



# **LITERARY PRAGMATISM**

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## Preface

The following essays do not make a sustained argument on behalf of the efficacy of an approach to literature and literary criticism I am calling “literary pragmatism.” They do attempt to show how such an approach can be grounded in the aesthetic philosophy propounded by John Dewey and can be developed in a more particular way by focusing specifically on literature than Dewey’s own synoptic focus on all the manifestations of art in *Art as Experience* allows. Perhaps this entails taking the pragmatic view of art in a different direction than Dewey himself might have done, or questioning the views expressed by others influenced by Dewey, but I believe that my explication of a pragmatic form of criticism remains true to the underlying principle Dewey wanted to advance—that art is indeed a singular human activity, valuable for its own sake beyond the multifarious uses to which it might be put, but that its value is to be found not in the particularity of the art object—its tangible “beauty”—but in the existential event of expanded consciousness by which the work of art makes itself known.

The first section, “John Dewey and Literary Criticism” explicates Dewey’s theory of art at length, more or less chapter by chapter. Here I am less interested in subsuming Dewey’s book to the selectivity and shapeliness of a critical essay and more concerned to elucidate the progression of Dewey’s thinking on a granular level. In this section I also attempt to show how a pragmatic conception of criticism might function as a corrective to some of the less tenable assumptions of New Criticism.

“Dewey’s Disciples” focuses on perhaps the two most important exponents of Dewey’s thought, Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish—in Rorty’s case, surely the most important philosopher to adopt (and extend) Dewey’s conception of pragmatism in the post-World War II era, while Fish formulated probably the most significant critical approach drawing on Dewey’s emphasis on the role of reader/audience in the acts of perception and interpretation—his famous “reader response” theory. In the Rorty essay, I take some exception to his somewhat superficial dismissal of “aestheticism” as it applies to the work of Vladimir Nabokov.

In “Pragmatic Applications,” I attempt to pull away even more fully from a purely explicative approach to the particulars of *Art as Experience* in exploring some of the implications of thinking about literature from a pragmatic perspective, first as literature might provide a beneficial model for thinking about politics (“Liberalism and Literature”) and then in a critique

of what I find to be seriously deficient thinking about literature by Steven Pinker in his book, *The Blank Slate*. In a third essay on Derek Attridge's *The Work of Literature*, I discuss Attridge's experience-based approach to teaching and reading literature in all of its "singularity" as a phenomenon of consciousness, but ultimately as well attempt to reconcile this singular raw experience as Attridge evokes it with the needs of literary criticism to describe and analyze a work of literature as an "object."

The final essay is a response to Mary Jane Jacob's book, *Dewey for Artists*, published in 2018. I have used the essay (not quite a review) to both recapitulate the core principles of Dewey's philosophy of art as delineated in the first section and to address the misperceptions specifically of *Art as Experience* that I feel a book like Jacob's could encourage. *Dewey for Artists* is assuredly a well-intentioned book, but its exposition of Dewey's concept of "aesthetic experience" falls short of capturing what he really means by "aesthetic."

Most of these essays originally appeared on my literary blog, *The Reading Experience*, or as reviews in other publications. They are the product of my own integrated thinking about the application of pragmatism as manifested in *Art as Experience* to literature and literary criticism, but they, and the collection as a whole, do not possess the sort of structural rigor associated with academic criticism. Probably the content expressed in the essays would be similar if I were still an academic critic, but the presentation is necessarily more various.

## JOHN DEWEY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

### *On Art as Experience*

“By one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an esthetic theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them,” begins John Dewey in, *Art as Experience*, a book that profoundly altered the way I think about art and literature, as well as (perhaps especially) the role of criticism. Dewey further elaborates about “obstruction”:

. . .When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience.

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish.

If works of art are "refined and intensified forms of experience," it will be Dewey's task *in Art as Experience* to "restore continuity" between art as a singular kind of human achievement and "the materials and aims of every other form of human effort." He will neither reduce art to the "materials and aims" of "everyday doings"—as did the Marxist critics of that time (1934)—nor accept the metaphysical exaltation of art to "a separate realm" where the designation "classic"

removes all responsibility from works of art (and from their critical champions) to provoke "fresh insight." Art has to live in the present or it doesn't live.

When Dewey cautions that art must always be attributed to "conditions of origin," he doesn't mean that art merely reflects those origins or that our understanding of its meaning has to be tied to what it meant when those conditions prevailed. As he writes a few paragraphs later, we simply want to remember that art is a human creation, that buildings such as the Parthenon came from "needs that were a demand for the building and that were carried to fulfillment in it"; this is not "an examination such as might be carried on by a sociologist in search for material relevant to his purpose." Dewey ultimately had very little use for history or anthropology as ways of "disciplining" our understanding of human possibility, and this extends to his "theory" of art as well—we should think of the Athenians as like "people in our own homes, and on our own streets." The Athenians are projected into the present as people we would recognize, their art as relevant to us as to them.

