfulness has come to seem impossible.

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It is with these assumptions in mind that Eliot reinterprets the metaphysical poets, whom he claims experienced no disconnect between thought and feeling. ‘A thought to Donne was an experience,’ he argues; ‘it modified his sensibility.'\(^9^8\) Such a claim is, on one level, vague and general enough to defy refutation, even though this same vagueness tends, on another level, to undercut the specific argument Eliot is making. One could make much the same observation about Wordsworth or Keats, for example. Yet the success of Eliot’s revisionist reading is that it offers itself at once as an interpretation of the past, an explanation of the present, and a manifesto for the future. The crisis of Modernism, he suggests, is part of a deeper philosophical crisis of modernity itself. The concept of the dissociation of sensibility connects the imperatives of Modernist poetics to the historical condition. Eliot, in effect, invents a lapsarian myth whose cogency is less a function of its basis in historical fact than its apparent ability to account for subsequent poetic developments, leading up to the aesthetic problems of the present moment. In harking back to the work of prelapsarian poets — poets who are presumed to be untainted by the modern disease that disconnects thought from feeling — Eliot is able to overturn the common wisdom while affirming his own aesthetic project. Following Samuel Johnson’s definitive critique in his *Life of Cowley*, the conventional view of the metaphysical poets had been to regard their characteristic quality — their frequent recourse to elaborate poetic conceits — as problematic. In their poetry, Johnson observed, ‘heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions.’\(^9^9\) For Johnson, this was a flaw. It dissipated the affective power of their poetry in perverse displays of erudition and hyperbole. Eliot brilliantly inverts Johnson’s assumptions, proposing that the very thing that Johnson regards as wilful and singular about the techniques of the metaphysical poets is, in fact, an essential element in all poetic technique. He argues that ‘a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind is omnipresent in poetry.’\(^1^0^0\) —

\(^9^8\) *Selected Essays*, 287.


\(^1^0^0\) *Selected Essays*, 283.
including Johnson’s own. Johnson criticised the metaphysical poets for being overly analytical, using a scientific analogy to suggest the sterility of their approach: ‘they broke every image into fragments: and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he, who dissects a sun-beam with a prism, can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon.’

Eliot, however, allows the erudition of their poetry on the grounds of the analytical, intellectual aspect of their verse is conflated with their sensuous apprehension of the world. The metaphysical poets are thus presented as an illustrative counter-example to nineteenth century poets, such as Tennyson and Browning, whom Eliot regards as merely ‘reflective’ and not intellectual in this integrated manner. Furthermore, on a purely formal level, their unusual techniques are a glimmer of light. Modern poets should strive to become more like them, not less. The metaphysical poets suggest a way forward, a way for the modern poet to batter and break his verse in such a way that thought and feeling might be reunited and meaning might re-emerge:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

When Eliot writes as an iconoclastic modernist critic, his negations are balanced by a positive critical agenda. In his early literary criticism, he is reacting against the cultural history of the recent past, but he is also proposing a theory of literary creation and meaning. Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality, his Classicism, the resistance to modernity that made him a formally daring literary modernist — these involve a fruitful tension between creation and destruction, between positive and negative critical impulses. This tension disappears when Eliot shifts his attention to social and

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101 Johnson, 1.15-16.

102 Selected Essays, 289 [emphasis in original].
political criticism. Yet to grasp Eliot’s criticism it is necessary to see it clearly and see it whole. The same critical proclivities, the same habits of thought, that make him an effective and influential literary critic make him an ineffectual cultural critic. His stance can sometimes seem elusive, but this elusiveness is less the product of his ironic evasions and love of hair-splitting than it is the result of a desire for transcendence that flows from a sense of cultural pessimism that assumes a perspective so wide it becomes unworldly. Eliot’s ultra-conservative, reactionary stance is as radical as he claimed — so radical, in fact, that it is politically inconsequential. There is a palpability to the idea of the individual artist’s struggle to find an appropriate means of expression, a struggle in which the desire to transcend the limitations of subjectivity assumes a formal aspect and involves a tangible engagement with the cultural legacy of the past. This evaporates when the desire for transcendence is transposed into a comprehensive rejection of the cultural and historical legacy of modern Europe, where it can only manifest itself in empty gestures and sour negation. *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* is ultimately an incoherent book. As Raymond Williams remarks, much of what it offers in the guise of an argument is little more than ‘the growling innuendo of the correspondence columns.’

103 Its confusions are, in a sense, Arnold’s revenge on Eliot. It takes up the challenge of Arnold’s ‘culture’ only to succumb to its internal contradictions more comprehensively than Arnold himself. Because Eliot tends to think absolutely, he cannot negotiate the distinction he tries to make between the anthropological and exclusive implications of the term. He defines culture in anthropological terms as the collective expression of a people’s way of life; he argues that religion is the source of all culture, that culture cannot exist without its basis in religion. As a result, he is unable to account for the secularised culture that is all around him, unable even to acknowledge its validity.

Eliot claimed to be interested in political ideas rather than politics.104 And it is this allegiance to an abstract ideal of purity that ultimately renders his politics inconsequential, impotent,

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104 *Criterion*, 8.281.
purely gestural. All he is capable of doing is deploring those who sit outside his supra-historical religious ideology, those whose very existence is an affront to his ideal of an orderly monoculture: secular humanists, free-thinking Jews, socialists, liberals, communists, Unitarians, atheists, John Middleton Murry, democrats, fascists, Bertrand Russell, temperate conservatives, football fans. Eliot’s cultural criticism cannot bear too much reality.
5

‘I do like the West and wish it would stop declining’

Lionel Trilling (1905-1975)

No discussion of Lionel Trilling can avoid the vexed term liberal. It is a word that evokes much of his criticism’s variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty. For Trilling, writing at the midpoint of the twentieth century, it had come to signify the mainstream of political thought. ‘In the United States at this time,’ he announces in the preface to his best-known book The Liberal Imagination, ‘liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.’

His own measured stance in the face of this dominance was to be critical but not hostile. He was a liberal, but considered it his duty to interrogate the moral and intellectual assumptions of the concept, to challenge its complacencies, arguing that ‘a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism might find its most useful work not in confirming liberalism in its sense of general


rightness but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time.3

This disinterested stance was, in certain respects, influenced by the example of Matthew Arnold, about whom Trilling wrote a definitive critical biography, but its basic orientation had been articulated seven years earlier in Trilling’s admiring study of E.M. Forster, published in 1943, in which he first used the phrase ‘the liberal imagination.’ Forster, he argued, ‘stands in particular relation to what, for want of a better word, we may call the liberal tradition, that loose body of middle class opinion which includes such ideas as progress, collectivism and humanitarianism.’ Though Forster is committed to these broadly liberal notions and his novels are tendentious in their support, his comic manner is nevertheless ‘deeply at odds with the liberal mind;’ indeed, he is ‘at war with the liberal imagination.’ This is to Forster’s credit, suggests Trilling, because ‘if liberalism has a single weakness, it is an inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being surprised. There is always then liberal work to do over again because disillusionment and fatigue follow hard on surprise, and reaction never hopes, desairs or suffers amazement. Liberalism likes to suggest its affinity with science, pragmatism and the method of hypothesis, but in actual conduct it requires “ideals” and absolutes.’4

Trilling’s diagnosis of liberalism’s paradoxical nature suggests something of the dialectical tension that animates his writing, a tension implicit in his juxtaposition of the terms liberal and imagination. For Trilling, the crux of liberalism, understood broadly as a social and political tendency rather than a body of doctrine, lies with the moral and psychological questions it raises. His assertion, as surprising as it is sweeping, about the absence of any other intellectual tradition — his claim that there are no conservative or reactionary ideas — is comprehensible only if one takes into account that he is using the word idea in an unusual and very specific sense.

3 The Liberal Imagination, x.


5 E.M. Forster, 13-4.
An idea is, in the first instance, distinct from ideology, which is ‘not the product of thought,’ but the ‘habit or ritual of showing respect for certain formulas to which, for various reasons to do with emotional safety, we have strong ties of whose meanings and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding.’ A reactionary stance is ideological because it is habitual or instinctive: it responds to circumstances in an emotional rather than a rational way. The promise the liberal view makes to itself is to remain rational and open-minded, to be self-critical and non-ideological, although it too is capable of deteriorating into mere ideology. The potential of liberalism can thus be sustained but never conclusively realised. To be true to itself it must take into account its inbuilt contradiction, involve itself in an intricate process of negotiation between the contradictory demands of reality and idealism, rationality and sentiment. The broad principles of democratic liberalism, as set out in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill, have their roots in the rationalist doctrine of utilitarianism, but as Trilling points out they have at their core, as their very object, an elusive emotional state — happiness. The significance of this point for Trilling is that it implicates the entirety of an individual’s psychological being in political questions. The focal point of the moral life comes to be the rational understanding of the complex yet tangible interaction between the self’s emotional existence and the limiting pressures of the encompassing social context.

It is in this sense that The Liberal Imagination proposes an intimate, if not always obvious, connection between literature and politics. In the book’s final essay, ‘The Meaning of a Literary Idea’, Trilling observes that there is an obvious and elementary way in which literature is concerned with ideas: ‘it deals with man in society, which is to say it deals with formulations, valuations, and decisions, some of them implicit, others explicit.’ He goes on to offer a definition of idea that is, he proposes, ‘scarcely less elementary’: whenever we put two emotions into juxtaposition we have what we can properly call an idea. When Keats brings together, as he often does, his emotions about love and his

6 The Liberal Imagination., 286.
7 The Liberal Imagination., xii.
8 The Liberal Imagination., 282.
emotions about death, we have a powerful idea and the source of consequent ideas.

Far from being elementary, Trilling’s definition is unusual. It is explicitly at odds with the familiar sense of an idea as an abstract concept or notion; nor does it quite accord with the Platonic understanding of an idea as a metaphysical essence. One of the original meanings of idea, Trilling reminds us, is form. Thus ‘the very form of a literary work, considered apart from its content, so far as that is possible, is itself an idea.’ Because the work unfolds via a series of statements, developing through dramatic stages whose meanings interact with one another to create a more complex meaning, the very nature of that form — the literary idea — is dynamic and evocative, both emotionally and intellectually. It dramatises the interaction between desire and reality, the inherent complexity of human psychology and emotions. The various responses it generates, its intellectual and affective properties, are not divorced from each other. A significant part of what we call aesthetic effect, Trilling argues, is attributable to the intellectual cogency that gives literature its moral dimension. Literature does not, as the saying goes, ‘have’ a moral; it is not moralistic. But it compels us to consider that ideas can ‘be generated in the opposition of ideals, and in the felt awareness of the impact of new circumstances upon old forms of feeling and estimation, in the response to the conflict between new exigencies and old pieties. And it will be said that a work will have what I have been calling cogency in the degree that the old pieties are firmly held and the new exigencies strongly apprehended.’ It is literature, in other words, that has the capacity to draw us back to the uncertainty of our most basic assumptions; it is literature that addresses the psychological fact articulated by William Wordsworth that ‘our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.’

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9 The Liberal Imagination., 283.

10 The Liberal Imagination., 283.

11 The Liberal Imagination., 298.

This is one of the most significant ways in which Trilling’s thought runs against the grain of the prevailing critical assumptions of his day: his understanding is grounded in a sympathetic interpretation of Romanticism.\(^{13}\) By the middle of the twentieth century, the popular image of the Romantic poets as effete, sentimental and dreamily ineffectual was well-established. Wordsworth’s assertion that ‘all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ was taken as evidence that the Romantics regarded poetry as a form of self-expression that was emotive rather than intellectual. This caricature had its origins in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Arnold, himself a late-blooming flower of English Romanticism, distanced himself by portraying Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth as gifted poets whose verse was rich in sentiment but deficient in ideas. Oscar Wilde was more succinct: all bad poetry, he said, is sincere. Much of the criticism of the first half of the twentieth century sought to make the break with Romanticism decisive. T.S. Eliot’s influential anti-Romantic stance stressed the objectivity and depersonalisation of poetic expression, while rejecting the notion that literature should be understood as having any direct bearing on moral and political questions. These views were, in important respects, harmonious with the New Criticism that flourished in the middle decades of the century and which, particularly in the Southern Agrarian form it took in the United States, was wedded to a deep social conservatism. One of its central tenets was that the literary work should be considered autonomous, that it should be interpreted independently of the complicating factors of authorial intention and socio-political context. To the New Critics, a ‘literary idea’ was an oxymoron.

Trilling would have none of this. Many prominent literary critics, he wrote, ‘prefer to forget the ground which is common to both emotion and thought; they presume ideas to be only the product of formal systems of philosophy, not remembering, at least on the occasion of their argument, that poets too have their effect in the world of thought.’\(^{14}\) He read the Romantic poets — Wordsworth and Keats, specifically — as advocates of an enlarging

\(^{13}\) For an consideration of Trilling’s critical interest in Romanticism and its relation to his political views, see: Tracy Ware, ‘Lionel Trilling and the End of Romanticism,’ Studies in Romanticism., vol.43, iss.3 (Fall 2004) 461-477.

\(^{14}\) The Liberal Imagination., 287.
form of apprehension that contradicted Eliot’s influential yet
dubious assertion that modern poetry, since about the seventeenth
century, was characterised by a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ that had
alienated thought from feeling. The currency of Wordsworth’s
definition of poetry, he pointed out, encouraged a distorted view of
his real meaning. Indeed, the contentious sentence reads in full:
‘For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful
feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be
attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a
man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility
had also thought long and deeply.’ Wordsworth located what he called
‘the naked and native dignity of man’ in this confluence of thought
and feeling, but, more importantly for Trilling, he saw the moral
essence of humanity in the ‘interplay between individualism and
the sense of community, between an awareness of the self that
must be saved and developed, and an awareness that the self is yet
fulfilled only in community.’ The ideal of contemplative
awareness that Wordsworth develops in his poetry resists what
Trilling saw as the predominant cultural tendency to overrate the
importance of action, force and negation. Arnold said of
Wordsworth that he taught us how to feel; for Trilling, however,
the significance of Wordsworth is that he ‘undertook to teach us
how to be.’ Furthermore, in grounding his understanding in the
perceptiveness and responsiveness of the individual, he implicitly
posits the dignity of the self as a fundamental political unit. In
suggesting an affinity on this point with the assertive American
individualism of Walt Whitman, Trilling elides the actual trajectory
of Wordsworth’s politics, but reaches for the broader principle.
Both poets, he suggests, regard this grounding as elementary and
irreducible. It is, as Whitman puts it, the ‘hardest basic fact’ —
and one he explicitly presents as ‘a political fact, as the basis, and
the criterion, of democracy.’

The significance of Trilling’s estimation of the Romantic
sensibility is drawn out in one of his greatest essays, The Poet as

15 Wordsworth, 27 [emphasis added].
17 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 192.
18 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 192.
**Hero: Keats in His Letters.** Keats, he proposes, ‘was nothing if not a man of ideas.’ Poetry was for Keats more than a mode of expression; it was a mode of existence. It was his ‘chosen way of being a man.’ The overt sensuality of Keats’s poems and letters — his receptiveness to pleasure, his frequent recourse to the imagery of ingestion — is significant for Trilling because it suggests that apprehension and intellection are not distinct, but are united in the poet’s heightened sense of reality. This conflation of the intellect with sensual perception is distilled in Keats’s remarkable phrase ‘the palate of my mind’ and in the concluding lines of *Ode on Melancholy,* in which the act of bursting a grape against his palate symbolises the poet’s intense awareness of life’s joys and sorrows. The essence of this Romantic, poetic understanding is not to be found in its languid passivity. ‘Impassioned poetry,’ Hazlitt argued, ‘is an emanation of the moral and intellectual part of our nature, as well as of the sensitive — of the desire to know, the will to act, and the power to feel.’ And Trilling locates the essence of Keats’s poetic achievement in just such a synthesis of thought and feeling, passive reflection and passionate engagement. It is with this complex state of being in mind that he characterises Keats’s thought as Platonic, while locating its basic validity in the fact that it manifests itself as a kind of thwarted Platonism that is not doctrinal or systematic. The potency of Keats’s vision lies in the way that it strives toward idealism without ever abandoning its tangible quality: ‘his characteristic mode of thought all through his life [was] to begin with sense and to move thence to what he calls “abstraction”, but never to leave sense behind. Sense cannot be left behind, for of itself it generates the idea and remains continuous with it...’ Against the popular view of Keats as an anti-intellectual voluptuary, Trilling argues that Keats’s understanding was that ‘mind came into being when the sensations and emotions were checked by external resistance or by conflict with each other, when, to use the language of Freud, the pleasure principle is

19 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 225.

20 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 225.


22 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 232 [emphasis added].
confronted by the reality principle.23 One of the things that made the poet extraordinary was the acuity with which he registered this elementary conflict. In Keats, a robust capacity for pleasure, an instinctive physicality, and a natural sociability of character confronted the strong sense of detachment and the knowledge of death that his illness forced upon him. Through his awareness of this elementary conflict, he was able to grasp the precarious and essentially unresolvable nature of the human condition.

Trilling’s interpretation of Keats is arguing on two fronts. It is, on one level, a rejection of a reactionary interpretation of modernity of the kind that Eliot develops in his essay on Charles Baudelaire, which celebrates the French poet as ‘the first counter-romantic in poetry.’24 This point is significant for Eliot because it allows him to define Baudelaire as both modern and counter-revolutionary. He argues that the innovation of Baudelaire’s poetry derives from the fact that in his work he was ‘searching for a form of life,’ but found the means at his disposal — the styles, moods and images he inherited from earlier Romantic poets — to be inadequate for his purpose. Thus in Baudelaire’s poems ‘the content of feeling is constantly bursting the receptacle.’25 Coupled to this formal radicalism, which anticipates the aesthetic upheavals of early-twentieth century Modernism, Eliot sees a reactionary purpose. The fascination with diabolism in Baudelaire he interprets as a revolt against the moral shallowness and degradation of modernity. It rejects the ‘bustle, programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism and revolutions which improved nothing,’ preferring to confront ‘the real problem of good and evil.’26 In its acceptance of the absolute nature of the metaphysical opposition, Baudelaire’s embrace of evil affirms a spiritual truth that the Anglo-Catholic Eliot believes is obscured and denied by modern secularism.