In fact, Greek art (and, ultimately, our own art) can survive only by continuing to project itself into the future, as a manifestation of aesthetic accomplishment and possibility: "By common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet it has esthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being." Too much criticism and interpretation of art, especially traditional art, actually inhibits its ability to become "an experience for a human being." The works themselves become encrusted with tendentious commentary meant to advance one external ideology or another, protect one or another cultural bias, rather than allow viewers/readers/listeners to judge for themselves. A proper Deweyan critic would either seek to help the audience for art have a more satisfying experience of it (in the ways Dewey will discuss later in the book) or otherwise get out of the way.

Later in Chapter 1 Dewey writes:

Order cannot but be admirable in a world constantly threatened with disorder—in a world where living creatures can go on living only by taking advantage of whatever order exists about them, incorporating it into themselves. In a world like ours, every living creature that attains sensibility welcomes order with a response of harmonious feeling whenever it finds a congruous order about it.

For only when an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment does it secure the stability essential to living. And when the participation comes after a phase of disruption and conflict, it bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the esthetic.

According to Dewey, our response to the "order" produced by art is rooted in our response to living in a world that is inherently disorderly but that is occasionally punctuated with an "integration with environment and recovery of union." It is this same "integration" that is produced by works of art—they reaffirm our hope that order can be achieved and produce a "harmonious feeling," in this case a feeling that human labor and imagination can momentarily impose order on chaos.

Dewey continues:

. . . Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake, but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total. . . .

Dewey is suggesting that artists (good artists, that is) are distinctive in their ability not merely to acknowledge "resistance and tension" (the world's tendency to thwart "harmonious feelings") but to dwell in them, to accept disorder as a necessary accompaniment to the experience of order. The scientist wishes to conceptualize disorder as a problem to be solved, after which "he passes on to another problem using an attained solution only as a stepping stone"; the artist wishes to capture the "rhythm" involved in the movement from disorder to "attained solution" (the work of art), to exemplify in the work what life feels like to the "living creature." Order is not as satisfying if it can't be contrasted with its always-impending dissolution, and the artist inherently calls attention to the fragility of order, aesthetic and otherwise.

Thus art is not just the ultimate product, the finished sculpture, the musical score, the published book, although these are the immediate gateways by which we enter art's domain (and the achieved work to which we return.) Great art also invites reflection on the process by which the product has been realized, order wrested from "flux." This emphasis on process is inherent in the very possibility of human creativity, since

There are two sorts of possible worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally it is true, however, that a world that is finished, ended, would have no trails of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for resolution. Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment. . . .

(See Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" for a concrete, poetic embodiment of this Deweyan idea. Much of Stevens's work could be taken as an extended reflection on the Deweyan notion of "order" more broadly.)

The emphasis on process is also crucial to Dewey's theory of art as he will develop it in *Art as Experience*. The "experience" of art includes an awareness of the process by which the work must have taken shape:

Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. (Ch. 3)

Dewey concludes Chapter 1 with this account of "experience":

Experience in the degree to which it is experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. . . .

Experience as Dewey defines it is the irreducible characteristic of life itself, and the most "vital" experience we can have, he will come to claim, is the experience of art.

Chapter 2 of *Art as Experience* includes this discussion of the distinction made between "fine art and useful or technological art":

. . .An angler may eat his catch without thereby losing the esthetic satisfaction he experienced in casting and playing. It is this degree of completeness of living in the experience of making and perceiving that makes the difference between what is fine or esthetic in art and what is not. Whether the thing made is put to use, as are bowls, rugs, garments, weapons, is, intrinsically speaking, a matter of indifference. That many, perhaps most, of the articles and utensils made at present for use are not genuinely esthetic happens, unfortunately, to be true. But it is true for reasons that are foreign to the relation of the "beautiful" and "useful" as such. Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree--that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life. . . .

Given the frequent association of the "pragmatic" with the "practical," one would assume that Dewey's appreciation of the "esthetic" would extend to the arts usually categorized as useful or "applied." (Perhaps this distinction could further be posed as the difference between "serious" and "popular" art, although the latter has by now become almost entirely subsumed within the broader category of "mass entertainment.") And indeed, while Dewey wants to preserve a role for "fine art," at least as a pragmatic term of convenience, he also wants to give the useful arts their aesthetic due. Thus the distinctions we make between the two are, as he puts it, "extrinsic to the work of art itself." Although works of fine art are more deliberately constructed to provide an intensified aesthetic experience, works of practical art are equally capable of being experienced as "beautiful."

Sometimes the distinction between fine and popular art is expressed in terms of "intention." The "serious" artist or writer intends that his work be contemplated abstractly or dispassionately as an aesthetic experience, while the popular artist merely sets out to produce work that will fulfill a more mundane and utilitarian function--to entertain or literally to be useful in a material sense ("bowls, rugs," etc.). But this is not a viable analysis, since intentions are always mixed and frequently unknowable, and since "intention" gives all the credit (and all the responsibility) to the artist. For Dewey it is "living in the experience of making and

perceiving" that makes art art, and the perceiver has his/her responsibility for transforming the act of encountering a work of art into one that might contribute "directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life." It is the experience of the work, not the work per se, that expands and enriches.

The "conditions" that might prevent us from enjoying aesthetic experience are those that cut off either the artist or the perceiver from the "beauty" of creating and focus his/her attention instead on the purely utilitarian. The paragraph I've quoted above concludes with the observation that "The story of the severance and final sharp opposition of the useful and the fine is the history of that industrial development through which so much of production has become a form of postponed living and so much of consumption a superimposed enjoyment of the fruits of the labor of others." Clearly Dewey believed that political and economic conditions in modern societies encouraged an "alienation" from the aesthetic qualities of an "act of production," and to that extent Dewey's insistence that distinctions between fine and useful art are invidious is a politically-implicated gesture. But Dewey does not want to patronize the artisan by simply celebrating applied or popular art. He wants to free the artisan and the popular audience of their servitude to a system that denies them the opportunity to fully appreciate the aesthetic qualities of either the fine or the useful arts.

"That many, perhaps most, of the articles and utensils made at present for use are not genuinely esthetic happens, unfortunately, to be true." Surely this as much the case now as it was in Dewey's time (and a very long time it was; Dewey died in 1952 at the age of 92). The post-industrial age has been no more accommodating of genuine aesthetic experience than the Industrial Age itself. If anything, mass consumption of media-packaged commodities has only trivialized both the fine arts and the applied arts as Dewey would have known them. We've become more sophisticated in our choice of entertainment "options," and we certainly have more of them, but the average American is as dead to real "experience" in Dewey's conception of it as any pre-WWII factory worker. Perhaps more so, since we could cultivate our capacity for aesthetic experience in both the popular and the fine arts if we wanted to, but largely choose not to do so. Utility and technology are in the saddle and ride mankind.

Pragmatism is often accused of denying the existence of "truth" (small t—it does, in fact, deny the existence of Truth), but in *Art as Experience* Dewey offers an account of truth through the following analysis of Keats's famous lines—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."—from "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Much of the dispute [about the meaning of these lines] is carried on in ignorance of the particular tradition in which Keats wrote and which gave the term "truth" its meaning. In this tradition, "truth" never signifies correctness of intellectual statements about things, or truth as its meaning is now influenced by science. It denotes the wisdom by which men live, especially "the lore of good and evil." And in Keats' mind it is particularly connected with the question of justifying good and trusting to it in spite of the evil and destruction that abound. "Philosophy" is the attempt to answer this question rationally. Keats' belief that even philosophers cannot deal with the question without depending on imaginative intuitions receives an independent and positive statement in his identification of "beauty" with "truth"—the particular truth that solves for man the baffling problem of destruction and death—which weighed so heavily on Keats—in the very realm where life strives to assert supremacy. Man lives in a world of surmise, of mystery, of uncertainties. "Reasoning" must fail man—this is of course a doctrine long taught by those who have held to the necessity of a divine revelation. Keats did not accept this supplement and substitute for reason. The insight of imagination must suffice. "This is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." The critical words are "on earth"—that is amid a scene in which "irritable reaching after fact and reason" confuses and distorts instead of bringing us to the light. It was in moments of most intense esthetic perception that Keats found his utmost solace and his deepest convictions. This is the fact recorded at the close of his Ode. Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats.

Aside from illustrating Dewey's skill as a literary critic—skills he did not practice nearly enough—this passage shows Dewey casting his lot with artistic "truth" as opposed to the conventionally philosophical version. "The very realm where life strives to assert supremacy" is

of course the realm of art, and its acts of asserting "supremacy"—of affirming and extending the reach of experience itself—constitute the most meaningful "truth" we can discover.

As Dewey points out, "intense esthetic perception" was for Keats not just "utmost solace" but also his "deepest conviction." Experience of art, which is a very material phenomenon, not a substitute for "divine revelation" was/is entirely sufficient as a manifestation of "truth," and such truth is also truth about "life" insofar as both require we accept "uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge." But "intense" experience is more than just passive acceptance. For the artist, it involves turning this experience "upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities," to create the poem or the work of art that is the extension of experience. For the reader or the viewer "art as experience" involves what Dewey calls elsewhere in the book an "act of reconstruction" whereby the "perceiver" undertakes "an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced."

Although Dewey believed there was an "esthetic" component to all "vital" experiences, he also held there was something unique to aesthetic experience per se:

. . .The most elaborate philosophic or scientific inquiry and the most ambitious industrial or political enterprise has, when its different ingredients constitute an integral experience, esthetic quality. For then its varied parts are linked to one another, and do not merely succeed one another. And the parts through their experienced linkage move toward a consummation and close, not merely to cessation in time. This consummation, moreover, does not wait in consciousness for the whole undertaking to be finished. It is anticipated throughout and is recurrently savored with special intensity.

Nevertheless, the experiences in question are dominantly intellectual or practical, rather than distinctively esthetic, because of the interest and purpose that initiate and control them. In an intellectual experience, the conclusion has value on its own account. It can be extracted as a formula or as a "truth" and can be used in its independent entirety as a factor and guide in other inquiries. In a work of art there is no such single self-sufficient deposit. The end, the terminus, is significant not by itself but as the integration of the parts. It has no other existence. A drama or novel is not the final sentence, even if the characters are disposed of as living happily ever after. . .