Trilling outflanks Eliot’s anti-Romantic, anti-modern, anti-liberal position by insisting that Keats’s theory of art ‘is, among

23 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent., 245.
25 Eliot, 424.
26 Eliot, 427.
other things, an effort to deal with the problem of evil.\textsuperscript{27} In making this argument, he means to refute Eliot’s assertions about the inadequacy of Romanticism’s psychological foundations. But he also means to address, and in a sense accommodate, a crucial aspect of Eliot’s conservative critique of modernity. Trilling made clear in a 1940 essay on Eliot that he disagreed with his subject’s theological and political conclusions, yet he argued that they highlighted the tendency for secular liberalism to place a naive faith in progress, rationality and human perfectibility. The dark stains of pessimism and violent negation Trilling encountered in Modernist literature spoke to him of the limitations of such optimism. He had learned from Arnold that ideas were the drivers of change in the modern, secular, democratic era ushered in by the French Revolution. But this positive empowering of the intellect, with all the freedom and responsibility it bestows, also has the negative potential to diminish moral possibility. The temptation inherent in political idealism is to underestimate human imperfectibility, to deny the full complexity of individual experience in the name of larger goals; in emphasising the transformative potential of social and political change, idealism paradoxically undermines the possibility of human agency by treating individuals as functions of their determining contexts. The individual is rendered subordinate to impersonal cultural forces and can thus be regarded as an unimportant part of an encompassing scheme for the greater good of humanity, a mere cog in the machine of historical change. Anxiety about the dehumanising effects of materialism and rationalism is, of course, as much a part of modernity as the onward march of materialism and rationalism themselves, and it is on these grounds that Trilling, somewhat cheekily, places the anti-Romantic Eliot in a line of ‘romantic’ thinkers who have resisted what they saw as the mechanistic implications of modern thought. For Eliot, sterility and meaninglessness are the inevitable consequences of secularism. His submission to religious dogma is a conscious choice, an intellectual stance rather than a form of emotional identification, and his conservatism devolves into mere reaction because its essence is negation: it refuses to accept the validity of the overall political and philosophical direction of the modern world and

\textsuperscript{27} The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 248.
denies the possibility of any redeeming qualities. Trilling’s concern, however, is not to repudiate modernity but to disentangle idea from ideology, to establish that the modern tendency to confuse them is not inevitable or absolute. In reaching back to the Romanticism of Keats and Wordsworth, he looks to the historical moment when the progressive ideals of Enlightenment rationalism began to exercise a decisive influence on political and social life, but draws on the philosophical revolution that sought to confront and humanise the Enlightenment’s mechanistic tendencies. He finds in Keats an example of the individual consciousness successfully acting as a mediating force: a mind capable of resisting the reflexive gestures of reaction.

Eliot contends that ‘in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them.’ Trilling agrees, but declines to accept Eliot’s religious solution to the problem of modern despair, such a solution being itself a form of evasion. For Trilling, the importance of Keats is precisely that he does not surrender to the absolutism of Eliot’s metaphysics. He refuses to embrace dogma and the inhumanity of transcendence. Keats sees the darkness at the core of human existence but does not succumb to despair or nihilism. He affirms ‘the creativity of the self that opposes circumstances, the self that is imagination and desire’; yet he ‘never deceives himself into believing that the power of imagination is sovereign, that it can make the power of circumstance of no account. His sense of the stubborn actuality of the material world is as stalwart as Wordsworth’s.’ In this lies the often overlooked significance of Keats’s aestheticism. The assertion that beauty is truth, which is simply false if taken at face value, is an expression of his heroic attempt to assimilate reality to his idealism. The word beauty, Trilling argues, ‘was not a word by which he evaded, but a word by which he confronted issues.’ Keats is proposing that when a great poet looks at life he ‘sees the terrible truth of its evil, but sees it so intensely that it becomes an element of the beauty which is created by his act of perception’; the substance of tragedy,

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28 Eliot, 428.

29 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent., 252.
exemplified in *King Lear*’s dramatisation of the fierce dispute betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay, is ‘ugly or painful truth seen as beauty. To see life this way, Keats believes, is to see life truly: that is, as it must be seen if we are to live it.\(^{30}\)

It is this refusal to look away that Trilling sees as the key to disentangling *idea* from *ideology*. The essence of the liberal attitude — at least, as it should strive to realise itself — he locates in Keats’s ‘urge toward the dialectical view of any large question,’ his ‘refusal to be fixed in any final judgement’\(^{31}\) Trilling praises Forster in similar terms, seeing him as someone who ‘refuses to be conclusive. No sooner does he come to a conclusion than he must unravel it again.’\(^{32}\) For Trilling, such a stance is less a state of permanent equivocation than a necessary recognition of life’s inherent moral complexity. It is a mode of understanding that is enacted in literature and that, in turn, implies an approach to literature, which inevitably addresses itself to human problems — that is, to moral and political questions — that are, by their nature, resistant to formulaic solutions. The imagination that grants priority to its faculties of comprehension ahead of its faculties of idealisation acts as a check against the human tendency to allow one’s dissatisfaction with the world to slide into intellectual simplifications. As he argues in *E.M. Forster*, the complacent liberal attitude expects the world to validate its moral categories, to be neatly divisible into good and evil; it recoils when it encounters moral ambiguity, refusing to see the intermingling of good-and-evil that exists in reality.\(^{33}\) But the liberal imagination, properly understood, resists ideology by attending to the emotional conflict that is generated in the confrontation between one’s desires and reality, and by providing a venue in which the impulses of radical optimism and reactionary pessimism can be mediated. It is in this light, he argues, that Keats’s most famous concept is to be interpreted: ‘In an ideological age such as ours, the faculty of Negative Capability is a rare one, and Keats’s naming and defining it attracts a good deal of praise or blame. It is often misunderstood. Thus, it is sometimes taken to mean that poetry

\(^{30}\) *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 249.

\(^{31}\) *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 245.

\(^{32}\) *E.M. Forster*, 16.

\(^{33}\) *E.M. Forster*, 14.
should have no traffic with ideas, and that the creative writer is exempt from the judgement of intellectual validity. This is not in the least Keats’s intention. Keats thinks of Negative Capability as, precisely, an element of intellectual power.34

Lionel Trilling was born in 1905, three years after Karl Popper, two years after George Orwell, and four years before Isaiah Berlin. He belongs to a generation that in its first four decades witnessed two World Wars and the Great Depression. As a young man he surveyed a political landscape dominated by the rise of two totalitarian ideologies, communism and fascism.

Trilling’s fame and influence was a post-war phenomenon, but his thinking was grounded in the ideological battles of the first half of the twentieth century. Though never a party member, he was a communist sympathiser for a period in the late-1920s and early-1930s. Early in his career, he became a regular contributor to the Partisan Review, which was established in 1934 as a pro-communist publication, but soon evolved into a journal of the anti-Stalinist left. Under the editorship of the Marxist critics William Phillips and Philip Rahv, it became a focal point for a loose association of writers, thinkers and disaffected radicals later to become known as the New York Intellectuals.

As the cultural historian Harvey Teres has argued, the project of the Partisan Review from the late 1930s until 1945 ‘is best understood as a radical appropriation of modernism for the purpose of renewing the American left.’35 Its contributors attacked what they regarded as the narrow and doctrinaire views about art that were de rigueur among communist fellow travellers. They argued that modern literature was unresponsive to such political subordination, interpreting the complex understanding of human experience they found there as a challenge to some of the left’s most cherished assumptions. ‘More than anyone else,’ observes Teres, ‘Lionel Trilling established the themes to which the Partisan Review critics returned again and again: the liberal-radical culture’s false optimism; its blind faith in progress; its mechanical materialism; its diminishment of self, consciousness, and human

34 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 246.

agency; its impatience with moral and spiritual experience; its anti-intellectualism.\footnote{Teres, 99.}

Nowhere in *The Liberal Imagination* does Trilling mention Stalinism. Yet its cultural influence is central to the book’s concerns. The word liberal, loose enough in its everyday usage, becomes even more elastic in Trilling’s hands. For when he criticises ‘liberal’ opinion he means to include a broader spectrum of political opinion than the term commonly denotes. This explains the somewhat incongruous inclusion of ‘collectivism’ in his list of middle-class liberal opinions in *E.M. Forster*. He made the point explicitly, more than two decades after the publication of *The Liberal Imagination*, when he reflected that what the book had to say was not, in itself, remarkable. Whatever importance it may have had was due to the fact that he was arguing within a particular historical and political context, with the intention of challenging the ‘commitment that a large section of the intelligentsia of the West gave to the degraded version of Marxism known as Stalinism.\footnote{The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent., 510.}

In making the anti-Stalinist thrust of his argument implicit rather than explicit Trilling sought to prevent his polemical purpose from narrowing the scope of his criticism. His essays, in this sense, exemplify what he sees as the genuinely liberal approach. They are a form of civilised discourse that allows necessary qualifications to be made, reservations to be stated, and nuances to be drawn out. Trilling prefers a level-headed undermining of an opponent’s argument to a direct rhetorical assault. Rejecting a metaphor favoured by Matthew Arnold, he took the Marxian view that ‘culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate — it is nothing if not a dialectic.’\footnote{The Liberal Imagination., 9.} But his understanding of this dialectic, as it is reflected in his critical method, is not necessarily progressive, or deterministic, or even combative. It describes a cultivated awareness of the way in which conflicting ideas, and one’s conflicting personal responses to those ideas, interact with each other. It is an awareness of the way in which opposed intellectual and emotional forces not only resist and define each
other, but reveal, by virtue of the conflict itself, a truer understanding of the reality of our ambiguous moral condition. Trilling’s measured style certainly does not enact the physicality of his own metaphor. The cautious softening of ‘struggle’ into ‘at least debate’ is characteristic of his urbane manner.

Jacques Barzun, paying tribute to his late colleague, wrote of Trilling that ‘he has lately been dubbed a disciple of Matthew Arnold because he wrote a classic book on the subject, but it is a misjudgement. In youth Lionel had been a Marxist, later he was a good Freudian, and although something of these influences remained visible in his work, he was nobody’s follower; his original thought outweighs the derived elements.’ While it is true that Trilling cannot accurately be described as anyone’s disciple, there is nevertheless one sense in which he remained thoroughly Arnoldian: he saw literature as a politically significant form of cultural expression. It was Arnold’s view, he observed, that criticism ‘is not what poetry is, it is what poetry does.’ This was also Trilling’s view, though he was more often drawn to the novel as the exemplary modern form of literary expression. His criticism can be understood as an enquiry into, and an attempt to keep faith with, Arnold’s understanding of culture, and literature in particular, as a criticism of life. He returns to Arnold’s open-ended formula on numerous occasions in his essays, finding in its implied reconciliation between the rigorous and the impressionistic a central imperative of his own critical method. In it he discovers the grounds on which he might develop an oppositional stance that resists the potential for encompassing culture to become politically or socially oppressive, without resorting to a reflexive negation.

To this end, Trilling is less a close reader than an intensive one. His approach is erudite rather than scholarly, and his arguments tend to be evocative rather than systematic. His literary essays are never unidirectional; they are always about something larger than their ostensible subject. In interpreting the literary work Trilling seeks to make use of it, inviting the consideration of


broad contextualising questions on the assumption that literature cannot help but be concerned with something more than itself. Just as a work’s aesthetic qualities are of secondary importance, in the sense that they are subsumed by the intellectual-emotional experience of the work — that is, by the work as an idea, in the fullest sense of the word — so too are Trilling’s essays manifestations of a literary idea in their willingness to convey the ambivalence of his own responses.

Many intellectuals of Trilling’s generation saw history as monolithic and oppressive. The status of the individual in the face of its overriding impersonal forces was a source of ideological controversy. At issue was the extent to which human beings were subject to a form of historical and cultural determinism. That one’s character and beliefs were not merely influenced by personal experience but conditioned, in a narrowly behaviourist sense, was a common assumption and a recurring anxiety.

Debates about the validity of Marxism frequently turned on this question. As Edmund Wilson pointed out in his sympathetic 1940 study To the Finland Station, the claim of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that the ideological superstructure of society was the product of its material base was widely misinterpreted as a ‘key to all the complexities of human affairs.’

Though Marxist theory did not mean to deny the possibility of human agency, the suggestion that a man’s social being determines his consciousness was seen as having reduced human behaviour to a function of economic and historical circumstances. Marx explicitly stated that history is nothing in itself: it is no more than the manifestation of humankind’s pursuit of its own ends. And yet, Wilson notes, this crucial point remains ambiguous. Marx frequently speaks of History as an independent force or higher authority, implying that there ‘is a non-personal entity called “History” which accomplishes things on its own hook and which will make the human story come out right, no matter what you or your opponent may do.’

Inscribed in the ‘myth of the dialectic’ is a metaphysical claim about the ineluctability of progress, a belief in ‘a semi-divine

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41 Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History (London: Phoenix, 2004) 179.

42 Wilson, 193.
principle of History, to which it is possible to shift the human responsibility for thinking, for deciding, for acting; furthermore, observes Wilson, because ‘we are living at the present time in a period of the decadence of Marxism,’ this deferral to the impersonal force of history ‘lends itself to the repressions of the tyrant.’

Louis Menand has pointed out that Wilson was temperamentally predisposed to wariness when it came to the comprehensive claims of Marxist theory and his grasp of the philosophical foundations of dialectical reasoning was shaky. But his suspicions about its ultimate incompatibility with democracy were not unfounded, nor were they his alone. Other thinkers who sought to question the theoretical basis of Marxism, such as Popper and Berlin, stressed its teleological aspect. They argued that applying scientific methods of prediction to large social questions was fallacious and unempirical, and that the belief that there were discoverable laws governing the direction of history allied Marxism with other forms of deterministic thinking which entailed, as Berlin put it, ‘the elimination of the notion of individual responsibility.’

Cultural issues acquired something of their immediate significance in this context. Implicit in the Marxist vision of historical transformation is an anti-essentialist view of human nature: it assumes that when the material conditions of society change, people’s attitudes change with them. This admits of an obverse principle — namely, that the potentially decisive influence of the cultural environment, which is understood to be the manifestation of a society’s ideological assumptions, might be co-opted and manipulated to particular ends. As the Russian Revolution devolved into Stalinist terror, the possibility that cultural influences may well be definitive and overwhelming took on murderous implications. A totalitarian regime that exercises its power to reshape the social and economic order in radical ways, while using violence and propaganda to control the nation’s artistic

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43 Wilson, 194.

44 Wilson, xv-xvii.

and intellectual life, denies the moral claims of the individual. But it also raises the possibility that individuality and freedom of conscience might not simply be suppressed, but obliterated entirely. Here, for example, is Orwell in 1939 reviewing a book called *Russia Under Soviet Rule*:

> The terrifying thing about modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of ‘human nature’, which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that ‘human nature’ is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not long for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had no technology to undermine the grounds on which one might think and act.

Orwell’s breeding analogy, which confuses biological and cultural manipulation, does not bear close scrutiny, but his anxiety expresses the tension between the liberal and radical views that Trilling places at the centre of his concerns. Apprehensions about the mechanistic worldview, which was often assumed to be intrinsic to scientific materialism, and the dehumanising effects of technology acquired fresh urgency as a result of the upheavals of the early-to-mid twentieth century. These apprehensions were sharpened by ideological divisions. The understanding of culture as an all-encompassing sociological phenomenon became politically double-edged, in the sense that it allowed for the possibility of social transformation on a large scale at the same time as it seemed to undermine the grounds on which one might think and act independently of one’s cultural conditioning. Culture, in a fatalistic tautology, could be interpreted as as both symptom and cause. The unfettered optimism of the era’s radical progressivism was the mirror image of its manifestations of its reactionary cultural pessimism, in that both bowed before a comprehensive sense of

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inevitability. Eliot asserted that ‘materialist determinism and absolutist government fit into the same scheme of life’\(^{47}\); neither Orwell nor Trilling \textit{wanted} to agree with Eliot, but part of them worried that he might be right. The possibility that the ‘human nature’ Orwell places in scare quotes may well be a fragile illusion is of genuine concern to him because he sees independence of mind as fundamental to human dignity and political freedom. Orwell was a committed socialist whose political views incorporated elements of both radicalism and social conservatism, but he falls within the purview of Trilling’s liberalism because he was ultimately opposed to any thinking he regarded as reactionary, conformist or ideologically absolute — that is, thinking which denied or surrendered individual autonomy. In a 1952 essay Trilling argued that Orwell’s importance as a literary figure ultimately rests on this conviction. Though Orwell was not a genius in any creative or intellectual sense, he was nevertheless able to recognise the existence of a truth beyond ideology and, in doing so, he affirmed the value and the integrity of the disinterested individual judgement in the face of obfuscation and political dishonesty. His personal example is compelling because he did not allow his political ideals to override his honest appraisal of events as he saw them.

This reading of Orwell, which has since become commonplace, is in fact a restatement of the basic principles of Trilling’s liberalism. Indeed, Orwell’s arguments become, in Trilling’s hands, decidedly Trilling-esque. ‘The gist of Orwell’s criticism of the liberal intelligentsia,’ writes Trilling, ‘was that they refused to understand the conditioned nature of life’; Orwell recognised, in other words, that the ‘characteristic error of the middle-class intellectual of modern times is his tendency to abstractness and absoluteness, his reluctance to connect idea with fact, especially with personal fact.’\(^{48}\)

For Trilling, this reluctance to let go of cherished illusions, to face the horrors of reality, to accept that ideals must engage with the constraints of the possible, was a rejection of the very basis of politics itself. The \textit{American} radicals of the 1930s, he argued many


\(^{48}\) \textit{The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent.}, 268.
decades later, had good intentions. They were attracted to communism for reasons that were altruistic and understandable given the traumatic historical context. The injustices they saw were real. But theirs was not a genuine political position. It was, rather, ‘an expression of a settled disgust with politics, or at least what politics entails of contingency, vigilance, and effort. […] The Stalinists of the West were not commonly revolutionaries, they were what used to be called fellow-travelers, but they cherished the idea of revolution as the final, all-embracing act of will which would forever end the exertions of our individual wills.’ The radicals, Trilling is implying, were mirrors of the reactionaries they opposed, who had no ideas but expressed themselves ‘only in action or in irritable gestures which seek to resemble ideas.’

The implicit affinity is given gently satirical treatment in a scene from Trilling’s only completed novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, published in 1947. A character named Emily Caldwell comes to the home of the novel’s representatives of political progressivism, Arthur and Nancy Croom, to return a book she has borrowed. It is Oswald Spengler’s famous study in cultural pessimism, *The Decline of the West*. Nancy gushes to her hosts that she found the book’s gloomy vision to be wonderful. But by praising it in polite company she commits a *faux pas*: Spengler is *passé*. ‘For all intelligent people of good will,’ thinks Trilling’s embarrassed liberal hero John Laskell, ‘this book, once seductive in its vision of tragedy, now existed only as a curiosity or a bad example, the symptom of a disease which was not a terrible reality. There had been a time when it had been attractive because it expressed the modern alienation in the largest possible way, but now it was known to be entirely reactionary because it cut off hope of the future.’ It is Arthur who attempts to set Emily straight: ‘Do you really, Emily, do you really believe with Spengler that man is nothing but a puppet of the cycles of culture? That man can never make his own fate and that he is passive to the will of forces which

49 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent.*, 511.
50 *The Liberal Imagination.*, ix.
he can see but not control, and that civilization rises only to reach decay.\textsuperscript{52}

As the scene unfolds, Laskell, who has come to doubt the Crooms’ ideological certainties has the subversive thought that ‘perhaps we hate the book because it has a hideous possibility of being true, and we hate the man who wrote it as in our hearts we would blame the physician who told us of our unknown but suspected disease.’\textsuperscript{53} But it is Nancy who finally identifies the precise nature of Emily’s error: ‘actually,’ she declares, ‘history shows that man is dialectically developing and improving himself all the time. There is no limit to his potentialities.’\textsuperscript{54}

The irony of the Crooms rejecting Spengler’s dubious determinism only to embrace a simplistic and no less dubious form of Marxist determinism is a droll expression of Trilling’s personal resistance to such naive political optimism. Yet his criticism treats as a serious issue the ‘hideous’ possibility that individuals may indeed be subject to the determining pressure of impersonal forces. This concern manifests itself in his engagement with the concept of culture. In his introduction to \textit{Beyond Culture}, Trilling points out the word \textit{culture} has at least two broad, commonly accepted meanings. On the one hand, it is often used in an exclusive sense to describe only the wisest and most refined manifestations of civilisation; on the other hand, it also has a comprehensive meaning that denotes all of the manners, customs and creative expressions of a society.\textsuperscript{55} This duality can create difficulties for the cultural critic who fails to maintain a clear sense of the term’s contrasting implications. Many of the inconsistencies and confusions in Eliot’s \textit{Notes toward the Definition of Culture} arise

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Middle of the Journey}, 97.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Middle of the Journey}, 96.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Middle of the Journey}, 97.

\textsuperscript{55} The term ‘culture’ is, of course, far more complex than this basic duality suggests. Raymond Williams proposes, not unreasonably, that it is ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.’ For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is enough to recognise that Trilling was drawn to the internal conflict implied by the distinction between the partial and the comprehensive understandings of the term, and the issue of the necessary involvement of the former with the latter, as an expression of what he saw as a fundamental conflict that was constitutive of the position of the individual within his or her society. Raymond Williams, \textit{Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society} (London: Fontana, 1988) 87.
from its failure to give an adequate account of the inherent tension between the exclusive and comprehensive implications of the word, which results in his failure to connect his ideal of cultural unity with the complex dynamic of modern culture in any convincing way. For Trilling, however, the deeper significance of what Eliot is apt to call the anthropological definition of culture is that it poses a fundamental philosophical problem that complicates the liberal allegiance to progress and idealism. When culture is understood in its all embracing sense, he points out, it is not possible to conceive of a person standing beyond his culture. ... No personal superiority can place one beyond these influences. ... Even when a person rejects his culture (as the phrase goes) and rebels against it, he does so in a culturally determined way.56 There is, in other words, a sense in which culture 'may be thought of as Kismet.57

On one level, the point is unremarkable. The pervasive influence of culture, in the broadest sense, would appear to be indisputable — indeed, it is something of a truism. But the apparent obviousness of the idea that we are the products of our cultural context does not lessen its essential difficulty for the liberal imagination. It places the individual in an awkward position because it appears to call individuality itself into question. The foundation stone of modern liberalism is the assumption of individual autonomy, an allegiance to free will and the possibility of rational choice. 'The belief that it is possible to stand beyond the culture in some decisive way is commonly and easily held,' Trilling observes. 'In the modern world it is perhaps a necessary belief.'58 Yet the socially determined quality of our existence renders unclear the precise grounds for positing this autonomy. The modern conception of individuality is riven, caught in an apparent contradiction: the individual is necessarily a part of his society and his character is shaped by its cultural influence, but our sense of individuality depends on being able to claim a degree of independence from that culture.

58 *Beyond Culture*, xii.
Trilling sees this tension as constitutive of modern literature. One of the readily observable features of the modern novel, in particular, is that it has the ‘clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produced him.’\textsuperscript{59} The function of literature, Trilling argues, is ‘to make us aware of the particularity of selves, and the high authority of the self in its quarrel with its society and its culture. Literature is in that sense subversive.’\textsuperscript{60} In his essay on \textit{Huckleberry Finn}, Trilling points out that Mark Twain’s novel has often been condemned for its alleged immorality, usually on the basis of episodes that involve lying, theft and denigrating religion (just as, in keeping with contemporary social mores, it has lately been criticised on the grounds that its depiction of the runaway slave Jim is racist). But moral condemnations of this kind overlook the way in which \textit{Huckleberry Finn} is genuinely subversive: ‘no one who reads thoughtfully the dialectic of Huck’s great moral crisis will ever again be wholly able to accept without some question and some irony the assumptions of the respectable morality by which he lives, nor will ever again be certain that what he considers the clear dictates of moral reason are not merely the engrained customary beliefs of his time and place.’\textsuperscript{61}

This ability of imaginative literature to encourage a critical view of social assumptions is a positive thing to the extent that it affirms the necessary autonomy of the self. In its insistence that experiences are tangible and individuated, fiction resists the tendency for liberal idealism to have recourse to the reflexive gestures of ideology. Trilling often judges works on this basis. In an early essay, he praises John Dos Passos’s \textit{U.S.A.} trilogy because it places an emphasis on the individual that prevents its politicised fiction from accepting the simplistic dualism that pits the forces of good against the forces of evil; elsewhere, he recommends Saul Bellow’s \textit{The Adventures of Augie March} on the grounds that its

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Beyond Culture.}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{60} Lionel Trilling, \textit{Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture}. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) 40.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Liberal Imagination.}, 112-3.
characters are ‘not to be comprehended by their conditions.’ One of the threads that runs through the essays in *The Liberal Imagination* is a dissatisfaction with much contemporary American literature, which Trilling contrasts unfavourably with the writings of the European Modernists. He argues that the comparative weakness of American writing is the result of its artistic complacency, its inability to speak to our emotional being in all its fullness and complexity. ‘Our liberal ideology,’ he observed in 1946, ‘has produced a large literature of social and political protest, but not, for several decades, a single writer who commands our real literary admiration; we all respond to the flattery of agreement, but perhaps even the simplest reader among us knows in his heart the difference between that emotion and the real emotions of literature.’

This dissatisfaction is based on what Trilling sees as the stolid allegiance that American writers display to a dully materialistic and ultimately simplifying conception of reality that makes them resistant to the complexities of what he calls ‘mind’ — an allegiance that has its origins in ‘a kind of political fear of the intellect which Tocqueville observed in us more than a century ago.’ He develops this point in the essay ‘Reality in America’, in which he interprets the critic V.L. Parrington and the novelist Theodore Dreiser as examples of a general cultural tendency. Parrington’s informing idea, Trilling argues, is that thought is economically and socially determined. His criticism displays a characteristically American sense of practicality, but tends to literal-mindedness and thus struggles to account for works that address complex personal ideas. He is representative of American culture because he believes that mind and reality are opposed, and that it is necessary to have an allegiance to the latter.

Trilling’s primary target, however, is Dreiser. Confirmation that Parrington’s limitations as a critic are symptomatic of the wider culture can be found in the indulgence with which Dreiser’s work is received, which Trilling underscores by contrasting it with the critical reception afforded the novels of Henry James. Liberal critics, he argues, are often willing to grant the literary merit of

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62 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, 5; Krystal, 103.

63 *The Liberal Imagination*, 98.

64 *The Liberal Imagination*, 12.
James’s work, but are apt to be severe about its lack of obvious political utility. The same critics are, however, prepared to excuse Dreiser’s literary shortcomings and even his unsavoury personal opinions. Indeed, they are inclined to interpret these conspicuous flaws as virtues, seeing the crudity of his work as evidence of its artistic credibility. Dreiser’s books are embraced because they have ‘the awkwardness, the chaos, the heaviness which we associate with “reality.”’ In the American metaphysic, reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant. The clear implication is that liberal critics are allowing political considerations to cloud their literary judgement, leading them to make a spurious assumption: ‘It is as if wit, and flexibility of mind, and perception, and knowledge were to be equated with aristocracy and political reaction, while dullness and stupidity must naturally suggest virtuous democracy.

Trilling does not explain the evident double standard in the critical responses to James and Dreiser simply by making the rather facile point that the latter’s novels are overrated because they have been found to be politically agreeable. He argues that the crude valorisation of material reality and the corresponding resistance to the subtleties of mind represent a wider abdication of intellectual and moral responsibility. The case of Dreiser demonstrates the logic of a liberal criticism ‘which establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty of resembling reality as much as possibility, he is not really responsible for anything, not even for his ideas.

There appears to be a moment of grammatical slippage here. One could argue that a fiction writer has a duty to represent reality; it seems peculiar to claim that the writer, rather than his work, should ‘resemble’ reality. Yet the phrasing is deliberate. Dreiser’s appeal is precisely that he embodies reality in the crude American sense and thus he can be said to ‘resemble’ that understanding of reality. His lack of cogency is excused along with his aesthetic shortcomings because the apparent sincerity with which he held his views and the unrefined power of his work are judged to be authentic. In this, he affirms the limited philosophical perspective

65 The Liberal Imagination, 13.

66 The Liberal Imagination, 12.

67 The Liberal Imagination, 21.
of liberal criticism. In its insistence on the opposition between mind and reality, such criticism does not simply render itself ill-equipped to comprehend the ‘moral mind’ of James, with its ‘awareness of tragedy, irony, and multitudinous distinctions’; it also detaches itself from the possibility that it might undertake a cogent critique of the reality it seeks to address. At the conclusion of the essay, Trilling reaffirms the distinction between ideas and ideals. In its rejection of the dialectical tension that Trilling sees as inherent in the former, the liberal criticism that is descended from Parrington creates a disconnect between its abstract political ideals and its crude notion of reality. And without any recourse to a concept of mind that might allow us to intelligently appraise the truth of our ambiguous moral condition, it has no way to reconnect them.

The word authentic does not appear in ‘Reality in America’, but it is a key concept in Trilling’s thought. The cultural privileging of behaviour that is deemed authentic — that is, untainted by the artificial refinements of civilisation — is understood as a symptom of the division that is intrinsic to an individualised notion of selfhood. Authentic behaviour is often admired, regarded as a source of creativity and insight, because it is seen to have escaped the repressive conditioning of society and provided a glimpse of a person’s true self. Yet the very fact that it seems necessary to repudiate intelligent reflection and civilised restraint in order to reveal one’s true self suggests the deeper sense in which our culture is divided against itself. Central to Trilling’s critical writings is the notion that in modern literature we encounter ‘one of the shaping and controlling ideas of our epoch. I can identify it by calling it the disenchantment of culture with culture itself — it seems to me that the characteristic element of modern literature, is the bitter line of hostility to civilization that runs through it.’ This hostility manifests itself in the ‘canonization of the primal, nonethical energies.’

Trilling coined the phrase ‘adversary culture’ to describe the way in which civilisation embraces and, in an important sense, fosters an internal dissatisfaction with its own civilised values. He

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68 The Liberal Imagination, 11.
69 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 381.
70 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent, 392.
defined the concept in the introduction to his 1965 book *Beyond Culture*, but a fascination with the destructive impulse it describes is evident throughout his work. For Trilling, adversary culture explains the limitations and weaknesses of liberal thought by grounding it in an elementary conflict within the American psyche and, more broadly, the psyche of modern democratic man. This emerges most clearly in his reading of the modern novel. *Don Quixote*, he points out in *The Liberal Imagination*, is based on a perceived disconnection between appearance and reality. In this seminal work of the early-modern period, this prototypical novel which contains the entire potentiality of the genre, there is enshrined a metaphysical problem, a problem of mind. Quixote's distorted sense of reality is mocked in his confrontations with a world that cruelly refuses to share in his delusions and makes him suffer accordingly. His idealism is repeatedly bested by an intransigent material reality. And yet, Trilling observes, the apparent triumph of reality is not depicted as absolute or final. In the second half of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes 'begins to show that the world of tangible reality is not the real reality after all. The real reality is rather the wildly fantasying mind of the Don: people change, practical reality changes, when they come into its presence.71

The recognition that reality is a malleable rather than an absolute concept, that our social relations can in fact be altered to better reflect our ideals, is the foundation of the modern novel's depiction of the relationship between the individual and society. The reality the novel describes is commonly a social reality. It is often preoccupied with questions of class and social mobility. This is particularly evident in its nineteenth century manifestations. And the novel's view of the social reality it describes is critical, in the sense that it acknowledges the artificiality of the manners which mark class divisions and seeks to expose that artificiality, to arrive at the truth that is assumed to be hidden behind false appearances. But in its dramatisation of the various ways in which individuals are compelled to make their way in the world the novel also indicates the extent to which our acculturation is constitutive. It shows that individuals are both independent and not independent of their culture, and that the markers of their social

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position are indeed indicative of their state of being. Trilling thus
defines the novel as ‘a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its
research being always the social world, the material of its analysis
being always manners as the indication of the direction of man’s
soul.’

By the term manners Trilling means something larger than the
everyday usage which refers to a category of approved social
rituals. He means to evoke the complex cultural web of implied
values and assumed meanings that defines society and one’s place
within that society. Manners ‘make the the part of culture which is
not art, or religion, or morals, or politics, and yet it relates to all
these highly formulated departments of culture. It is modified by
them; it modifies them; it is generated by them; it generates
them.’ The intellectual movement they suggest is necessarily
dialectical. The ideals of liberal thought depend on the possibility
of social transformation; they derive from the necessary tension
between the individual consciousness and social manners, in the
expansive sense of the word. But because liberal thought,
particularly as it is reflect
ed in the American novel, concerns itself
only with reality in the intractable and crudely oppositional sense
of the word, it is reluctant to acknowledge the double movement,
the necessary duality that might prevent its collapse into reflexive
negation. It cannot see the ‘real reality’ that Trilling’s neo-
Romantic, anti-realist epistemology regards as intrinsic to the
concept of mind. Liberal thought, in other words, tends to
becomes illiberal when it refuses to recognise the very fact that
engenders it: that reality is an unresolved and unresolvable
concept.

Trilling insists on this point because he sees an unhappy
paradox at the heart of political idealism — a paradox that is, in
certain respects, an ineluctable part of the development of modern
secular society. For it is only when the institutions and habits of
society have been recognised as cultural, and thus created, that it
becomes possible to conceive of them being comprehensively
reformed for the better. Our imaginations recommend to us a
vision of a world unlike the one we inhabit, a more agreeable world
in which society is organised on the basis of just principles. Such

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72 The Liberal Imagination., 212.
73 The Liberal Imagination., 207.
ideals are attractive and worthwhile, but they are not innocent or inconsequential, even though they are abstractions. They have their effect; they move us. And in this lies their force and their potential danger. An imagined reality is a manifestation of the will; it is the expression of a desire to alter the world after our own designs. As such, it contains a sublimated desire for power. This is true even when the ideals are altruistic and the desired outcome is obviously worthwhile. Indeed, it is when our ideals are virtuous that we are most likely to deny the regressive element of our wishes, because we convince ourselves of the purity of our motivations. Trilling thus sees the moral instinct that motivates us to improve the lot of humankind and the will to power as arising from the same source, the same human impulse. And because these cannot be disentangled the liberal imagination must always be on guard against its own latent tendencies. To this end, Trilling posits the related concepts of ‘moral realism’ and ‘moral imagination’ as necessary correctives. We must, he cautions, be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes. Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironical and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination.74

Trilling, who wrote these lines in the 1940s, has in mind the distortion of the egalitarian principles of communism into the vicious hierarchy of the Stalinist state, but he is also addressing an encompassing problem in a way that extends a political critique to the point where the liberal habit of thought is revealed to be a psychological conundrum. The practical issue liberalism faces is how to make justice and power coincide; its success depends on its ability to negotiate the conflict between them. Yet the tendency of liberal thought is to deny that the tension even exists. As Trilling observes in his essay on Henry James’s The Princess Casamassima, it is ‘one of the beliefs of our culture that power invalidates moral purpose.’75 This impractical belief places the individual in the invidious position of having to deny one in the name of the other.

74 The Liberal Imagination, 221–2.
75 The Liberal Imagination, 90.
One can either become a hypocrite by seeking power in order to further one’s ends, or one can remain morally pure and thus politically consequential. As James dramatises in the figure of his heroine Hyacinth Robinson, the result of this conflicted position is alienation both from the kind of moral realism that might enable a genuinely liberal politics and from the possibility of self-knowledge. Hyacinth’s tragedy, which develops from her relationship with the idealist Paul Muniment, is that she is conflicted in precisely this way:

She cannot but mistake the nature of reality, for she believes it is a thing, a position, a finality, a bedrock. She is, in short, the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, making itself appear harmless, the will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue, that despises the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity, which is but another way of saying a nothingness. In her alliance with Paul she constitutes a striking symbol of that powerful part of modern culture that exists by means of its claim to political innocence and by its false seriousness — the political awareness that is not aware, the social consciousness which hates full consciousness, the moral earnestness which is moral luxury.²⁶

The ability of literature, the novel in particular, to reach beyond the brute facts of social organisation, beyond the opposition between appearance and reality, in order to expose and explore the depths of personal being grants it a profound political significance. Its subversiveness, its ability to destabilise the firmest of convictions, is potentially comprehensive. This is the essence of James’s difficult literary genius. The Princess Casamassima, Trilling argues, is a work of great political importance, not because it offers a perceptive critique of a social reality and suggests a path to resolution, but because it is ‘an incomparable representation of the spiritual circumstances of our civilization.’²⁷

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²⁶ The Liberal Imagination., 91–2.

²⁷ The Liberal Imagination., 92.
Trilling gives his most comprehensive account of his overarching interpretation of modern literature in his last book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. The book began life as a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1970, but is clearly conceived as a unified work. Its six chapters set out to chart no less than the cultural evolution of modernity itself. In tracing the historical development of the book’s two defining concepts, Trilling revisits many of the key texts that shaped his thinking, such that *Sincerity and Authenticity* becomes a summation, as well as a late reassessment, of the themes that had preoccupied him as a literary and cultural critic for the better part of half a century.

At a certain point in European history, Trilling proposes, people became individuals in the modern sense of the word. By this he means to suggest two simultaneous and mutually dependent historical developments. He argues, firstly, that from the Renaissance there emerged a new psychological understanding of human experience. The nature of this new understanding is implied by his contention that, at around this time, ‘the moral life of Europe added to itself a new element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity.’ He observes that Polonius’s advice to his son Laertes in *Hamlet* — ‘to thine own self be true’ — is an original sentiment, historically speaking, in that it presupposes the existence of a self that is, in some way, independent of circumstances, not a function of its determining social context. It implies an irreducible core of being, a form of private conscience, that must be attended to and honoured in order to preserve one’s personal integrity. The rise of autobiography, a literary genre whose authority rests on its appeal to the revelatory truth of confessed personal experience and conviction — that is, on its sincerity — exemplifies this modern conception of the self as unique and innately valuable.

For Trilling, the creation of this individualised, autonomous, psychologised self is best understood as both a conceptual and a social phenomenon. ‘One way of giving a synopsis of the whole complex psycho-historical occurrence,’ he writes, ‘is to say that the idea of society, much as we now conceive it, had come into being.’

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79 *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 20.
In other words, modern individuality reflects a structural change in the relationship between the individual and his or her social context. It allows one to belong to a society while also remaining separate from it, in the sense that one can adopt a stance of critical detachment or principled objection to the organisation of that society. This raises the possibility of political reform and social development along rational lines. What differentiates the concept of a society from older political structures, such as a kingdom or commonwealth, Trilling argues, ‘is that it is available to critical examination by individual persons, especially those who make it their business to scrutinize the polity, the class of men we now call intellectuals. The purpose of their examination is not understanding alone but understanding as it may lead to action: the idea of society includes the assumption that a given society can be changed if the judgement passed on it is adverse.  