"Philosophic or scientific inquiry" does enable the kind of dynamic, fully aware and integrated experience that Dewey values and that does have, precisely because it is dynamic, an aesthetic character. The artist is no more "alive" at his work than the philosopher or the scientist (or the engineer or the scholar). But the work done by the artist does have a different character, at least in its subsequent use-value. When the philosopher and scientist have completed their work (to the extent it can be completed), the "conclusion" is literally at issue—for the work to be valuable, the "truth" that results must be "extracted" to be used in subsequent inquiry. The "parts through their experienced linkage" no longer matter, however much they were "recurrently savored" while the work was ongoing. Only the conclusion retains significance for other scientists and scholars.

No such "truth" emerges from the creation and experience of art. The experience itself is all. "The end, the terminus, is significant not by itself but as the integration of the parts. It has no other existence." The "end" of the experience—and with fiction, this means the "end" of the work as well—means returning to the beginning, and to the middle, and to the end again. It means "the integration of the parts" both to complete and enhance the experience and to continue the process of re-creating the work which is the reader's part of the job in producing an aesthetic experience. The reader who settles for "the end"—whether this involves accepting "happily ever after" or the solution of the crime as the "truth" of the work, its reason for being—has not had an aesthetic experience, is in practice denying the existence of the aesthetic where fiction is concerned. If a work of fiction is to be taken as art, the conclusion of the story "has no other existence" except as the remaining piece to be integrated into the whole.

In Chapter 4 of *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes:

If one examines into the reason why certain works of art offend us, one is likely to find that the cause is that there is no personally felt emotion guiding the selecting and assembling of the materials presented. We derive the impression that the artist, say the author of a novel, is trying to regulate by conscious intent the nature of the emotion aroused. We are irritated by a feeling that he is manipulating materials to secure the effect decided upon in advance. The facets of the work, the variety so indispensable to it, are

held together by some external force. The movement of the parts and the conclusion disclose no logical necessity. The author, not the subject matter, is the arbiter.

By "emotion" Dewey perhaps means something like "intuition" or "inspiration," the specifically artistic emotion that determines "the selecting and assembling of the materials." In experiencing a work of fiction that seems "regulated by conscious intent," the reader does not share or him/herself intuit the "emotion" that holds the work together, but in a sense only observes the author manipulating the "materials"—the story, the depicted characters, etc.—to achieve an effect "decided upon in advance." In this kind of inauthentic, aesthetically impoverished fiction, the writer has latched on to fiction as a vehicle for "saying something," not as a form of verbal art in which the work must "say" for itself. Readers expecting literature to provide a compelling reading experience unlike that to be found in ordinary written discourse are rightly offended by this kind of fiction, which privileges the author's intent over the achieved "necessity" of the work itself.

As Dewey writes further:

In reading a novel, even one written by an expert craftsman, one may get a feeling early in the story that hero or heroine is doomed, doomed not by anything inherent in situations and character but by the intent of the author who makes the character a puppet to set forth his own cherished idea.

Suffice it to say that characters can become "puppets" in any kind of narrative, not just a tragic one, although Dewey implies that the tragic mode is especially susceptible to didactic purposes, resulting in a work in which "doom" is not "inherent in the movement of the subject matter portrayed" but instead creates "an arbitrary and imposed world." Tragedy becomes not the result of human frailty or conflicting goods but a consequence of the machinations of wicked people or oppressive institutions or political malfeasance. It is a particularly tempting narrative convention within which to cloak one's "cherished idea," although obviously such ideas could just as easily motivate (and perhaps be even less concealed in) satire, especially satire of a more overtly corrective kind. And both satire and "tragedy" as Dewey describes it here easily enough slip into moralism:

It is for similar reasons [those reasons why we "resent" being presented with characters-as-puppets] that we are repelled by the intrusion of a moral design in literature while we esthetically accept any amount of moral content if it is held together by a sincere emotion that controls the material.

The moralist is the writer who has a "moral design" on literature—who sees it as a forum for moral discourse more than as an aesthetic form—or who wishes to create a moral "design" in works of fiction or poetry in the guise of, or in substitution for, aesthetic design. We are "repelled" by the highjacking of literature for these moral purposes because it is not "sincere." It has no regard for the integrity of works of art as art, reducing both it and real moral discourse to a kind of cheap thrill.

Dewey's distinction between "moral design" and "moral content" is crucial to the proper consideration of art and literature. Focusing on moral design essentially converts works of art, especially literature, into a method of conducting moral/political debate by other means. At its worst, it becomes tedious moralizing. To speak of the "moral content" of literature, however, is to recognize the inherent moral quandaries and conundrums that fiction and poetry inevitably explore, simply because novels and stories and poems are written by human beings and are inescapably about human reality. Some readers might indeed want to abstract "moral content" from particular works to ponder more fully, as long as the work in question "is held together by a sincere emotion that controls the material." That is, as long as it is, first of all, art.

The problem of "form" in art, especially in works of literature, disappears fairly quickly if we simply accept Dewey's definition:

. . . form is not found exclusively in objects labeled works of art. Wherever perception has not been blunted and perverted, there is an inevitable tendency to arrange events and objects with reference to the demands of complete and unified experience. Form is a character of every experience that is an experience. Art in its specific sense enacts more deliberately and fully the conditions that effect this unity. Form may then be defined as the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment.