Sincerity, then, has political implications. It is the public expression of Whitman’s hardest basic fact. Indeed, the claim for the integrity of the individual conscience that is implied by the concept of sincerity underpins the basic principles of modern secularism and democracy. That Trilling’s definition of society also echoes a famous observation by Marx — that philosophers have traditionally interpreted the world when the point is to change it — is doubtless deliberate. The common ground between the modern ideologies of Marxism and liberalism, the feature that defines them as modern, is their belief in the possibility of progress. The key difference, which Trilling emphasises throughout his criticism as a way of disentangling these two progressive ideologies, is that Marxism subordinates individualism to the determining influence of impersonal material forces, while liberalism does not. For Trilling, this point is decisively in liberalism’s favour, but he also recognises that the liberalism’s stress on individuality creates a structural problem of its own.

Sincerity is the honest demonstration of one’s personal conviction. It ostensibly refers to a virtuous state of being. But because one’s sincerity is necessarily something to be demonstrated, it involves the enacting of certain gestures which are susceptible to ritualisation. When the gestures of sincerity are normalised, when they belong to the accepted manners of society,

80 Sincerity and Authenticity, 27.
it becomes possible to learn them, to perform them, even when one is not being sincere. In light of this self-conscious knowledge, they are apt to be viewed with suspicion. The concept of sincerity thus begets the concept of authenticity, which applies when the performance of one’s sincerity is taken to be genuine — that is, when an act, in the behavioural sense of the word, is understood not to be an act, in the theatrical sense of the word.

This necessary tension between the concepts of sincerity and authenticity, which follows from the positing of an individualised self, is at the core of Trilling’s view of the relation of the individual to society and his understanding of the essentially divided nature of modern selfhood. He explains this with reference to Hegel’s distinction between the ‘honest soul’ and the ‘disintegrated consciousness’, which the philosopher derives from his reading of Denis Diderot’s fictional dialogue *Rameau’s Nephew*. The former category is embodied in Diderot’s first-person narrator, who is direct and sincere, who behaves in a consistent manner when interacting with the world, who accepts social norms and the strictures of conventional morality. The latter is erratic, ingratiating, mocking, contemptuous, theatrical — a buffoon, like Rameau’s nephew, who scorns conventional morality, who accepts social conventions only so far as he can manipulate them to his own advantage, and who displays no stable sense of identity.

One might assume that it is preferable to live the harmonious and unified life of an honest soul, rather than embrace the tormented and tormenting existence of a disintegrated consciousness. But Trilling argues that the latter is enshrined in our culture as the path to self-determination and self-realisation. Hegel is condescending, even scornful, of the sincerity displayed by Diderot’s narrator, seeing the unproblematic acceptance of the encompassing social order as a simple-minded mode of existence that is unworthy of respect. Rameau’s nephew, on the other hand, recognises the createdness of his cultural context and takes it as his field of endeavour. He defines himself negatively, against social expectations, and in doing so creates the possibility of a dialectical movement that suggests the possibility of a transcendence of received moral categories. *Rameau’s Nephew* is a significant work, in this Hegelian reading, because it depicts the striving for individual autonomy as a means by which one might pass an adverse judgement on society’s manners and institutions. It thus enables
the kind of social criticism by which civilisation might advance to a new stage of development.

For Trilling, however, it also captures the uncomfortable ambiguity of the modern condition. In *Rameau’s Nephew*, we see the way in which the modern individual is internally divided, turned against himself. The ‘self’ to which Diderot’s eponymous anti-hero is striving to be true is not the same as the superficial benefit social self he performs for the sake of others; it may not even exist in an essential way. Yet his sense of individuation asserts itself through the acting out of his adversarial relationship with the values of his own civilisation and the antagonism displayed by Rameau’s nephew is repeated throughout the literature of the modern period, which, Trilling argues, is overwhelmingly a literature of negation and rebellion, a literature possessed of a powerful sense of the inauthenticity of the cultural conditions of modern life. When a talented writer offers a conservative moral vision that affirms the value of an existence that is reconciled to the social order — as in Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* or Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* — the result is a source of discomfort and embarrassment to the modern sensibility. The more characteristic tendency is that represented by the series of books, beginning with *Rameau’s Nephew*, that Trilling sets out in his essay ‘On the Teaching of Modern Literature’ — a list that includes such concise but devastating works as Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Albert Camus’s *The Outsider* — all of which express an ambivalent and sometimes hostile attitude toward the positive ideals of civilisation. Because authenticity trumps mere sincerity in the modern consciousness, we find ourselves in an awkward and seemingly unhappy position. ‘At the behest of the criterion of authenticity,’ Trilling writes, ‘much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of the culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification. Conversely, much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason.81

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81 *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 11.
The internal conflict is exemplified for Trilling in the act of teaching modern literature. There is, he proposes, something profoundly incongruous about the act of embracing an adversarial literature within the walls of the academy — a cultural institution supposedly dedicated to preserving and nurturing the positive ideals of civilisation. For modern literature does not simply question those ideals. The kinds of intimate responses it seems to demand are such that they can only be falsified by the dry formality of pedagogy. The literature of the modern period, Trilling observes, is shockingly personal: ‘it asks every question that is forbidden in polite society. It asks us whether we are contented with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends.’ This personalised aspect makes the adversarial quality of literature radical in the etymologically true sense of the word: it reaches into the very core of our being, at the same time as it expresses the sense of social disintegration and personal despair that so oppressed Eliot. The question modern literature asks is not simply where one stands, but how one is to stand, how it is possible to live, when the negations of modern literature, pushed to their ultimate point by writers such as Diderot, Dostoevsky and Conrad, seem to point only to an exhausting and unresolvable ritual of self-destruction and self-abasement that indicates the fundamental inauthenticity of one’s being, in both a moral and social sense.

It is on this question that Sigmund Freud can be seen to exercise a decisive influence on Trilling’s thought. With the greatest respect to Barzun, I submit that Trilling was not a ‘good’ Freudian, but a rather selective and idiosyncratic one. The Freud whose presence is most keenly felt in his writing is not the purveyor of now discredited theories about infantile sexuality, but the late Freud of Civilization and Its Discontents, the Freud who is a cultural pessimist and underminer of ideological certainties.

When Trilling first read Civilization and Its Discontents in 1930, he still considered himself a Marxist and found the book to be ‘ridiculous and even offensive.’ He was repelled in particular by its rejection of the possibility of human improvement. By mid-

88 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent., 385.
89 Kimmage, 57.
century, however, he had come to see a deeper significance in its pessimistic view of human nature, finding in Freud’s arguments a way to complicate the essentially liberal orientation of his thought. In 1961, he described Civilization and Its Discontents as ‘a book whose importance cannot be overestimated’ and he continued to see it standing ‘like a lion in the path of all hopes of achieving happiness through the radical revision of social life’ until the very end of his life.84 He came to admire Freud for his intellectual courage, for his ‘submission to facts,’ explaining that ‘the facts to which Freud submitted himself were not only hard but also human, which is to say disgusting, or morally repellent, or even personally affronting.’85 Freud, to his credit, understood that ‘life is a grim, irrational, humiliating business — nothing softens this judgement.’86 This all sounds overwhelmingly negative, even reactionary or nihilistic. Yet one misunderstands Trilling’s intentions if one does not take into account the positive connotations of the image of the lion, its implicit dignity and grandeur. For he reads Freud’s pessimism optimistically.

The basis of Trilling’s Freudianism is its affinity with the traditions of literary humanism. He is, in other words, interested in a literary reading of Freud rather than a Freudian reading of literature. Psychoanalysis he regards as ‘one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century.’87 Freud and literature, he observes, have a common interest in discovering ‘the truth of the self, and also the truth about the self, about the conditions of its existence, its survival, its development.’88 Though Trilling suggests that Freud had little feel for literature in practice, he argues that his theory of the mind — which grants priority to its instinctive, irrational, symbolic, associative and unconscious workings, ahead of its strictly logical and deductive functions — ‘establishes the naturalness of artistic thought’; he proposes that

85 Jones, xi.
86 Jones, xiii.
87 The Liberal Imagination., 35.
88 Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture., 32.
Freud’s psychology ‘makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind.’

This is significant for Trilling because it grants literature an elemental significance, an ability to express essential truths about the human condition, but also because it suggest the grounds on which one might resist both unchecked idealism and the spectre of cultural determinism. In the Freudian conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, between *eros* and *thanatos*, Trilling finds a theoretical explanation for the unresolvable tension that exists between the supposedly autonomous individual, who is of central importance to liberal political theory, and the culture in which he or she is necessarily immersed. The important underlying idea Trilling takes from Freud is that our sense of individuation is not illusory, but has its basis in our biological drives, and can therefore be regarded as irreducible.

Freud’s argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents* is that aggression has its origins in the frustration of our instinctive desires, a frustration that we naturally encounter in our interaction with reality and which is, therefore, an ineradicable part of human nature. As a consequence of the repression of our instincts, which is one of the necessary conditions of civilisation, an element of personal discontentment is, in effect, built into our social existence. This is not ultimately the product of the specific material conditions of society, so it cannot be eliminated by reforming those conditions. On this basis, Freud argues that the redemption of humankind that the communists hope to achieve through the abolition of private property will never be realised. He proposes that the persecution of the bourgeoisie that accompanied the establishment of communism in Russia served a psychological and not simply a political purpose; he wonders darkly who will be next, once the hated bourgeoisie have been eliminated.

It would not have been lost on Trilling, as he revisited *Civilization and Its Discontents* in subsequent decades, that Freud’s remarks proved to be prescient, that at the height of the Stalinist terror the supposedly modern and rational ideology of communism

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89 *The Liberal Imagination*, 161, 52; *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture*, 16 [emphasis in original].

had indeed taken an atavistic lurch toward anti-Semitism. But for Trilling there is also a general, universal lesson here. The attraction of Freud’s thought is not simply that it is anti-utopian, but that it seeks to explain the position of the individual before society in a way that also takes full account of the constitutive reality of the human will. It thus establishes the possibility of a critical dialectic while recognising the inevitability of social constraint. The basis of Trilling’s positive reading of Freud’s pessimism is that it sees biology as a liberating idea. It is a resistance to and a modification of the cultural omnipotence.91 In this, it grounds and affirms the necessity of Trilling’s cautious liberalism. Our social existence is necessarily a negotiated existence, and it is only when we have a clear understanding of the nature of this negotiation that it becomes possible to grasp the latent danger of a willed idealism. For this reason, we ‘must be glad and not sorry that some part of our fate comes from outside the culture.’92

Joseph Frank has criticised Trilling’s argument in *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* on the grounds that it is contradictory to ‘locate ideas of freedom and liberation in stasis, immutability, and barely conscious biological existence. For the problem still remains how biological determinism can be a root of freedom, and how biological attributes can “criticize” culture and exhibit “human quality” without the intervention of some more positively human spiritual force.’93 But Trilling’s stance is not necessarily contradictory within the terms of his argument, though it would perhaps be more accurate to say that biological attributes do not themselves criticise culture, but rather generate the sense of dissatisfaction and separateness from one’s culture that allows for the possibility of criticism. The essential point for Trilling is that between biology and culture we are subject to two powerful determining influences, neither of which can be ignored or overthrown. Freedom is, in this sense, always a heavily qualified concept. But the simple fact that there are two determining influences also means we can be certain that neither can be

91 *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture*, 53.

92 *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture*, 55.

considered final or absolute. We are thus ‘free’ in the limited sense that we are not subject to the fatalistic tautology of cultural determinism. The phrase ‘positively human spiritual force’ is vacuous in this context.

Trilling’s Freudianism needs to be understood in light of the problem he sees it as addressing. Like Freud, he regards religion as an infantile delusion. There is no spiritual force, as such, only a spiritual condition that follows from the complex processes of the mind in its engagement with a material reality. The distinctly modern anxiety this creates is that the world is valueless, that meanings are illusory, that the self is an unstable fiction. Near the end of Sincerity and Authenticity Trilling writes of ‘Nietzsche’s revulsion from the developing modern culture. Nietzsche dreaded the “weightlessness of all things”, the inauthenticity of experience, which he foresaw would be the consequence of the death of God.94 Freud’s arguments are presented as a direct response to this anxiety: ‘Freud, in insisting upon the essential immitigability of the human condition as determined by the nature of the mind, had the intention of sustaining the authenticity of human existence that formerly had been ratified by God. It was his purpose to keep all things from becoming “weightless”.’95

For Trilling, then, the virtue of Freud’s thought is that it provides a material explanation for the moral condition of humankind. In doing so, it brings us back to what Trilling calls the ‘imperative actuality’ of life.96 Our fate is essentially tragic because it is unavoidable. Nietzsche argues for the liberating virtues of the Dionysian spirit, which negates the socialised self; his view of tragedy ‘proposes man’s metaphysical destiny of transcending morality’.97 Freud, in Trilling’s reading, proposes that this belief in the possibility of moral transcendence is misguided, that the modern dilemma is unresolvable, that the dignity of human existence therefore depends on our ability to reconcile ourselves to the difficult reality of our divided state and the knowledge that we live in a condition of possibility that is neither illusory nor absolute. Ultimately, there is no liberation to be found in the

94 Sincerity and Authenticity, 158.
95 Sincerity and Authenticity, 156.
96 Sincerity and Authenticity, 157.
97 Sincerity and Authenticity, 63.
seductive negations of adversary culture. Destruction begets only destruction. To be mad is not to be granted a privileged position of understanding; it is simply to be mad. The bias of psychoanalysis, argues Trilling, 'so far from being Dionysian, is wholly in the service of the Apollonian principle, seeking to strengthen the “honest soul” in the selfhood which is characterised by purposiveness and a clear-eyed recognition of limits.\(^8\)

Frank's criticism does, however, suggest the political ambiguity of Trilling’s stance. Drawing on a distinction made by Karl Mannheim, he argues that the essential difference between the liberal imagination and the conservative imagination lies in their respective attitudes to determinism. The liberal ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment tend to emphasise the virtues of free will and indeterminacy; the conservative tendency is to place a positive value on the conditional nature of human existence. On the basis of this distinction, Frank suggests that Trilling evolved from a critic of the liberal imagination to ‘one of the least belligerent and most persuasive spokesmen of the conservative imagination.\(^9\)

Since his death in 1975, a number of neoconservative commentators have claimed Trilling as a fellow-traveller. His work has been described as a precursor to Allan Bloom's influential assault on the cultural legacy of the 1960s, *The Closing of the American Mind*.\(^100\) Gertrude Himmelfarb — whose husband, Irving Kristol, is sometimes credited with being the first person to embrace the term neoconservatism — argued in her 2005 book *The Moral Imagination* that Trilling offered ‘a mode of thought, a moral and cultural sensibility, that was inherently subversive of liberalism and thus an invitation not to conservatism but to some hybrid form of neoliberalism or neoconservatism.\(^101\) His former student Norman Podhoretz, who as editor of *Commentary* championed the emerging neoconservative movement in the 1980s, has also suggested that some of Trilling’s ideas anticipate

\(^8\) *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 56.

\(^9\) Frank, 233.


neoconservatism and argues that Trilling was conscious of the conservative drift of his thought: ‘When Lionel was accused of being a “conservative” (and in those days this was indeed an accusation), he would sometimes acknowledge that in certain respects he was.’

The Marxist critic Cornel West has gone so far as to describe Trilling as the ‘godfather of neoconservatism.’ Overlooking *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which appeared in 1972, he argues that Trilling ‘essentially gave up on the book’ following the publication of *E.M. Forster* in 1943 and that his reputation rested on his mastery of an urbane literary style that ‘created the illusion of superiority’ and ‘disarmed critical scrutiny and dispassionate objections.’ The confident manner Trilling perfects in his essays meant that ‘interesting observations and stimulating suggestions could be put forward with little or no intellectual rigor or serious argumentation.’ West sees Trilling as ‘a thinker preeminently preoccupied with the circumstantial and the conditional’ and ‘obsessed with the individual will and the need to curb it.’ He proposes that ‘Trilling’s disinterested stance ‘leads to an intellectual dead-end.’

The two key features of neoconservatism in its initial form were, according to Podhoretz, opposition to communism in foreign affairs and opposition to the cultural and political agenda of the 1960s counterculture in domestic politics. Trilling’s stance on these issues was — to resort again to one of his favoured words — complex, but both of these broad positions can be extrapolated from his writings. A clear note of concern about the radicalism of the counterculture sounds in his writing in the last decade of his life. When he addresses his cultural pessimism in the late essay ‘Mind in the Modern World’, he voices sentiments that might well be read as fore-echoes of the ‘culture wars’ that broke out after his death, particularly when he writes of his concern about declining

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academic standards and the fate of his own discipline. His cautious linking of the concept of mind to ‘the idea of order, even of hierarchy, the subordination of some elements of thought to another’ has been enthusiastically appropriated by Cynthia Ozick, another former student, to proclaim the incontrovertibility of hierarchies of cultural value and take swipes at West and one of Trilling’s former colleagues, Edward Said—who was by no stretch of the imagination an enemy of high culture, but whose seminal influence on the discipline of postcolonial studies and outspoken support of the cause of Palestinian liberation made him something of a bête noire to the American right.105

There is clearly a conservative dimension to Trilling’s thought. In the introduction to The Liberal Imagination, reiterating a point he made in his 1940 essay on Eliot, he evokes the precedent of Mill who urged his fellow liberals to read Coleridge, to argue that liberalism might strengthen itself by considering conservative objections to its philosophies. He was making a similar point as early as 1933, when he was still, at least notionally, a communist fellow-traveller.106 He celebrated the ‘conserving’ cast of mind he detected in Orwell, which helped ‘to protect his politics from the ravages of ideology.’107 And there is a something of a Johnsonian quality to Trilling’s recoil from excessive enthusiasm and his promotion of the virtues of moderation and balance.

There are, however, good reasons for resisting the retrospective view of Trilling as a conservative or a forerunner to neoconservatism. He certainly did not think of himself in this way. As Mark Krupnick points out, though some of Trilling’s themes have been appropriated for neoconservative ends, he ‘never assented to the political program of the neoconservatives. On cultural issues he was clearly conservative, but politically he remained an old-fashioned liberal, closer in sensibility, say, to nineteenth-century liberals like Arnold than to contemporaries like


106 Kimmage, 64.

107 The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent., 265.
Irving Howe. His wife, Diana Trilling, remained unequivocal on this point: ‘I am of the firmest belief that he would never have become a neoconservative and that, indeed, he would have spoken out against this outcome of the anti-Communist position. ... Nothing in his thought supports the sectarianism of the neoconservative movement. Everything in his thought opposes this rule by doctrine.’