Thus it is quite impossible for "substance" to precede form in works of art and literature. All experiences are given substance by their unfolding and consummation into form, as perception itself (when it hasn't been "perverted") naturally seeks form ("a complete and unified experience"). Art makes the human form-imposing impulse itself into a subject of contemplation. In experiencing a work of art we are both witnessing an "event" brought "to its own integral fulfillment" and are invited to reflect on our own "inevitable tendency" to seek such fulfillment.

For me, this is one of the most important tasks undertaken by works of art, especially works of literature. I would even say that it is a process, fundamental to the way that art works, that also has "real world" implications, a carryover from literature to life. By encouraging us to occupy the second-order level of reflection on the manifestation of form, literary art reveals our predisposition to form, at the same it satisfies it in a particularly concentrated way. (In Dewey's formulation, it "clarifies" experience by allowing us to more fully realize what it's like for an "event, object, scene and situation" to be brought to "integral fulfillment.") Literature in particular also forces a recognition of the "formal" elements of language, the way language when arranged into complex written compositions becomes ever less transparent in its capacity to "mean," ever more mediated by the form of its arrangement.

At the same time, Dewey does not want us to understand artistic form as something conventional or predetermined. Indeed:

A rigid predetermination of an end-product whether by artist or beholder leads to the turning out of a mechanical or academic product. . . A statement that an artist does not care how his work eventuates would not be literally true. But it is true that he cares about the end-result as a completion of what goes before and not because of its conformity or lack of conformity with a ready-made antecedent scheme. He is willing to leave the outcome to the adequacy of the means from which it issues and which it sums up.

Further:

The consummatory phase of experience—which is intervening as well as final—always presents something new. Admiration always includes an element of wonder. As a Renaissance writer said: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion". . . .

In my opinion, the resistance to form in some quarters of American fiction comes from a failure to consider this aspect of aesthetic form. Form does not refer to the mindless recapitulation of strategies deemed appropriate (by whatever shadowy cabal responsible for enforcing the rules) for composing what we agree to call a "novel," a "short story," or a "poem," but to what emerges from the "adequacy of means" adopted by the artist, the "consummatory phase" that always—at least in the most admirable works of literary art—results in "something new," a something new many readers will find "strange." Form ought not be dismissed because it is upheld by the literary world's elitist powers-that-be but should be embraced because it so often confounds them.

In Chapter 9 of *Art as Experience*, "The Common Substance of the Arts," Dewey discusses the artist's special awareness of his/her medium, a focus on "means" utterly unlike our ordinary utilitarian notion of "means" as "preparatory or preliminary," simply a way to get from here to there we would gladly skip if we could "get the result without having to employ the means." According to Dewey, "sensitivity to a medium as medium is the very heart of all artistic creation and esthetic perception." For the artist, a medium—paint-and-canvas, sound, words—is an employment of "means that are incorporated in the outcome." They don't disappear into the results. They are the results.

Dewey illustrates his point by noting the methods of "inferior" artists:

Something which Delacroix said of painters of his day applies to inferior artists generally. He said they used coloration rather than color. The statement signified that they applied color to their represented objects instead of making them out of color. This procedure signifies that colors as means and objects and scenes depicted were kept apart. They did not use color as medium with complete devotion. Their minds and experiences were divided. Means and ends did not coalesce. The greatest esthetic revolution in the history of painting took place when color was used structurally; then pictures ceased to be colored drawings. The true artist sees and feels in terms of his medium and the one who has learned to perceive esthetically emulates the operation. Others carry into their seeing of pictures and hearing of music preconceptions drawn from sources that obstruct and confuse perception.

(As with painting, so with fiction: The inferior writer fastens words onto his/her "represented objects" rather than making them out of words. In both cases, the artist fails not only to show "sensitivity to a medium as medium" but essentially denies the value of the medium as anything other than the laborious means one would readily avoid if the "represented object"—presumably locked up in the artist's head—could be accessed in a more immediate way. The medium and its "objects and scenes" are kept so far apart that the former collapses into its barest utility.)

It is typical of Dewey that in this passage he stresses both the procedure of the artist and the aesthetic perception of the viewer. Throughout *Art as Experience*, he insists that an aesthetic act is not complete until the viewer/reader/listener is able to "emulate the operation" undertaken by the artist. When the painter and the poet succeed in incorporating "medium" in the outcome, that is, in creating a work of art, the work in turn provides the viewer and the reader with a potentially rich aesthetic experience that becomes all the richer when they are able to perceive the way the medium itself is being "used structurally" to create an aesthetic whole that precedes any "idea" the work putatively conveys.

Unfortunately, the "other" kind of audience that "carry into their seeing of pictures and hearing of music preconceptions drawn from sources that obstruct and confuse perception" is all too prominent, even including some critics. If anything, the preconceptions that obstruct and confuse are in my view more seriously debilitating in literary criticism and discussion, which often introduce not just preconceptions about appropriate form but also about the non-literary ends to which artistic means are presumed to point. A preoccupation with ideas, with "themes" or social commentary or political efficacy or the author's biographical circumstances, deflects attention away from the work's primary reason for being, its exploitation of "medium," and reduces the experience of literary art to an ordinary form of communication.