The apparent ambiguity of Trilling’s political identity and his influence on the aggressive conservatism that came to dominate American politics in the years after his death has been analysed by Michael Kimmage, who has argued convincingly that Trilling was prepared to entertain conservatism as countervailing tendency but did not ultimately regard it as a credible intellectual position. Yet the confusion is readily comprehensible and, in a sense, symptomatic of the kind of disinterested critical identity Trilling sought to cultivate. He belongs to a tradition of Arnoldian humanism that is characterised by its underlying anxieties about the destabilising and potentially destructive power of modernity. As a result, the political position he adopts is often so cautious and heavily qualified, so concerned to stifle unaccountable hopes, that it becomes difficult to identify the grounds on which one might legitimately advocate a beneficial reform in the name of a better world. Trilling’s criticism can sometimes seem to be an implicit endorsement of an unsatisfactory status quo, since the moment at which the will to act is granted validity appears to be deferred indefinitely. Freud made a point of distinguishing between a desire for freedom that is ‘directed against particular forms and claims of civilization’ and ‘against civilization as a whole.’ Trilling may well have accepted the distinction, but he makes little attempt in his work to address this issue of particularity. Though he criticised


111 Freud, 33 [emphasis added].
Arnold’s *culture* for failing to take adequate account of the reality of power, there is evident in his own criticism a similar tendency to look past the substance of a political grievance in order to explain it in terms of a general psychological or spiritual condition. He was made uneasy by the emergence of the 1960s counterculture because it saw it as a manifestation of modern civilisation’s impulse toward self-destruction, but the political issues fuelling on-campus radicalism — the Vietnam war, civil rights, feminism — were tangible problems. The implication of Trilling’s stance is that they are best approached in a cautious and pragmatic way, but other than to suggest the advisability of a general dampening of enthusiastic idealism, his criticism has nothing specific to say about the substance of these issues, how we might assess the justness of the moral claims they entail, and what might be done about them in a practical sense. Literary criticism, even a politicised literary criticism of the most incisive kind, also has its limits.

But the clearest indication that the posthumous characterisation of Trilling as a proto-conservative is untenable can be found in one of the most recognisable features of his style. His habit of addressing his audience in the first person plural was remarked upon during his lifetime, to the extent that he was moved to justify it in his preface to *Beyond Culture*. There is, he conceded, an degree of imprecision in his use of the word ‘we’. It can sometimes seem to refer to a narrow class of New York intellectuals; at other times it seems to evoke the educated middle class more generally. Yet it is also expansive enough to allude to what Trilling calls ‘the temper of our age’. This open-ended quality, he suggests, reflects the interconnectedness and the continuity of modern culture — a culture in which ideas are widely disseminated and class divisions are not always clear. Ultimately, we are all implicated in dilemmas of liberalism, even if we do not identify as being liberal in the classical sense, because we live in a modern world that is defined by the fact that the concepts of individualism and a liberal democratic polity, with all the promises and problems these entail, have come into being.

It is one of the quirks of contemporary American political discourse that Trilling’s elasticated and unorthodox use of the term

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112 *Beyond Culture*, ix-x.
liberal to allude to the entire spectrum of progressive political opinion, including socialism and communism — a usage that is meant to imply a similar sense of collective involvement in the problems of our modern condition — has been normalised, albeit in a rather skewed way. Liberal is now commonly used as a catch-all term to describe any supposedly left-wing opinion, whether radical or moderate. The aggressive conservatism that came to dominate politics in the United States in the decades after Trilling’s death often uses this conflation of meaning in its rhetorical attacks on its enemies on the left, equating any form of government sponsored social program with socialism or communism and suggesting, in a kind of idiot version of Trilling’s critique of liberalism, that anyone who advocates a socially ameliorative policy is really a crypto-totalitarian. It is impossible to conceive of Trilling sympathising with such assertions, not simply because they are fatuous, but because they are an affront to the core principle of his liberalism.

The most important political distinction in his thought is not between left and right; it is between what he regards as a genuine liberalism, which accepts moral complexity, and reaction, which embraces the false comfort of moral absolutism and certainty. The moment one exempts oneself from the substance of Trilling’s arguments, the moment one begins to speak of ‘they’ instead of ‘we’, is the moment of intellectual capitulation, the collapse into simplification, in which one betrays the substance of those arguments. His criticism’s psychological foundations proscribe their own practical limitations, but they also provide his thought with its durability and flexibility. And their implications are, in the final instance, deeply personal. Running through Trilling’s essays is a subdued but insistent strain of dignified confession, a clear note of measured sincerity. As he confesses at the beginning of Sincerity and Authenticity, the ambivalent attitude the book expresses toward the shifting, uncertain moral conditions of society ‘is my own.’

When Trilling died in 1975, he left some notes for an unfinished autobiographical lecture in which he wrote: ‘I am always surprised when I hear myself referred to as a critic. After some thirty years of having been called by that name, the role and function it

\[113 \textit{Sincerity and Authenticity}, 2.\]
designates seem odd to me.’ His real ambition, he observed, was to be a novelist and this intention, never fully realised, came to define his criticism with its ‘tendency to occupy itself not with aesthetic questions, except secondarily, but rather with moral questions, with the questions raised by the experience of culture and history.’ Looking back over his career, he credited two thinkers in particular for their decisive influence on his work: Marx and Freud. Though their views are antithetical in some respects, Trilling noted, they are in accord in the sense that both ‘taught the intellectual classes that nothing was as it seemed, that the great work of the intellect was to strike through the mask.’ Of his third great influence, Matthew Arnold, he observes that he ‘called himself a liberal, yet his major effort in criticism was to bring into question the substance of liberal thought.’ In the early stages of his career, Trilling notes, ‘I found myself in a similar situation.’

The passive phrase belies the intellectual vigour with which Trilling synthesised these influences, absorbed them, played them against each other, as a way of addressing the cultural reality he encountered. He was a critic with a clear sense of purpose. In one of his last essays, he reiterated, with the fastidious clarity bordering on fussiness that defines much of his writing, that the essays in *The Liberal Imagination...* had sought to make two simple points: ‘that liberalism was 1) a political position and 2) a political position that affirmed the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty, and that, since this was so, literature had a bearing upon political conduct because literature, especially the novel, is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, complexity, difficulty — and possibility.’ It is a position that invites an easy assent. But the reason Trilling’s work remains compelling is that he understood that living up to the intellectual promise of such a position is not easy at all.

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115 *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent.*, 511.
In April 2009, James Wood published two essays. One, on George Orwell, appeared in the *New Yorker*; the other, on the novels of Ian McEwen, ran in the *London Review of Books*. The near simultaneous appearance on either side of the Atlantic of two substantial articles was not, in itself, remarkable. Wood has long been a prolific essayist. He is one of the most widely read and influential literary critics currently writing in English. He holds the position of Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism at Harvard University, but is somewhat unusual for having established his reputation in the public realm. Unlike many prominent literary critics of the past century— including F.R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Edward Said and Terry Eagleton— Wood is a journalist who has branched into academia, rather than the other way round. He began his career writing for the *Guardian*, and has a longstanding association with the *London Review of Books*, where he remains a member of the editorial board. For more than a decade he was a senior editor with the *New Republic*, before he left to take up a position as staff writer with the

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New Yorker in 2007. Most of the essays in his first two books of literary criticism, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* and *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, first appeared in the pages of the *New Republic* and the *London Review of Books*. And, in many ways, Wood is the ideal product of this intellectual milieu. His criticism is erudite and closely argued, but never dry or ponderous. His writing is invariably brisk, assertive and articulate; his breadth of knowledge and depth of literary appreciation are considerable. For Wood to be simultaneously tackling one of the twentieth century’s most revered authors and a celebrated contemporary novelist would seem to be all in a day’s work.

But there was perhaps something pointed about the decision to write on Orwell, who is revered as a political writer, and McEwen, whose popular appeal rests, to a significant degree, on his skilful manipulation of narrative conventions. For these two writers’ strengths lie in areas Wood has been accused of neglecting. His third book of literary criticism, *How Fiction Works* — which presented itself as an accessible introductory essay in the manner of E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* and Milan Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel* — had recently provided a concise summary of some of his work’s major themes and had been given a bumpy reception, culminating in a long and snarky critique in the *Nation* in November 2008. The general thrust of the negative responses to

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How Fiction Works — when not merely bitchy — was that the focus of Wood's criticism was too narrow. It was argued that his aestheticism overlooks or underestimates social and political factors which may be informing the work; that he has an arbitrary and limiting preference for fiction that endorses his sense of what he calls ‘the real’; and that his method of close reading, which stresses the importance of style and finely observed detail, leads him to neglect the structuring significance of narrative.

Though his position is not as straightforward or doctrinaire as his detractors sometimes claim, there is some truth in these accusations. Throughout his three volumes of literary criticism and in numerous uncollected articles, Wood has defined his core preoccupations with considerable clarity and thoroughness. They form a tight knot of problems at which he is constantly worrying. His work is concerned, largely though not exclusively, with modern fiction, and he shares with earlier critics, such as Kundera, Ian Watt and Erich Auerbach, an interest in the formal development of literary representation. He is particularly interested in the novel's invention of new ways to represent, and thus to understand, the complex reality of human behaviour and the nuances of individual consciousness. The essays in The Irresponsible Self are

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united in their focus on a distinctive form of comedy that differs from overtly satirical humour — which adopts a superior or corrective stance toward its object — in that it combines psychological acuity with pathos and generous sympathy. This emotionally inflected ‘comedy of forgiveness,’ Wood argues, has its origins in Shakespearean soliloquy but ‘is almost entirely the creation of the modern novel.’

The attention to detail that is a defining feature of his criticism is an attempt to illuminate the various ways in which the fictional work strives to establish the credibility of its inventions and, in particular, provide insight into its characters. The major technical developments of modern fiction are significant for Wood to the extent that they convey a tangible sense of the intimate reality of subjective experience. In the subtle interaction between the subjective and objective points of view that characterises free indirect style — an innovation he traces to the novels of Jane Austen and Gustave Flaubert — Wood finds not only a defining technique of modern fiction but something like its basic rationale. In this sense, his criticism does indeed treat social, political and historical questions as matters of secondary importance. He is, on a fundamental level, simply more compelled by the uncommon vitality of Nicolai Rostov and Stiva Oblonsky than he is by Leo Tolstoy’s crotchety denunciations of Napoleon.

This preference entails a resistance to what Wood has called ‘the essential juvenility of plot.’ Chapters addressing the issues of plot and genre are conspicuously absent from How Fiction Works. His criticism is attuned to the way in which narrative conventions can impose a simplifying teleology on the raw materials of fiction; it is wary of manipulative twists and endings that contort narratives to unnatural resolutions. The novel, he argues, ‘is a form that doesn’t want to end,’ which is why ‘unsuccessful endings are

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6 This is in marked contrast to Forster, whose Aspects of the Novel devotes separate chapters to story and plot. Tellingly, the one point on which Wood chooses to engage with Forster’s criticism in How Fiction Works is Forster’s famous distinction between flat and round characters. E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: Penguin, 1990) 73-81; How Fiction Works, 98-106.
the norm. He often takes as a measure of the value of a given work the degree to which it resists this resolving pressure, praising fiction whose representations are not subordinated to the contrived and ultimately tendentious dance of complication and resolution that is a necessary part of dramatic action, and criticising novels that resort to outrageous coincidences, overt allegorisation or farcical satire. When he celebrates Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov — two authors he particularly admires — it is because their characters convey a sense of individual freedom, a sense that they somehow exist independently of their enclosing fictional context. That is, they appear to be more than simply a function of their dramatic role, more than a vehicle for their creators’ intentions.

Wood begins his essay ‘What Chekhov Meant by Life’, for example, by recalling a disparaging remark his subject made after watching a performance of Heinrich Ibsen’s A Doll’s House: ‘Ibsen just doesn’t know life. In life it isn’t like that.’ Chekhov meant that life is not neat and orderly; it is not structured like a tidy three act play. He meant that people are not as readily comprehensible or predictable as Ibsen depicts them. Even if individuals do have typical or generic qualities, they also retain a certain unexpected or indeterminate aspect that follows from the essential inscrutability of consciousness. Chekhov’s genius, Wood goes on to argue, was to find a way to capture in his writing this psychological hesitancy, this emotional ambiguity: ‘The secrets of Ibsen’s characters are knowable secrets, not the true privacies of Chekhov’s people; whatever happens to Chekhov’s characters, however they yearn, they have one freedom that flows from his literary genius; they act like free consciousnesses, and not as owned literary creations.’

Similarly, Wood sees the illusion of autonomy flowing from the apparent naturalness with which Tolstoy’s characters apprehend and interact with their surroundings. He argues that ‘in Tolstoy, as in Chekhov, reality appears in his novels as it might

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9 The Broken Estate, 75, 87.
appear not to a writer but to the characters.\textsuperscript{10} Details are dynamic because they are functional. Tolstoy's creations, Wood proposes, 'feel real to us in part because they feel so real to themselves, take their universes for granted.'\textsuperscript{11} They are defined by their physical presence, which conveys a sense of self-containment that inclines toward solipsism. For Wood, Tolstoy is 'the great novelist of physical involuntariness. The body helplessly confesses itself, and the novelist seems merely to run and catch its spilled emotion.'\textsuperscript{12}

The apparent contradictions of Tolstoy's realism — the tension in his work between his didactic instincts and his objective gaze; the conflicted understanding of his characters as both individuals and as types — find a formal solution in this determined palpability, which is embedded and interactive: 'Tolstoy sees reality as a system of constant adjustments, a long tricky convoy of surprises, as realities jostle together and the vital, solipsistic ego is affronted by the otherness of the world.'\textsuperscript{13}

The real, understood in this subjective yet palpable and dynamic sense, acts in Wood's criticism as the sometimes uncertain standard against which individual works are interpreted and assessed. As he declares at the beginning of \textit{The Broken Estate}: 'Everything flows from the real; realism is not a law but a lenient tutor, for it schools its own truants. It is realism that \textit{allows} surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on.'\textsuperscript{14} He echoes this sentiment, in almost the same words, in two uncollected articles from 2005,\textsuperscript{15} and again at the conclusion of \textit{How Fiction... Works}: 'Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, lifesameness, but what I must call \textit{lifeness}: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. And it cannot be a genre; instead it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres. For

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{The Irresponsible Self}, 73.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Irresponsible Self}, 70.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Broken Estate.}, xi [emphasis in original].

\textsuperscript{15} James Wood, 'The Blue River of Truth,' \textit{The New Republic} (1 August 2005) 27; 'A Reply to the Editors,' \textit{n + 1: Reality Principle.}, no.3 (Fall 2005) 135.
realism of this kind — lifeness — is the origin. It teaches everyone else; it schooling its own truants; it is what allows magical realism, hysterical realism, fantasy, science fiction, even thrillers, to exist.16

The slight wobble here between the ‘real’, implying ontological truth, and ‘realism’, which is a literary style or mode, is less an attempt to brush over an important distinction than it is the expression of a defining tension of Wood’s criticism. Depending on how generous one is feeling, his definition of the strained neologism ‘lifeness’ can be interpreted as either paradoxical or contradictory. It proposes that the credibility of a work of fiction both is and is not a function of its verisimilitude; it both is and is not a function of its artistry. This can also make the definition seem tautological: ‘lifeness’ says that what works, works. Yet the indeterminacy Wood cultivates on this point is deliberate and purposeful. His criticism values what Catherine Gallagher has called ‘fictionality’: the conceptual space that novels create by appealing to the reader’s sense of the credible without making any ultimate claim to truth. The ironic credulity fictionality encourages, argues Gallagher, is enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game.17 For Gallagher, as for Wood, this grants fictional characters their affective force, which is generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and their apparent depth, the link between their real nonexistence and the reader’s experience of them as deeply and impossibly familiar.18

Wood’s refusal to endorse a generic, which is to say formally limiting, definition of realism can be seen in this light as not simply a refusal to subordinate aesthetic response to formal analysis, but as an argument for the necessity of an aestheticised criticism. The interaction between fiction’s formal properties and its powers of evocation, the precise nature of which must inevitably remain undefined, generates the sense of imaginative engagement with the work that Wood regards as elementary. His

16 How Fiction Works, 186.


18 Gallagher, 366.
criticism assumes fiction's mimetic function, but does not treat 'the real' as an absolute or objectively stable category. It is, rather, called forth in the act of reading itself. The appeal of fiction is, as Samuel Johnson suggested, to our sense of reality: it does not refer directly to the real, but brings realities to mind.

*How Fiction Works* makes this argument explicit. Wood declares in the introduction that the book is an attempt to answer 'some of the essential questions about the art of fiction. Is realism real? How do we define a successful metaphor? What is character? When do we recognize a brilliant detail in fiction? What is point of view, and how does it work? What is imaginative sympathy? Why does fiction move us? Some of these old questions, he goes on to argue, 'have been resuscitated by recent work in academic criticism and literary theory, but I am not sure that academic criticism and literary theory have answered them all that well. His own approach is thus to combine technical questions (What is character? What is point of view?) with questions of aesthetic value (What is a brilliant detail? A successful metaphor?). The last and most general of his questions—why does fiction move us?—is essentially a non-intellectual question (though not an anti-intellectual one) and the fact that it is elementary and yet refuses to yield to any purely technical answer gives his argument its impetus. His genial discussion of the elements of fiction develops into a spirited attack on what he suggests is the sterile formalism of critical approaches that interpret the work as a set of conventions, without crediting the way these qualities appeal to the imagination and the emotions. He positions himself as an opponent of writers and critics, such as Roland Barthes and William Gass, who treat the fictional work solely as a formal system of signification. Citing a passage in which Gass dismantles one of Henry James's characters, Wood declares that he finds such an approach to be 'deeply, incorrigibly wrong.' A work of fiction is, of course, a formal system of signification, but Wood argues that there is no necessary conflict between its artificiality and its ability to evoke a reality, 'that fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude, and that there is nothing difficult in holding together these two...

\[19 \textit{How Fiction Works}, 2.\]

\[20 \textit{How Fiction Works}, 81.\]
possibilities.’ In other words, ‘realism can be an effect and still be true.’

Wood is perhaps best-known for coining a term — ‘hysterical realism’ — to describe what he saw as a deleterious tendency in modern fiction. In dozens of essays and reviews from the late-1990s and early-2000s, he mounted what was, in effect, a public campaign against novels he claimed were distorted by their exaggerations and implausibilities, their recourse to heavy-handed satire and farcical comedy, their obsessive engagement with the mindless trivia of consumerist culture, and their fetishising of information at the expense of character development and genuinely revealing detail. In such works, he argued, the ‘conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked.’ Hysterical realism is ‘characterised by a fear of silence. This kind of realism is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity.’ The central problem Wood associated with this bombastic style, which he repeatedly described as ‘cartoonish’, was its tendency to evade or override the basic imperative of fictional representation. The result was ‘curiously arrested books which know a thousand different things — How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market in Detroit! The history of strip cartoons! — but do not know a single human being.’

Wood traced the origins of hysterical realism to the grotesques of Charles Dickens, and his criticisms extended to some of the fanciful conceits of magic realist fiction, but his primary target was a certain kind of brash, ambitious, postmodern novel. Implicated in his argument were some of the most celebrated writers in the English-speaking world, most of whom were either American (Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen, Tom Wolfe, David Foster Wallace) or influenced by recent

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21 How Fiction Works, 67.

22 The Irresponsible Self, 168.


24 The Irresponsible Self, 190–1.

25 The Irresponsible Self, 167.
American fiction (Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith). They were commonly authors whose work contained an element of satirical comedy; all of them wrote novels that attempted some form of knowing cultural critique. In attacking the presumption of writers who ascribed to the ‘DeLilloan idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer — a cultural theorist, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry’26 — Wood was, on one level, taking up a point made by Philip Roth four decades earlier: that the bizarre and chaotic reality of modern America, the sheer scale and madness of it all, will always outstrip the novelist’s powers of comprehension and imagination.27 But his stance, though it has been criticised as narrowly prescriptive, was based on more than a set of arbitrary assertions about the function of the novel and the appropriate limits of the fiction writer’s art; it was an ambitious attempt to render his aesthetic preferences and his philosophical position inseparable by advancing them simultaneously as an argument about literary form.

Wood’s concerns about hysterical realism began to coalesce well before he came up with the label in a review of Smith’s novel White Teeth, published in July 2000.28 As early as 1996 he was observing, in an otherwise appreciative essay on Rushdie, that The Satanic Verses displayed ‘a programmatic hysteria whose design was to daunt us with its anarchy’ and that the manic comic energy of Rushdie’s writing tended to create characters who were ‘Dickensian balloons, inflated with fantasy.’29 Reviewing Wallace’s novel Infinite Jest later that year, he borrowed T.S. Eliot’s notion of ‘relevant intensity’ to argue that much recent American fiction was characterised by an irrelevant intensity, which manifested itself in two principle modes. The first is the use of ‘a zany, technical specificity, whose pseudo-precise language is borrowed from the discourse of science and technology, and whose specificity is wildly in excess of the actual importance of the data; the second mode is

26 ‘Tell me how does it feel?’ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/oct/06/fiction>.
the comic and pointless accumulation of brand names and other
details. 30 Though his notice was broadly positive, Wood concluded
that Wallace’s novel was weakened because it surrendered the
comedy of character to the comedy of culture.

The orientation of much of Wood’s subsequent criticism is
set out in these early judgements. Indeed, the arguments he
developed against hysterical realism are of particular interest as an
exercise in critical positioning because they were pieced together,
in full public view, over a period of several years. A marshalling of
rhetorical forces is evident throughout Wood’s writings from the
latter half of the 1990s. Lines are crafted and reiterated with
increasing firmness. He first attributes hysterical realism’s ‘fear of
silence’ to Rushdie in 1997; the distinction between the comedy of
culture and the comedy of character is redrawn, more forcefully
and at greater length, in his critique of Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon.*
that same year; while the notion of irrelevant intensity is reapplied
several years later in a harsh review of Smith’s second novel, *The-
Autograph Man.* 31 His notices of three consecutive Rushdie novels
over a five year period — *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in 1996, *The Ground
Beneath Her Feet* in 1999, and *Fury* in 2001 — become increasingly
caucistic: the first professes qualified admiration; the second credits
Rushdie’s comic talents, but criticises his ‘cartoonish and
allegorical characters’ and describes the novel as ‘a characteristic
postmodern defeat’; the third begins by calling *Fury* ‘a novel that
exhausts negative superlatives’ and goes on to lambast it as a
compendium of all the worst tendencies of Rushdie’s fiction. 32

Though Wood was attuned to the significant differences in
style and intent among the authors he criticised and was not, in
practice, uniformly or implacably hostile to their work, he pursued
his quarries in a consistent, even systematic fashion. He has argued
that aesthetics ‘does not really exist — it is always a form of

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‘Levity’s Rainbow,’ *The New Republic* (4 August 1997) 32-38; reprinted as ‘Thomas
Pynchon and the Problem of Allegory’ in *The Broken Estate,* 200-212;
‘Fundamentally Goyish,’ *The London Review of Books,* vol.25, no.20 (3 October

32 James Wood, ‘Salaam Bombay!’ 38-41; ‘Lost in the Punhouse,’ *The New Republic*
(26 April & 3 May 1999) 94-100; ‘Salman Rushdie’s Nobu novel,’ *The Irresponsible-
Self,* 210-222.
criticism — and so all aesthetic judgements need to stop at local stations. The discussion of specific works is the only valid aesthetics. Yet his critique of hysterical realism often assumes the force of generalisation and, in doing so, develops a clear set of aesthetic preferences. These preferences are reinforced across his work via a process of contextualisation and contrast that underpins his evaluative method. One of his common strategies is to treat the work of a particular writer as an occasion to discuss a general literary question. Thus an essay on Herman Melville considers the function of metaphor; novels by Pynchon and J.M. Coetzee prompt reflections on the limitations of allegory; Flaubert is credited with problematising the issue of literary style; and Knut Hamsun is discussed as the progenitor of the psychologically-oriented modernist novel.

This critical interaction between the specific instance and the generalised concept is performed against the backdrop of Wood's broad knowledge of literary history. The essays in both *The Broken Estate* and *The Irresponsible Self* are arranged according to a loose chronology of subject that charts the formal evolution of the modern novel, and by approaching this evolution as a series of aesthetic practices and innovations developed by particular authors, Wood grants fiction its indigenous history and suggests it has distinct, self-defined artistic imperatives. He claims, in other words, that when we are considering a work of fiction we should consider it as fiction and not as another thing. Individual works are judged against an internal standard that is established by considering their specific aesthetic intentions in light of techniques developed in other successful works.

In arguing for the autonomy of fiction, Wood draws on a number of familiar, even commonplace critical notions. He stands in a long line of critics who have conceived of the importance of literature in humanistic terms. That fiction is a mimetic art that takes as its primary subject matter the experiences of recognisably human characters (and even when its characters are not human they tend to be anthropomorphised) becomes the justification for the emphasis his criticism places on characterisation and the depiction of consciousness. Indeed, this is presented as something

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33 *The Broken Estate*, 179.

34 *The Broken Estate*, 29-60, 200-12; *The Irresponsible Self*, 96-111, 235-245.
of a critical *fait accompli*. For Wood, representing human experiences is not what fiction *should* do; it is what fiction does. Fiction has ‘a primary involvement with the human’ and to deny its natural interest in character ‘is essentially to deny the novel.’\(^{35}\) And it is from this basic assumption that he extrapolates the negative principles that give his criticism its traction, that allow him to move from an *is* to an *ought*. If we allow that fiction is a distinct medium with its own artistic objectives, then its aims are not to be confused with, or reduced to, the aims of journalism, sociology, philosophy or politics; it should not treat its characters as vehicles to express a moralising or didactic message, but should see them as objects of interest in their own right.

This basic stance gives Wood’s criticism its wiggle room, its ability to appear principled and coherent while retaining a degree of pragmatic flexibility and responsiveness. In offering stout critical resistance to the postmodern novel in its most visible manifestations, he positions himself as a defender of a particular set of literary values. He is not only able to conflate his aesthetic and philosophical preferences, but to argue for them on technical grounds. For he does not simply claim that the novels he criticises are lacking the humane generosity and insight he finds valuable in principle; he proposes that they are distorted as a direct consequence of their vaulting ambition. Their desire to display their extensive knowledge and analytical smarts, to expose the interconnectedness of society on a grand scale, to assimilate the functions of the journalist and the cultural theorist, undermines their fictionality because the weight of information and analysis creates a sense of contextual pressure that overwhelms their human element. The intensified fictional mode, Wood suggests, inevitably creates a form of overdetermination, a tendency to exaggerate the significance of individual events and treat individual characters as representative types or symptoms of encompassing historical or cultural forces. And to define a man in sociological terms, he argues, is in effect to allegorise him.\(^{36}\) It is to deny him his full humanity, in the sense that a sociological definition does

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\(^{36}\) ‘Virtual Prose,’ 30-1.
not recognise his individuality or potential agency. This becomes a formal problem for the fiction writer, who is assumed to have a natural interest in the creation of credible human characters, because he must somehow find a way to make the carefully selected details that are the substance of his art speak of something more than themselves. The determined medium of fiction is, in other words, striving to depict something that is defined by its resistance to determination.

Wood has dismissed this inherent tension as a ‘trivial paradox.’ But his criticism returns to it almost obsessively. It reaches to the very heart of his critique of hysterical realism and defines his method in general, because it creates the necessary fissure that admits the critical wedge. Its recurrence points to the way in which his criticism seeks to efface the artificial distinction between form and content, only to reinstate it in a provisional way that allows room for subjective and qualitative responses. In a 2005 essay that anticipates several lines of argument Wood develops in *How Fiction Works*, he argues with reference to Aristotle that in a mimetic artform the ‘burden is instantly placed not on simple verisimilitude (since it is conceded that an artist may represent something that is physically impossible), but on mimetic persuasion, since it is the artist’s task to convince us that this could have happened. Internal consistency and plausibility then become more important than referential rectitude.’

Seen in this light, fiction is most effective when it is affective. The critical judgement does not ultimately rely on an epistemological distinction between the real and the unreal, but works with a sliding scale that moves between the credible and the incredible. The critic, which is also to say the reader, enters into a relationship with the work on this basis. He validates the work by colluding with its fictional premises, but he always retains the right to withhold that validation if anything should make him feel disinclined to suspend his disbelief, if at any time he should feel unduly coerced or unconvinced. At any given point, he can explain his positive or negative responses on either the formal grounds of style or the referential grounds of mimesis, playing them against each other at his own discretion.

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37 *The Broken Estate*, 87.

38 ‘The Blue River of Truth,’ 25.
The fineness of the line that Wood walks between personal appreciation and prescriptiveness is most evident in his resistance to novels that display overtly generic qualities. The novel, as he defines it, is an anti-genre: it is ‘the great virtuoso of exceptionality: it always wiggles out of the rules thrown around it.’ Wood does not, however, take this definition to mean unboundedness or to preclude exclusivity. For his criticism does not merely identify works he regards as aesthetically successful and go on to analyse their affective qualities in formal terms; it also inverts this process to suggest that some literary modes are less conducive to aesthetic success than others. He has argued that historical fiction, like hysterical realism, tends to become stagey because it overcontextualises its material, and he has declared his lack of interest in science fiction. Allegories, parables and broad satires are also less likely to be credible works of fiction because, he argues, a judgemental determinism is intrinsic to their form. A parable he defines as ‘a tale whose form is the answer to its own question. But a parable is in many ways the opposite of a novel. A parable cannot finally tolerate or explore a mess or a jumble.’ Allegory, too, Wood sees as burdened by a sense of its own meaningfulness, which compromises its fictionality. In an essay on Coetzee’s Disgrace, he argues that it is the form and not the content of the novel that prompts his critical resistance. Discussing the novel’s central incident, he observes that ‘the novel’s shape — its very story, the allegory of the tale — does seem to insist on the necessity of Lucy’s “punishment.” … [Her] rape is overdetermined — not merely by South African politics, but by the novel itself.’ The overt structuring parallels and binarisms of the plot, he argues, invite ‘a kind of clarity of reading which is ultimately simplifying or harmful to the novel.’

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39 How Fiction Works, 83.


42 Wood also uses the novelistic and the allegorical as contrasting terms in his discussion of the treatment of ideas in Thomas Mann’s fiction. The Irresponsible Self, 244-5 [emphasis in original]; The Broken Estate., 107-8.
Though Wood is always willing to admit of exceptions to his general rules, the fact that he expresses strong aesthetic preferences built around a clear set of rhetorical oppositions has, at times, given his criticism a polemical edge. That is, he argues against didacticism in fiction in a way that, by virtue of his journalistic knack for coining a pithy phrase, can often seem didactic. He can be blunt when he dislikes something. He declared, somewhat notoriously, that Kazuo Ishiguro’s unusual novel The Unconsoled invented its own category of badness, and he has described Margaret Drabble’s attitude toward her characters as bullying and puritanical, suggesting that it is ‘as if they must all be put into the stocks of fictional predestination and pelted with adjectives.’ Nor is he averse to using parody to make a point: in addition to mocking the excesses of hysterical realism, he can be found parodying Roth, the ‘dirty realism’ of writers such as Raymond Carver, the cinematic style of Robert Stone, Paul Auster, Alan Hollinghurst, and (with cruel accuracy) the circumlocutory name-dropping mannerisms of Harold Bloom. This forthrightness, coupled with the perception of a generic bias that makes him seem a more sympathetic reader of Anton Chekhov than David Foster Wallace, has generated much of the resistance to his work. He has been called ‘a critical Canute, ordering the tide back, and hoping to see his beloved nineteenth-century forms emerging like woodhenges from the receding sea’ — a line that manages to be unfair to King Canute as well as Wood — and an ‘eloquent, exacting zealot’ who is engaged in a ‘literary crusade.’ More appositely, it has been suggested that he has constructed a

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critical world [that] has its own internal conventions, which simply will not register those of a writer such as Thomas Pynchon.46
Jeffrey Staiger has argued that Wood's critique of Pynchon 'does not attempt to explain why writers might aspire to write serious fiction that avoids plumbing the depths of character' and that it does not adequately address its subject because 'it gets stuck on inauthenticity' when this should be thought of as a premise rather than a demonstrandum.47

The charge is a serious one, implying as it does a failure to treat certain works on their merits. Though it is not borne out when considering Wood's criticism as a whole, there are moments when his generalising impulses combine with his insistent style to strike a note of disapproval in a way that gives teeth to the accusation. At such moments, he can indeed appear to move from the legitimate critical argument that a work has not successfully realised whatever it might be that the author has set out to achieve, to the more contentious position that the author's ambitions are themselves misguided or invalid. Wood has never argued in quite these terms, but he is not blameless when it comes to the widespread perception that this is the case. And the fact that he is often taken to be applying arbitrary and inappropriate standards that make him an unsympathetic reader of certain kinds of contemporary fiction indicates something of the fraught nature of the tussle that is acted out in his criticism, the way its interaction between a respectful recourse to broad contextualising gestures can lead to a form of rhetorical overextension.

His ambivalent response to Wallace's fiction is illustrative on this point. Wood's reading of Infinite Jest clearly influenced his conceptualisation of hysterical realism. Because the novel displayed many of the new genre's symptoms (comic exaggeration, cultural critique, information overload), he was able to name it as one prominent example of a general tendency. And much of the critical authority of the concept derived from this readily observable quality. There were indeed a lot of brash, ambitious, comic novels about at the time, many of them influenced by

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46 Ratcliffe, 13.

Wallace. But once the generic affiliation has been identified and named, the concept itself becomes a critical tool. Having derived the idea from a survey of contemporary fiction, Wood could then apply it to individual works, using its power of generalisation to frame his specific criticisms. The difficulty this creates is that a generalisation has a tendency to efface distinctions between works that fall within its purview, obscuring the ways in which the intentions of individual writers are stylistically and thematically different. Wood is aware of this difficulty and attempts to counter it by grounding his argument in a close reading of the text under consideration, but the specifics of his criticism, its implications and qualifications, are inevitably coloured by their contextualisation, particularly when they are presented within the confines of a short essay. The concept of hysterical realism, which Wood invested with strong negative connotations, not only blurred the distinction between description and prescription, its general applicability was sheeted home in memorable phrases — that information was the new character, that bright lights were being mistaken for evidence of habitation, that the contemporary American novel was aspiring to the condition of journalism — which underscored the assertion that the artistic failure was symptomatic of a prevailing cultural tendency and not merely an individual failure.

The point is not that, as a critic, Wood does not have the right to make generalised observations or find himself unmoved by any given work. On the contrary, the interaction between categorical and subjective responses is an intrinsic part of any evaluative criticism. The point is that one of the potential hazards of combining these necessary elements of criticism is the appearance of an inappropriate prescriptiveness, or an uncharitable dogmatism, even when these are not intended. The charge that Wood reveres nineteenth century realism and routinely derides contemporary or avant garde modes of literary expression is simply not sustainable when one considers his work as a whole. But this caricatured view of his critical stance has been enabled by the fact that he has identified a particular literary style, suggested that it is an inherently flawed mode of expression, and argued his case consistently over a period of several years with reference to a variety of fictional works.
The framework Wood adopted during the late-1990s and early-2000s gave his criticism a clear sense of perspective and a strong sense of purpose, but his response to Wallace’s short story collection *Oblivion* demonstrates the potential for a set of critical assumptions to obscure a work rather than bring it into focus. Though the review avoids the term ‘hysterical realism’, which by 2004 had taken on something of a life of its own, it begins by contextualising Wallace’s writing in familiar hysterical realist terms. What Wood accurately describes as Wallace’s interest in ‘immersion fiction’ is introduced as an example of the exceptionalism that informs the scope and ambition of much American literature. Has anyone, he asks rhetorically, ever conceived of the Great American Novel as a novella? He alludes to Roth’s remarks about modern reality out-fictionalising fiction, again summons Eliot’s notion of ‘relevant intensity’, and compares Wallace to contemporaries, such as Jonathan Franzen and Colson Whitehead, whose fiction aspires to journalistic expansiveness, cultural savvy and demotic verve. He goes on to argue that ‘Wallace’s subjects are more often cultural subjects than human subjects’ and proposes that the stories in *Oblivion* are unmoving for this reason. Because they cannot overcome their mocking, dominating, satirical impulses in order to establish the kind of empathetic human connection they seek, their characters are unlikeable and the stories succeed only in reproducing the inhuman coldness they affect to deplore.

Wood’s review of *Oblivion* is misjudged for several reasons. It is revealing, in part, because it is the work of a jobbing critic who has fallen back on some familiar tropes that might have served him well in the past but which, in this particular instance, prove to be inapt. The important issue is not Wood’s negative evaluation of Wallace’s fiction. He is, of course, free to condemn a book he finds ‘boring’, ‘frustrating’, and twice describes as ‘intolerable’. These are the kinds of subjective assessments with which one can only beg to differ. But Wood’s assumptions fail to account for essential elements of Wallace’s literary practice. His characteristic approach is to interpret a fictional work via an assessment of the author’s stylistic proclivities; his point of entry, the basis of his

48 *The Great Gatsby?*


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understanding, is the weave and texture of a writer’s prose. One of the consequences of this prioritising of style, which often leads him to praise writers on the basis of the expressive quality of their language and their mastery of detail, is that he rarely embarks on structural interpretations, unless it is to suggest the way in which plots tend to function as a manipulative form of teleological imposition. Willliam Deresiewicz has complained that Wood ‘never shows much interest in what novels mean. His criticism shuttles between the largest scale and the smallest, the development of fictional technique over the course of novelistic history and the minute particulars of authorial style.’