Since "the movements of the individual body enter into all reshapings of material," all art, according to Dewey, could be described as performances, or at least as encompassing "the rhythm of vital natural expression, something as it were of dancing and pantomime" ("The Varied Substance of the Arts,"). But the "shaping arts" (Dewey also calls these the "technological arts) transform and extend the possibilities of performance:

. . .print has acted—or reacted—to profoundly modify the substance of literature; modifying, by way of a single illustration, the very words that form the medium of literature. The change is indicated on the unfavorable side by the growing tendency to use "literary" as a term of disparagement. Spoken language was never "literary" till print and reading came into general use. But, on the other side, even if it be admitted that no single work of literature excels, say, the "Iliad". . .yet print has made for an enormous extension not merely in bulk but in qualitative variety and subtlety, aside from compelling an organization that did not previously exist.

Still, the "vital natural expression" we think we find more directly in performing arts—which is itself, of course, not exactly spontaneous—can still be attributed to poetry or painting or architecture—or at least to the semblance of "performance" embodied in the poem's lines, the painting's brushstrokes, or the building's contours. The reader or viewer "appreciates" the performance not as a passive spectator but by actively attending to the "shaping" that is the performance. Here lies, I think, the crucial difference between an aesthetic experience as conceived pragmatically by Dewey and an aesthetic "object" as implied by the practice of, say, the New Critics. The reader of a poem or novel in Dewey's formulation seeks to trace the "subtlety" of the work as manifest in the writer's aesthetic choices. The reader tries to re-create the writer's performance as much as possible. For the formalist, the object itself, the text, is the sufficient focus of interest, the "shape" rather than the shaping. The distinction here might seem rather subtle, but Dewey's insights help us avoid fetishizing the art "object" and push us harder to think through the implications of an aesthetic strategy in the context of strategies not pursued. They help us see "aesthetics" as an always renewable process rather than as the fixed qualities of a particular work.

One could say that reading involves becoming aware of that "organization that did not previously exist" when language was/is a specifically oral performance. As the most highly organized constructions of language, poetry and fiction especially solicit our attention to the way their "words" are organized. They allow words to become a "medium." I tend to think that those who do "use 'literary' as a term of disparagement" ("merely literary") ultimately don't want to accept language as a "medium" in Dewey's account of the term. As a medium, the language of fiction and poetry precisely mediates between "natural expression" and the reader's response to

what is expressed. The act of "saying something" becomes unavoidably dispersed in the entangling energies that literary "organization" brings forward. Many readers seem to find this frustrating.

One naturally wonders whether Dewey would find the cyberspatial revolution to be a sufficient change in our encounter with language that it would again "profoundly modify the substance of literature." I believe he probably wouldn't. The internet, whether through blogs or online versions of literary magazines, is not inherently incapable of the "extension" and the "variety and subtlety" introduced by print, and if that extension now seems somewhat circumscribed online, it doesn't always have to be so. When everyone is online, cyberspace will be just as capable of displaying language as an aesthetic medium as print has been. Some of its features—instaneity, linking—might even work to "extend" the medium even farther.

There has been much debate about whether the aesthetic qualities of a work of art—in some formulations, its "beauty"—can be considered intrinsic to the work or whether these are qualities imputed to the work according to our own individual, subjective experience of it.

Dewey in Chapter 11 of *Art as Experience* offers his own resolution of this dilemma. He quotes the literary critic I. A. Richards, who contended that "We are accustomed to say that the picture is beautiful instead of saying that it causes an experience in us which is valuable in certain ways." What we should say, asserts Richards, is that "they (certain objects) cause effects in us of one kind or another," rather than "projecting the effect and making it a part of the cause." Dewey responds:

What is overlooked is that it is not the painting as a picture (that is, the object in esthetic experience) that causes certain effects "in us." The painting as a picture is itself a total effect brought about by the interaction of external and organic causes. The external factor is vibrations of light from pigments on canvas variously reflected and refracted. It is ultimately that which physical science discovers—atoms, electrons, protons. The picture is the integral outcome of their interaction with what the mind through the organism contributes. Its "beauty," which, I agree with Mr. Richards, is simply a short

form for certain valued qualities, belongs to the picture just as much as do the rest of its properties.

The picture is an intentional object, created to convey those "certain valued qualities" that are fully realized in the viewer's encounter with them in the perceived object. It is not simply the "vibrations of light" that in Richards's scheme would account for our experience of beauty. It is an "object in esthetic experience," not just the provocation to such experience.

Dewey continues: "The reference to 'in us' is as much an abstraction from the total experience, as on the other side it would be to resolve the picture into mere aggregations of molecules and atoms." The "total experience" includes both the viewer's subjective apprehension of the object and the "qualities" of the object itself. It is not merely a subjective response. Although even Richards doesn't suggest that aesthetic response is essentially subjective: "certain objects cause effects in us of one kind or another." This account actually strips the subject of its agency, casting its role in aesthetic experience as passive and mechanical. Indeed, aesthetic experience itself is described by Richards entirely in mechanical terms, as the incidental phenomenon produced by the laws of cause and effect. For Dewey it is an "integral outcome" of a mutually dynamic interaction, something subjectively felt but not simply a matter of "projecting the effect and making it part of the cause," in Richards's words.