Wood might justly respond that novels are certainly meaningful in their minute particularities of style, and perhaps especially so. There is no question that his critical methods are often appropriate and illuminating. But they become problematic when applied to Oblivion, because it is a book that approaches meaning as a function of narrative structure. One of its defining themes is, as one story puts it, the ‘conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance’—this is, the book proposes, ‘the single great informing conflict of the American psyche.’ This conflict is built into the stories’ multi-layered, compartmentalised narratives. All are concerned with states of consciousness, and the sense of individual encagement these imply; they are particularly concerned with the possibility and the difficulty of moving from one state of consciousness to another. This is reflected in their fascination with dreams, hallucinations, memories and their frequent shifts between one frame of narrative reference and another. These shifts do not simply disturb the conventional cause-and-effect logic of plot; they deliberately appropriate conventional, even clichéd, narrative

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51 And he would have an unlikely ally in Lionel Trilling, despite their very different critical temperaments: ‘In literature style is so little the mere clothing of thought,’ observes Trilling, contradicting no less an authority than Samuel Johnson, ‘...that we may say that from the earth of the novelist’s prose spring his characters, his ideas, and even the story itself.’ Lionel Trilling, ‘Reality in America,’ The Liberal Imagination: Essays in Literature and Society (London: Mercury Books, 1961) 17.

tricks in order to subvert them. (The title story, for example, turns
the hackneyed ‘it was all a dream’ ending inside-out by attributing
the dream to a character other then the one the story leads one to
assume would be the likely dreamer — a point that Wood
misinterprets, as Wyatt Mason observed. 5) The book’s
philosophical ambitions are, in this sense, inseparable from its
complicated narrative strategies and its difficult, sometimes
deliberately alienating aesthetic choices.

Wood chooses not to analyse the reasons for these choices in
any detail. He observes that Wallace ‘seems peculiarly intent on
obstructing individual communication.’ This is true, but it is not
peculiar: it is an essential part of Wallace’s understanding of his
subject. It is his theme. Wood acknowledges this, but does not
account for it. In this sense, his reading of Oblivion is not so much
incorrect, as limited — hampered by its reluctance to consider the
structural dimension of Wallace’s imaginative endeavour, a
reluctance which perhaps derives from Wood’s characteristic
wariness about the determining influence of plot.

This suggests what would seem to be a basic disconnect
between the assumptions of the critic and the intentions of the
author. Wood habitually opposes culture to humanity; Wallace
assumes the deep entanglement of these categories, such that one
cannot begin to understand his characters as human beings unless
one also understands them as cultural subjects. Wallace’s stories, in
other words, often seek to dramatise the uncertain, precarious
state of the ideal of humanity that Wood’s criticism takes for
granted. In Wood’s review of Oblivion, we encounter a critic who
is a largely untroubled literary humanist, a critic who seeks to
affirm the expressive power of fiction. But he is reading a writer
who is struggling with the modernist collapse of faith in language’s
expressive power and the postmodern exhaustion of conventional
literary modes — a writer who considers structural constraints to
be ineluctable and definitive.

The difference in sensibility highlights two related issues.
The first derives from the assumption that Wood and Wallace
share. Both see the element of formal self-consciousness that the
late-twentieth century novel inherited from the late-nineteenth

5) Wyatt Mason, ‘Don’t like it? You don’t have to play,’ The London Review of
wytta-mason/dont-like-it-you-dont-have-to-play>.
and early-twentieth Modernists as the source of its definitive problem. In a 1996 essay on postwar English literature, Wood argued that the fiction of this period ‘often seems poised uncomfortably between experiment and nostalgia.’\(^{54}\) An acute awareness of the modern problematising of style, which he traces back to Flaubert,\(^ {55}\) runs through his criticism. The issue of style, he suggests, is the locus of the conflict between the desire for formal innovation and a more traditional commitment to character and realism. It is the problem that Postmodern experimenters and conventional realists have in common. In broad terms, it implies two possible directions for the contemporary novel, as one of the more astute respondents to Wood’s criticism has noted.\(^ {56}\)

The second issue is evoked by the different assumptions of Wood and Wallace. Wood is not opposed to formal innovation but is clearly more comfortable than Wallace with the conventions of realist fiction. Wallace has his aesthetic ideas and Wood clearly has rather different tastes. The issue for the critic is how best to negotiate this difference. To understand a work of fiction, the critic must make an effort to understand its creative intentions. Yet absolute sympathy is impossible and maintaining a degree of critical distance from the work’s intentions is essential to the act of criticism. The critic will have his own preferences, his own ideas, but if he presses his agenda too far or in too peremptory a fashion, he risks delegitimising his arguments and undermining his ability to advance a positive agenda.

Wood is aware of the criticisms that have been levelled at his work and has shown a willingness to engage with them. In 2004, the first

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\(^{55}\) *The Broken Estate*, 48-55.

\(^{56}\) Zadie Smith has at times felt the full force of Wood’s critical disapproval, but unlike a number of other well-known novelists she has elected to respond to his criticisms graciously and intelligently. In 2001, she wrote a thoughtful reply to post-9/11 polemic about hysterical realist fiction that Wood published in the *Guardian*, and his influence is often felt in her own literary criticism. Her 2008 essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’ does not mention Wood by name, but can be read as a direct reply to some of the formal issues raised in his criticism. Zadie Smith, ‘This is how it feels to me,’ *The Guardian* (13 October 2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan>; ‘Two Directions for the Novel,’ *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009) 71-96.
issue of the literary journal *n+1* ran an editorial that attacked the critical culture of the *New Republic*. The editors singled out Wood, accusing him of having ‘narrow aesthetician’s interests and idiosyncratic tastes’ and adding, by way of a rhetorical flourish, that he ‘seemed to want to be his own grandfather.’\(^{57}\) He replied with an essay, which was published in the third issue, that is perhaps the most direct statement of critical principles he has yet committed to print.\(^{58}\) He justifiably rejected the charges of unwarranted negativity and narrowness of taste, pointing out that he has, over the course of his career, written appreciatively about many novelists who have pursued radically different styles. The challenge for the literary critic, he went on to argue, is to find a way to combine critique and redescription, to write in a way that is affirming and not merely negative. He claimed to be drawn to ‘the idea of a criticism that does three things at once: speaks about fiction and verse as writers speak about their craft; writes criticism journalistically, with verve and style, for a common reader; and bends criticism back toward the academy in the hope of influencing the kind of writing that is done there (of course, such criticism has also learned a great deal from academic scholarship and theory).’\(^{59}\) Because the literary critic expresses himself in the same medium as the artists he discusses, Wood argued, he must find a metaphorical language adequate to his task, a persuasive language that can approach the work on its own terms. Most importantly, he emphasised that, ideally, the novel should be understood as an autonomous artform: ‘Give the novel back its aesthetic autonomy and we will discover once again the great

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58 The essay is listed on the contents page under the heading ‘Apologia Pro Vita Sua’, which means ‘a defence of one’s life’ and alludes to the autobiography of the nineteenth century theologian John Henry Newman. This rather cheeky reference, perhaps inspired by Wood’s interest in theological questions, suggests that the editors were not quite willing to let Wood escape the charge of being at least a little bit old-fashioned. Interestingly, the same issue carries a review of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shalimar the Clown* by Siddhartha Deb that strongly critiques Rushdie’s characterisation in terms that bear the distinct stamp of Wood’s influence.

59 ‘A Reply to the Editors,’ 137.
circularity of the form: that the novel justifies itself by making an enquiry that it alone can make.\textsuperscript{60}

There is a sense in which Wood's combination of analysis, argument and aestheticism, his insistence that the meaning of a literary work cannot be disentangled from the act of appreciation, is informed by his practice as a public critic. Though academic critics and theorists often do admire the works they analyse and teach, their personal admiration is largely beside the point, professionally speaking. It tends to be suppressed in the name of scholarly objectivity. The institutional imperative for literary studies to act as a credible academic discipline has rendered suspect critical approaches that seem merely impressionistic.\textsuperscript{61} The theoretical turn in the latter decades of the twentieth century, which gave literary studies a welcome air of philosophical gravitas and intellectual rigour, can be seen, in part, as a response to such institutional pressures. For the public critic, however, the issue of value remains alive and, in an important sense, unavoidable. Geoffrey Hartman has argued that, irrespective of developments in academic discourse, the basic mode of the literary critical essay in the public realm has remained more or less unchanged since the days of Addison and Steele.\textsuperscript{62} There are some elementary reasons for this. A work of criticism addressed to a non-academic audience needs to perform certain basic functions. It must describe and

\textsuperscript{60} Wood's argument here echoes a point often made by Kundera: 'The novel's sole raison d'être is to say what only the novel can say.' 'A Reply to the Editors,' 134; Milan Kundera, \textit{The Art of the Novel}, translated by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial Classics, 2003) 36.

\textsuperscript{61} This need for self-definition and self-justification would seem to be intrinsic to literary criticism in its institutionalised form. As Carol Atherton has shown, strong doubts about literature's viability as a legitimate field of academic inquiry were being voiced from its inception as an independent discipline in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the early literature courses of the 1880s, she observes, 'literary criticism was largely absent, the evaluative process that would seem to lie at the heart of criticism, with all its connotations of subjectivity and personal opinion, was difficult to reconcile with the demands of professionalism.' She goes on to argue that the professionalisation of literary studies thus came to be marked by 'a continuing tension surrounding the relationship between amateur and professional, between academic practise and the needs and values of the wider public.' Carol Atherton, \textit{Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 6-8 [emphasis in original].

contextualise; it must avoid obscure or technical jargon. Most importantly, the public critic is expected to provide an opinion about the work’s merits and faults. The compulsion to confront a simple question — is this book any good? — naturally leads to a more difficult aesthetic question: how does one define ‘good’?

For Wood, the question is fundamental. From the very beginning of his career he set himself in opposition to the anti-aesthetic tendencies of academic literary criticism, and specifically against the theoretical predilections that came to predominate within the academy in the 1980s. In 1990, in the letters pages of the London Review of Books, he embroiled himself in a controversy about the interpretation of Shakespeare, sparked by the critic Terence Hawkes, that came to turn on this question. The correspondence flowed for the better part of two years.\(^63\) The arguments, which were often heated, largely followed the prescribed template for such cultural skirmishes: Hawkes’s defenders argued that the concept of Shakespeare’s greatness and the meanings of his plays were cultural constructions, while Wood and some others argued that texts have intrinsic aesthetic qualities that are not reducible to social and historical determinants. These arguments were accompanied by accusations of ignorance, bad faith and sinister political intent, which reached something of a nadir when John Drakakis made the inane assertion that Wood was advocating an ‘authoritarian metaphysics’ and that his humanism was complicit with ‘Thatcherite bureaucratic centralism.’\(^64\) But beyond the general air of bootless antagonism and cross-purposes that inevitably characterises such exchanges, the controversy, though somewhat dated, is of interest for the way in which Wood’s stance anticipates some of the concerns of his later work. The specific lacuna he identifies in the various theoretical approaches he lumps together, rather insouciantly, under the umbrella term ‘cultural materialism’ is that they do not allow room for authorial intention, for the possibility that the author can be a product of his particular time and place and yet


\(^64\) ‘Bardbiz’ (14 June 1990).
resist its assumptions. Such theories, he argues, claim to be politically radical but are in fact deeply conservative, because they deny the work’s true complexity and its true expressive potential in the name of an ideological determinism. He proposes further that cultural materialism not only devalues the literary object by negating its artistic intentions but discounts the reader’s natural responsiveness. When reading there are, he declares, ‘moments of release, of insight, of radical breakthrough, which are beyond the grip of ideological categorisation.’ This leads him to an argument about the metaphorical basis of criticism itself, in which he aligns himself with Walter Benjamin’s assertion that criticism must speak the language of artists. Literature, he argues, ‘challenges the thoughtful critic, the intelligent critic, to formulate a language of originality adequate to the text under discussion.’ Though the theoretical vocabulary of cultural materialism affects to be technical and precise, he proposes that it is in fact limited: it is ‘more metaphorical, more approximate, more gestural, than any critical language before it.’ He recognises its historical origins and its rationale, but rejects the possibility that such technical approaches can ever be adequate. Literary criticism, he writes,

was born into intellectual status early in this century hating its own inexactitude, its dependence on the slippery polyphony and polysemy of narrative and language. Criticism needed to assert its difference from literature. Hence the attempt, every twenty years or so, to create a rigorous, self-contained ‘science’, a series of purifications: I.A. Richards with his grand, pseudo-scientific theories, the New Criticism with its rigid lexicon, the anthropological, sociological and philosophical languages of Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. My point was that this constant striving for precision is not bad, so much as


inevitable and doomed. It is a condition of literary criticism, and one about which it should be aware, even humble.\(^{69}\)

This understanding of literary criticism is not necessarily anti-theoretical or anti-academic. Wood professes to admire Barthes’s criticism, which embraces elements of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, even though he disagrees with its emphasis. He has argued that Barthes’s attack on the ‘reality effect’ in fiction is ‘ninety-nine percent right.’\(^{70}\) But the one percent disagreement is a significant point of difference. For Barthes, the illusions of realist fiction are not merely false but ideologically suspect. Fiction’s manipulative techniques need to be exposed for what they are; the oppressive concept of the author standing behind the work as the guarantor of its meaningfulness needs to be debunked in order to liberate the reader. To this end, Barthes distinguishes between the *work*, meaning the physical object, and the *text*, which he defines as a methodological field that is ‘*experienced only in an activity of production,*’ proposing that the distinction can be considered analogous to Jacques Lacan’s distinction between *reality* and the *real*, where the former is displayed and the latter is demonstrated.\(^{71}\) The movement of his criticism is from the former to the latter; the movement of Wood’s criticism, however, is from the illumination of technique toward the recognition of the work’s expressive function. Barthes wants to destroy the work’s illusions in the name of an open-ended text; Wood sees the text, in Barthes’s sense, as a negotiated space that exists in the service of illusion, and that without its illusory aspect, which is to say its mimetic aspect, the fictionality of fiction becomes redundant.

Wood takes up the point in a 2004 essay. Proposing that a gulf in understanding exists between literary academics and professional writers, and that this has had a detrimental effect on the state of public criticism, he goes on to observe:

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\(^{69}\) ‘Bardbiz,’ (11 October 1990) [emphasis in original].


This absence of a general, non-academic literary criticism is the speaking void which tells us that writers, though apparently closer than ever to academics, are actually miles from them. The void is the public space that might have been. Many contemporary writers are familiar with the procedures of post-structuralism and deconstruction. They can talk about decentred texts and self-reflexive narration; they acknowledge that a text has an unconscious, and that it can be read against the grain of its author's apparent intentions. They see that Eminem's lyrics might be a 'text' in the way that Middlemarch is a text. They are often keener than many scholars to open up the canon. But they diverge from most academic critics, theoretical or otherwise, in two massive areas: intention and value.  

Wood's overstated claim about the absence of non-academic literary criticism is partially refuted by the fact of his own existence, but his point about intention and value can be read as an act of self-definition. In addition to being a professional critic, he is the author of a novel and is married to a novelist: he sides with the writers. He sees the critical act as following from this empathetic identification. 'I've always wanted to be a novelist,' he observed in an interview. 'The greatest compliment that is ever paid to me as a critic is when writers come up to me and say, “I think the reason I like your criticism is that you see things as a writer does, from the inside. You really look at the language, you're speaking to me as a writer,”' How Fiction Works, he claims, 'asks a critic's questions and offers a writer's answers.' And writers 'are often suspicious of the way academic criticism confounds or even nullifies authorial intention in pursuit of the symptomatic'; they are 'intensely interested in what might be called aesthetic success; they have to be, because in order to create something successful one must learn about other people's successful creations.'  

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72 How Fiction Works, 2.


74 How Fiction Works, 2.

75 ‘The Slightest Sardine,’ 11.
claims, in other words, that value follows intention on the grounds that it is not possible to understand or assess a work without first trying to sympathise with its artistic endeavour.

This is the broad basis of his critical project. For Wood, it is the illusory nature of fictional representation that frees it from ideology. He wants to reinstate into the text, in the Barthesian sense of the word, a sense of appreciation that avoids the ideological suspiciousness, and acknowledges the author rather than dissolving his intentions. In contrast to Barthes’s iconoclasm, Wood’s criticism is conciliatory. This project is not rendered invalid by the fact that Wood has, at times, conveyed the impression that he is unsympathetic to certain kinds of writing. Indeed, the paradoxes of Wood’s critical practice are a result of this attempt to close the gap between writer and reader — to occupy these roles simultaneously as a critic. His critical project is to re-establish criticism as a practice and not simply as a theoretical exercise, which he does not by denying theoretical understanding but by insisting that, ultimately, the practice is the theory. As he observes in his discussion of Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*: ‘the only means of arguing for the literary — for feeling over reason, imagination over thought — is via the literary.’\(^\text{76}\) The love of metaphor that is evident in his work — it is one of the most recognisable features of his style — is part of his solution to the problem of finding an appropriate critical language. Discussing the fiction of V.S. Pritchett, he writes that ‘the metaphorical is central to writing, and central to character; that characters expand via metaphor — they are, as the word suggests, carried over, changed into something else in the process of using metaphor — and that readers expand metaphorically when they encounter metaphor.’\(^\text{77}\) The critic is, in effect, translating his impression of the fictional work into his own fictional language. Each metaphor is a small explosion of fiction. Its purpose is to invite recognition. The key point, however, is that it cannot demand recognition. And this element of uncertainty, like the provisional, negotiated quality of the key terms *life* (or ‘lifeness’), *truth* and *the-*

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\(^\text{77}\) *The Irresponsible Self*, 285.
real — each of which refers to and is defined by the others — that gives fiction its potency and its special claim on our attention.

For Wood, the encounter with fiction is never merely aesthetic. A work of fiction can compel, but it cannot coerce, and it is precisely because this process is contingent and voluntary that it is philosophically significant and, ultimately, affirming. Because fiction is a mimetic artform, because it cleaves to the tangible and the specific, relying on concrete details even when it is not being realistic in any strict sense, it resists abstraction and dogmatism, particularly the intangibility of religious dogma and faith. ‘Fiction asks us to judge reality,’ Wood observes; ‘religion asserts its reality.’

He proposes, in other words, that fiction is inescapably secular.

Wood was born in 1965 and raised in an evangelical sect that broke away from the Church of England in the 1970s. He belonged to a charismatic congregation that endorsed ‘speaking in tongues, dancing in the spirit, ecstatic worship, healing, miracles, prophecies.’ As he writes in The Broken Estate: ‘I saw people shivering with ecstasies, people clutching at God with their hands raised. I saw people dancing in the aisles, whirling and writhing.’

His childhood was happy, but passed in the command economy of evangelical Christianity. Life was centrally planned, all negotiations had to pass by Jesus’s desk.

‘At the age of fifteen or so,’ he remembers,

I sat down with a notebook and tore myself away from belief in God. It is a process that brings great unhappiness to others, but not to oneself. It is like undressing. You are so quickly, so easily free. One writes down four or five objections to belief in God. Before one has read any atheist or sceptical philosophy one finds that one has apparently invented the old, old objections to God — the problem of evil and suffering in the world, the senseless difficulty of faith, the cruelty of heaven and hell, the paganism of Jesus’s “sacrifice”, one’s own lack of religious experience.

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78 The Broken Estate., xv.
79 The Broken Estate., 293–4.
80 The Broken Estate., 298.
Wood's description of this moment of intellectual rebellion — a moment he has revisited on numerous occasions in his critical writings and which informs his only novel — conveys something of the complex of emotional associations involved in the act of rejection. The violence of the verb (‘tore’) suggests the difficulty, the wrenching anxiety of his apostasy. But this anxiety is social in its origin, not intellectual. The falling away of faith itself is easy, as natural an action as disrobing, for it is merely to acknowledge the self-evident, to discover the pre-existing fact of doubt, and thus arrive at the truth of one’s self. The objections to belief turn out not to be obscure, but glaring. Wood finds they are at once deeply personal, deeply his own (he has arrived at them without consulting other authorities), and that they are retrospectively validated by the fact that they are not his alone (they agree with those authorities anyway).

But the most important word in the above passage is ‘free’. It is a word that carries considerable weight in Wood’s critical lexicon. Fiction he defines in the introduction to The Broken Estate as a ‘special realm of freedom’. The true writer, he declares at the end of How Fiction Works, is a ‘free servant of life’. As the paradoxical phrase ‘free servant’ suggests, Wood’s notion of freedom is not straightforward. It is presented as an essentially liberal notion, in the sense that individual freedom of conscience is assumed to be a positive value. But the intellectual freedom Wood claims is not absolute; it is always negotiated, always grounded, always constrained by worldly considerations. As an ideal, as a concept, it exists in a dependent structural relation with the illiberal dogmatism it rejects; while, in a pragmatic sense, it has limits that will always be proscribed by the stubbornness of facts.


82 The Broken Estate, xv.

83 How Fiction Works, 187.
Wood's atheism can be understood in this light not merely as one prominent aspect of his intellectual position, but as intrinsic to his view of literature. His criticism develops a counter-theology of fiction, in which the reader, in the act of engaging with the fictional work, undertakes the movement of religious belief but withholds final assent, denying the moment of intellectual surrender that is necessary to make a belief genuinely religious. The necessary negotiation that takes place within the fictional work between its willed meaningfulness and the determined palpability of the details of its imagined world naturally evokes the metaphysical tension between ideas and reality. By allowing us to observe and to respond to its depiction of this fundamental tension, the fictional work also suggests the way in which the issues of critical authority and individual responsiveness are involved in the question of critical autonomy, which is also to say personal autonomy. Wood's fictional creation Thomas Bunting observes that 'life is always a struggle for freedom.' In Wood's criticism, this struggle is enacted in the critic's assertion of intellectual independence from the imposition of structural determination, an assertion in which his authority is seen to be resistant to any higher or controlling authority.

Wood's criticism, in fact, evokes several competing freedoms, which are not always clearly delineated. Fiction is, in the first instance, a realm of freedom in the sense that a writer has creative licence to invent anything he pleases and write in any style he finds congenial. But Wood also claims (reasonably enough) the critic's right to be unmoved or unconvinced by the writer's creation. This is often asserted in cases where he becomes conscious of the controlling hand of the author — as when, for example, he complains about the 'grinding plots' of Thomas Hardy's 'deeply coercive' late novels, in which Hardy seems to act like 'God himself, plotting against his characters.' This implies a third kind of freedom, applicable to the fictional creation itself: the freedom from overt authorial coercion that is exemplified in the illusion of independence Wood finds in the characters of Tolstoy and

84 The Broken Estate, xiv-xv.
85 The Book Against God, 16.
Chekhov. Strictly speaking, this third freedom is not distinct, but a rhetorical projection of the critic’s personal response. What Wood is really suggesting is that he has detected a tendentious aspect to the work and resents being bullied toward a predetermined conclusion. He is, in other words, claiming his right not to be told what to think about the characters and events he is reading about, not to have their potential meaning forced upon him. Yet in positing a freedom of characterisation Wood also makes an implicit argument about fiction as the point of intersection between the beliefs of the writer and the reader. The author is assumed to have an intellectual, aesthetic or expressive purpose, as well as a desire to render his fictional creation credible and coherent, a desire to give it a plausible tangibility even if it is not realistic, which he attempts to realise in his refinements of style. In the work itself, with its presumed mimetic basis, the interaction between thought and reality is dramatised, and thus rendered observable, in the actions of the characters. And the critical reader is placed in a position where he can only judge the ideas and depictions he encounters against his own sense of reality. ‘Each work of art, and each work of reading,’ Hartman has observed, ‘is potentially a demonstration of freedom: of the capacity we have for making sense by a mode of expression that is our own, despite political, religious, or psychological interference.’ Wood’s approach to fiction, his critical methodology, is an attempt to put this idea into practice.

The concept of freedom, then, acts as both a metaphor and as a philosophical principle. It is the positive pole of a rhetorical opposition by which Wood is able to indicate where he thinks a work has life, capaciousness, gusto; while fictional shortcomings are often described in antithetical terms, suggesting constraint and oppression. In fiction, he observes, the ‘regime of fact is, necessarily, despotic’: facts are used to give fictional descriptions their palpability, but for the work to succeed the author must ‘make a revolution with this description-explanation.’ The revolutionary battleground is the struggle with form, which in a work of fiction ‘often bullies characters into formal self-


88 *The Broken Estate*, 270.
presentation, in a way that has more to do with the conventions of art than the anarchy of existence. The metaphors here — *regime, despotic, revolution, anarchy* — have a political flavour but do not indicate a political agenda. They are internalised, subjective; they are meant to appeal to our personal sense of independence. We all like to feel free, to feel that our thoughts and impressions are our own, just as we all dislike being bullied and oppressed. In this way, Wood’s evocation of a metaphorical freedom of character is naturally collusive, while the internalisation of the tension between subjective consciousness and its interaction with necessary structural limitations implies the philosophical orientation of his thought. In looking to incidental details for moments of revelation, Wood’s criticism searches for the sudden rupturing of structural constraints, the flash of insight that defies ideology. The self-forgetting of the character finds its parallel in the self-forgetting of the engaged reader, who has given himself over to the illusion. In its focus on these intimate aspects of fiction, Wood’s criticism, though sometimes taken to be dogmatic, implies an element of dialogue. It is addressed to his fellow authors as authors, and to his fellow readers as readers. And when it states ‘I notice this’ or ‘I feel this’, the implicit question is: don’t you? Much like fiction itself, it asks for validation, rather than demands it.

Wood has been called ‘a modern Matthew Arnold,’ but, apart from the fact that both writers belong to a literary critical tradition that might be broadly characterised as humanist, the comparison is not accurate. Indeed, the philosophical differences between the two critics are far more significant than any similarities. The rather superficial reasons for the comparison would seem to be that Wood, like Arnold, is a forthright defender of an idea of literary value and is interested in the relationship between literature and religious belief. But, unlike Arnold, Wood has never sought to use his literary criticism to advance a socio-political agenda. Other than to suggest that fiction can make us better observers of reality, he is not given to making motherhood statements about the socially cohesive or individually refining aspects of the literary experience. Furthermore, he explicitly

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89 *The Irresponsible Self*, 288.

rejects a key Arnoldian tenet. In the essay that concludes *The Broken Estate*, he discusses the attempt by Arnold and Ernest Renan to address the challenge to religious faith represented by nineteenth century scientific rationalism and he is scathing about the ‘sour disingenuousness’ of their reinvention of religious belief as a mere structure of feeling or a shared cultural heritage. This secularising equivocation, he argues, tries to rescue religion from the ravages of scientific rationalism, but in practice only undermines it, because it judges the crucial question: whether the foundational claims of religion are, in fact, true. A decade later, he develops a similar argument against Terry Eagleton’s critique of the ‘new atheists’ Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. It is not enough, Wood argues, for Eagleton to defend the Christian religion by pointing out that Jesus was an admirable man. This elides the issue of Jesus’s divinity, which is not incidental to Christianity but central to it. If the story of the Gospels is understood as a ‘mere political allegory,’ he points out, ‘it no longer has any power to command belief.’ Against Eagleton’s suggestion, following Wittgenstein, that religious belief is best thought of as a practice, rather than as an adherence to a set of propositions about the the nature of reality, Wood argues that all religion necessarily involves an acceptance of both practice and proposition, and that it is the implausibility of religious doctrines as truth propositions that leads many people to abandon their faith.

For Wood, then, the choice between belief and unbelief is clear: one cannot occupy the quasi-religious ground that Eagleton tries to stake out. Yet he also insists that the negation of religious belief remains structurally indebted to the proposition it denies. ‘The child of evangelicalism,’ he writes, ‘if he does believe, inherits nevertheless a suspicion of indifference. He is always evangelical. He rejects the religion he grew up with, but he rejects it religiously. He has buried evangelical belief but he has not buried evangelical choice, which seems to him the only important dilemma.’

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91 *The Broken Estate*, 288.

92 James Wood, ‘God in the Quadrangle’, *The New Yorker* (31 August 2009) 78 [emphasis in original].

93 *The Broken Estate*, 293.
And it is on this question that Wood’s criticism often assumes its greatest urgency. In his essay ‘Dostoevsky’s God’, for example, he considers the self-tormenting psychology of Dostoevsky’s characters: the way their desperate but frustrated attempts to confess, to reveal the truth of themselves, arrive at ‘the crucial point at which secular psychology meets religious mystery.’

For Wood, however, the real interest in Dostoevsky’s late fiction lies with its encompassing theological preoccupations. Dostoevsky was repelled by the rationalist, proto-communist ideologies of his day and sought to formulate a Christian response, adapting the secular form of the novel to his religious purpose. Wood, echoing the sly comparison of his own evangelical childhood to life in a ‘command economy’, points out that Dostoevsky seems to imply a parallel between political and religious absolutism. For Dostoevsky, the alternative to the nightmarish social program proposed by the revolutionary Shigalev in The Possessed, which is decried as a system in which ‘all are slaves and equals in slaves,’ is the ideal of true Christian equality expressed by Father Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov — an equality based, rather unhappily, on the principle of universal guilt. These conflicting views, Wood observes, are described in almost identical language: ‘The forced enslavement and forced equality of Shigalev’s proto-communism has been replaced by the willing enslavement and ecstatic equality of Christian penitence.’

Wood’s reading of Dostoevsky turns on the issue of the inherent unreasonableness of Christian faith, which is given its most powerful expression in Ivan Karamazov’s devastating denunciation of God in the fifth book of The Brothers Karamazov, and in the legend of the Grand Inquisitor that Ivan tells to illustrate his argument. Wood has called this famous act of principled rejection ‘an unanswerable attack on the cruelty of God’s hiddenness’ and has said that he finds it personally decisive.

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94 The Irresponsible Self, 49.
95 The Irresponsible Self, 54.
atheism: he ‘is one of those atheists who stand on the rung just below faith; he is an almost-believer.’\(^97\) And in the closing pages of his essay, Wood sets out what he sees as the implications of the crucial issue of theodicy — that is, the attempt to reconcile the idea of an omnipotent and benevolent God with the reality of worldly suffering — and the manifest inadequacy of the rationalisations that have been offered to explain away the problem of evil. The attempt to provide a logical justification for human suffering, he argues, founders on the issue of free will. To the argument that the existence of evil is the price of human freedom, since to deny the possibility of doing evil is to deny genuine choice, Ivan replies with two broad points. The first, as Wood summarises, is to declare ‘that future harmony is not worth present tears.’\(^98\) The second is to challenge the idea that there is something inherently good about freedom. One of the implications of Ivan’s argument, Wood points out, is that ‘we will probably not be very free when we get to heaven, and heaven sounds like a nice place. So why are we all so ragingly and horribly free on earth?\(^99\) The promised ideal merely emphasises that the painful reality of present existence is incomprehensible and illogical. The Grand Inquisitor flings a version of this idea in the face of the returned Christ. People do not want to be free, he tells him: freedom is a terrible burden; what people truly desire is subjection; they want to be liberated from the difficult necessity of choice.

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor has sinister totalitarian implications by design. The sly aspect of the Inquisitor’s argument is that Dostoevsky has a man who is supposedly one of God’s official representatives on Earth in league with the Devil. In the figure of the Inquisitor, Dostoevsky combines his loathing for the Roman Catholic church with his loathing for the revolutionary program of the Russian socialists. He describes what he regards as the hideous logical consequences of giving priority to material concerns, such as bread and worldly power, while ignoring the human need for spiritual salvation. But the great intellectual advantage the Devil has over God in this argument is that he does

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\(^{97}\) *The Irresponsible Self*, 56.

\(^{98}\) *The Irresponsible Self*, 57.

\(^{99}\) *The Irresponsible Self*, 57–8.
not have to take ultimate responsibility for evil. He is only a part of creation; he is not its master. (Later in the novel, Dostoevsky has the Devil appear to Ivan in a vision and declare: ‘I didn’t create the world, and I am not answerable for it.’) On these grounds, Wood suggests that *The Brothers Karamazov* is ambivalent about ideas. It is in love with ideas in the sense that it wants to dramatise them, to demonstrate the terrible consequences of modern rationalism, and to provide a justification for its alternative Christian vision. But it also fears ideas because it recognises this Christian vision is not logical, not ultimately capable of being justified in this way, for if God exists he must be answerable for the world. Thus the novel cannot, and does not, answer Ivan’s challenge directly. Alyosha’s response to Ivan’s denunciation is not to reason with him, but to kiss him — a gesture that implies the existence of a spirit of compassionate forgiveness, an empathy beyond words, but one that abandons the field of reason and ideas altogether.

*The Brothers Karamazov* advocates Christianity not by reasoned argument but by passionate exhortation. As a result, Wood argues, Dostoevsky’s celebrated ‘dialogism’ — his novelistic dramatisation of intellectual conflict, both within his characters’ psyches and in the arguments between characters — collapses in the face of his abandonment of ideas. The novel’s Christian message is overpowered by the force of Ivan’s rejection. It can only insist that, as Wood puts it, ‘Christ is not an idea’ — in other words, that the promise of universal harmony and forgiveness Christ represents cannot be explained by any worldly standards of reasonableness, because it is by definition unworldly. Dostoevsky does not simply dramatise the conflict between reason and faith; he seeks to push the opposition to an extreme point, to force the issue, to make the choice seem absolute and unavoidable. This is a reactionary wager that, Wood suggests, one can only refuse. To draw the otherworldly claims of religion into the worldly medium of novelistic discourse is merely to underscore the senselessness of

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the suffering they are meant to alleviate, for the world of the novel is Ivan's world of reason and ideas, a world full of the terrible and meaningless suffering that repudiates the notions of justice and forgiveness — a world that, in this painful sense, resembles our own world.

Wood's advocacy of atheism as a principled rejection of the truth claims of religion — what he calls 'a theologically engaged atheism that resembles disappointed belief' — is intrinsic to his definition of fiction and his understanding of its ultimate significance. It is fiction that leads us to Wood's evangelical choice, which is not Dostoevsky's reactionary choice between two unpalatable absolutes, between an irrational faith and a deathless materialism, but a choice between a surrender to a religious dogma that is permanently enclosed, a suffocating room with all the exits sealed, and the possibility of discovery, of continuation, of independence: an acceptance of the burden of freedom. Where Arnold attempts to paper over the awkward question of religion's lack of empirical validity by arguing that religious texts can be understood as a form of poetry, Wood looks to the narrative form of the novel to draw a sharp line between the religious and the non-religious view of the world. The underlying principle is the principle of narrative itself. Narrative, he argues, 'corrugates dogma, puts truths in motion. ... [Its] continuousness — this happened and then this happened, for these reasons — is secular rather than religious, because it is endless the way life is, rather than eternal in the way religion promises. ... Religion works to attest narrative. In place of narrative's bottomlessness, religion poses the parable — a story that answers in advance the questions that it raises.' Rather than assimilate the Bible into the wider literary corpus by treating it as a culturally influential document whose truths have been downgraded from literal to metaphorical, Wood insists upon a clear distinction between Biblical and novelistic texts, defining the modern novel in opposition to the privileged status the Bible claims for itself. The four gospels of the New Testament, he argues, 'are enemies of the novel':

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102 'God in the Quad,' 79.

They are not narratives, they are witnessings that occasionally fall into narrative. The life of Jesus is not conceived by the writers of the gospels as the story of an individual whose fate, unknown until the moment of reading, may interest us. Jesus did not live the life of a character in a modern novel. He was a story already told, and he felt this. He existed to fulfil the prophets; he is the completion of evidence. The whole machine of persuasion that is the secular, modern novel — verisimilitude, a believable character, an uncertainty about meanings and endings, the passing of time, the description of place — is irrelevant. The task of the gospels is not to persuade novelistically, but to convince forensically. ... The proclamation of divinity has nothing to do with the establishment of credibility as we understand it in literature.104

The difference Wood is proposing here is formal, a result of the contrasting narrative styles of the modern novel and the ancient parable. He posits the process of narrative as a liberating response to the structural oppressions of plot. But he is also suggesting a fundamental difference in intent: a difference that indicates his understanding of the relationship between the modern reader and the literary text. In Wood's criticism, the imposition of God's will parallels the imposition of authorial will. The author is understood to be, as Flaubert claimed, the God of his own creation. This acknowledgement of authorial intention is crucial to Wood because his criticism is a demonstration of independence. For Wood, this can only be achieved through the engagement with style. His criticism is a genuinely literary criticism in this sense. It is in the act of granting style priority, in the intellectual movement from style to content, that he rejects the arrogation of the critic's interpretive freedom to any higher authority. It is by cleaving to the palpable, the recognisable, the verifiable, the experiential that the critic is able engage with the work as an equal — an interlocutor rather than a passive receiver.

The critical freedom to interpret and judge is the liberal freedom of secularism, but in Wood's hands it is ultimately a secularism that, like Dostoevsky's Christianity, both loves and fears

ideas. His criticism, in its resistance to the exaggerated and the allegorical, enacts its own resistance to the philosophical. In 2003, he wrote an appreciative review of Coetzee’s novel of ideas Elizabeth Costello, which he read as literature’s response to philosophy. He concluded with the argument that to enter into the life of a fictional character ‘is a kind of religion, akin to the worship of a God who gives us nothing back. If it represents the paganisation of belief in God, it also represents the sacralisation of belief in fiction. Because, like suffering and death, fiction, too, is not an idea.’

The echo of Wood’s reading of Dostoevsky is striking. Christ is not an idea, he suggested, because the purity of the ideal he represents disconnects that ideal from the brutal world in which he was put to death; he is supposed to represent an idea, but his claim to divinity is incompatible with his materiality and the materiality of the suffering of humanity. Fiction, too, is not an idea because it is tangible and specific. Coetzee, in a typically lucid passage, sets out the essential problem for the literary artist who seeks to combine intellectual content with realistic representation. Realism, he writes, ‘has never been comfortable with ideas’:

It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations — walks in the countryside, conversations — in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world.

Wood’s criticism acknowledges this reality. If literary argumentation must take a literary form, he argues, this means that ideas cannot be won, that they are vulnerable. It also means that criticism itself cannot win, that it cannot resolve the tension

103 'A Frog’s Life,’ 16 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n20/james-w-wood/a-frogs-life>.
105 'A Frog’s Life,’ 16 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n20/james-w-wood/a-frogs-life>.
between gesture and argumentation, between the subjective
tangibility of the critic’s personal responses and his need to
objectify and rationalise those responses. And this is a secular
ambiguity for which we should be thankful.
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