It is thus possible through Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience to affirm that "appreciation" of a work of art arises in subjective experience but is also directed toward an object of which it can be said that such qualities as "form" and "style" and even "meaning" objectively exist, although no particular aesthetic experience is likely to fully encompass all of the relevant elements of each. Still, one could point to these qualities as a way of judging the soundness of a description or interpretation of the work. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but our eyes must register the assertion of beauty in the first place.

However, Dewey's notion of "experience" in *Art and Experience* cannot be equated with what some aestheticians, following Kant, refer to as "contemplation":

To define the emotional element of the process of perception merely as the pleasure taken in the action of contemplation, independent of what is excited by the matter contemplated, results. . .in a thoroughly anaemic conception of art. Carried to its logical

conclusion, it would exclude from esthetic perception most of the subject-matter that is enjoyed in the case of architectural structures, the drama, and the novel, with all their attendant reverberations.

This last sentence would seem to suggest that Dewey believes there is something called "subject-matter" that exists apart from the formal qualities of art and that can properly be the point of the reader's "perception." However, it is the way in which "subject" contributes to aesthetic perception, subject as part of aesthetic perception, that is Dewey's focus, emphasizing a kind of perception that produces "reverberations," not conclusive "meaning."

Indeed, Dewey immediately adds that "Not absence of desire and thought [as would be the case with 'contemplation'] but their thorough incorporation into perceptual experience characterizes esthetic experience, in its distinction from experiences that are especially 'intellectual' and 'practical.'" Those who wish to "contemplate" a work of art want to avoid the projection of desire or the imposition of thought, but for Dewey a fully engaged aesthetic experience finds the subjective response of the "percipient" satisfyingly integrated in all of its facets with both the matter and manner of the work: "The rhythm of expectancy and satisfaction is so internally complete that the reader is not aware of thought as a separate element, certainly not of it as a labor."

The percipient who settles for contemplation is unable to experience art in quite this active way, but neither is the one driven by the sheer desire for beauty, who is willing to sacrifice the particularity of the work for the abstractly sensual, nor the "investigator," who, in his/her preference for "data" or illustration can only be impatient with the "uniqueness of the object perceived." Both the sensualist and the investigator "want the object for the sake of something else," while anyone open to genuine aesthetic experience will find his/her thoughts and desires "fulfilled in the perception itself."

I myself have some sympathy for the sensualist, who properly seeks out art for its aesthetic value but has a indiscriminating conception of "beauty," In my view, however, Dewey's core notion that art is most valuable as an agent of heightened experience, that it is best appreciated as experience, undercuts all forms of critical "investigation"—moral criticism, political criticism, cultural criticism, etc.—at least to the extent that such approaches assume that

"subject-matter" is easily detached from "perceptual experience." Subject matter exists, but it is the means by which the work of art comes into being, not its end.

By and large, Dewey's pragmatic philosophy did not really have much room for a preoccupation with history. Dewey most emphasized the possibility of "growth," the forward-looking realization of potential, whether in education, politics, or art. History might hold some illustrative value, but only as it is relevant to the present or the future, only as history contributes to the enhancement of the present and future.

One might surmise, therefore, that Dewey would not particularly esteem "tradition" in the arts. And indeed he does in *Art as Experience* reject tradition as an end-in-itself, dwelling instead on the "adventurous" nature of the best art, art that takes account of the "emergence of new materials of experience demanding expression" by creating "new forms and techniques." But Dewey understands that the "new" in art also relies on "a particular background of experience":

Of this background, traditions form a large part. It is not enough to have direct contacts and observations, indispensable as these are. Even the work of an original temperament may be relatively thin, as well as tending to the bizarre, when it is not informed with a wide and varied experience of the traditions of the art in which the artist operates.

The work of an artist insufficiently grounded in the "forms and techniques" of the past might nevertheless be original, but that originality risks being meaningless (simply "bizarre") because the existing audience fails to recognize it as participating in the broader practices of "the art in which the artist operates," although the artist who does so participate might indeed wish to alter or modify those practices. The alterations keep the tradition itself alive even as the tradition makes the "new" possible. Indeed, much of the critical commentary on modernism and postmodernism, for example, has consisted of efforts to show that works immediately received as so singular as to seem completely alien are actually comprehensible within the formal, stylistic, or national traditions from which these works arise.

About literary traditions in particular Dewey suggests that "'Schools' of art are more marked in sculpture, architecture, and painting than in the literary arts" but "there has been no

great literary artist who did not feed upon the works of the masters of drama, poetry, and eloquent prose." Some writers merely imitate these masters, and for such a writer literary traditions "have not entered into his mind; into the structure of his own ways of seeing and making." Past practices "remain upon the surface as tricks of technique or as extraneous suggestions and conventions as to the proper thing to do." One might object to Dewey's narrowing of the source of tradition to the "masters"; it isn't just the influence of the greatest writers that encourages the new contributions of current writers but, or so I would maintain, of literary history as a whole. "Tradition" does not rest in the indisputably "great" writers but in the continuity of fiction or poetry or drama even as manifested in lesser writers. As Dewey himself often insisted, it is best to think about human activities and institutions in terms of process rather than fixed result, so literary tradition is most usefully considered as an ongoing process of mutually reinforced conservation and change.

Artistic transformation occurs, then, when the artist with his/her "experience demanding expression" confronts tradition in an act of what Dewey calls "intuition," a

meeting of the old and new in which the readjustment involved in every form of consciousness is effected suddenly by means of a quick and unexpected harmony which in its bright abruptness is like a flash of revelation; although in fact it is prepared for by long and slow incubation.

Like most accounts of artistic creation, Dewey's suffers from a perhaps unavoidable vagueness, although "intuition" may be as accurate a term for naming the act of discovery that culminates in the work of art as any other. What Dewey adds to nebulous descriptions like "a quick and unexpected harmony" or "flash of revelation" is that the "bright abruptness" of intuition comes only after "long and slow incubation." Artistic intuition occurs against a background of previous creation. It is prompted by that creation.

The reader or audience also has a responsibility to tradition: "The perceiver, as much as the creator, needs a rich and developed background which, whether it be painting in the field of poetry, or music, cannot be achieved except by consistent nurture of interest." Since Dewey's position is that the value of art resides in the experience of it, then that experience would be thin indeed without this "developed background" of tradition. The adventurous work of art could be

equally meaningless if the "perceiver" can't recognize the broader practices made visible by tradition, even if the work does encompass them.

To say that both artist and audience need an acquaintance with tradition is not to claim that either must devote lifetimes to the study of literature and literary history (although nothing precludes doing so). They need "a wide and varied experience of the traditions of the art," but this means that it is the experience of those traditions that count, regarding which quality counts for more than quantity. "Wide and varied" does not mean encyclopedic. At some point, in fact, a pursuit of tradition for its own sake is as likely to impede our ability to experience art deeply as enable it, as the customary practices come to seem "normal" and departures from them unwelcome. In this way, a fixation on "great art," or a certain kind of great art, makes it less likely the tradition it otherwise nourishes will continue to thrive.

A more familiar, if not necessarily more precise, term for the faculty involved in intuition is "imagination," the latter of which Dewey discusses immediately after introducing the former in Chapter 11 of *Art as Experience*:

In what precedes, I have said nothing about imagination. "Imagination" shares with "beauty" the doubtful honor of being the chief theme in esthetic writings of enthusiastic ignorance. More perhaps than any other phase of the human contribution, it has been treated as a special and self-contained faculty, differing from others in possession of mysterious potencies.

While Dewey himself is not above invoking "mysterious" processes such as "flash of revelation" in describing intuition, he does hesitate to attribute magical properties to imagination.

It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination.

The use of passive voice here—"old and familiar things are made new in experience," "the new is created"—is not simply clumsy writing (although Dewey's prose does sometimes have a clumsily hurried quality, as if he is choosing the words that most immediately come to mind), but expresses Dewey's restraint in considering the nature of imagination. He resists the idea that it is a "power" that acts on experience but instead sees it as a function of experience: "[A]n imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world."

Unless regarded as this kind of "union," imagination becomes merely the "imaginary," which "gives familiar experience a strange guise by clothing it in unusual garb, as of a supernatural apparition." With the imaginary, "mind and material do not squarely meet and interpenetrate." The artist "toys with material rather than boldly grasping it." A truly imaginative artist does not distort or supersede experience for the sake of fancy. (Dewey cites Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy.) However much the "real" may be transformed by imagination (Dewey is not making a case for realism), it is not reduced to mere fantasy. Imagination makes the intangible tangible because "possibilities are embodied in works of art that are not elsewhere actualized." Art makes the real visible.

Dewey more specifically identifies the difference between the imaginative and the imaginary by making a further distinction between what he calls "inner" and "outer" vision.

There is a stage in which the inner vision seems much richer and finer than any outer manifestation. It has a vast and enticing aura of implications that are lacking in the object of external vision. It seems to grasp much more than the latter conveys. Then there comes a reaction; the matter of the inner vision seems wraith-like compared with the solidity and energy of the presented scene. The object is felt to say something succinctly and forcibly that the inner vision reports vaguely, in diffuse feeling rather than organically. The artist is driven to submit himself in humility to the discipline of the objective vision. But the inner vision is not cast out. It remains as the organ by which outer vision is controlled, and it takes on structure as the latter is absorbed within it.

The artist who insists on his "inner vision," who remains satisfied with that inner vision, is likely to only indulge in the imaginary. The artist who is willing to "submit himself in humility to the discipline of the objective vision" (who must accept the demands of the outer vision or there is

no art) will, potentially at least, discover the fuller possibilities of the imagination. The imagination isn't confined to the reveries of the fantasist. It requires the "solidity and energy" of the "objective vision," of the art object itself, the making of which is the ultimate exercise of imagination.

The artist who devotes his/her attention to the "objective vision" finds "the object is felt to say something." Dewey is probably using the construction "say something" very loosely, to indicate that the work as shaped turns out to express the sharpest and most far-reaching vision, but it might mislead us into thinking that the vagueness of the inner vision becomes the more clearly enunciated "theme" through outer vision. Something closer to the opposite is true. The disciplined artist allows the work itself to find what it will say; its meaning will develop "organically," not as the figural rendering of the artist's "intention." The artist feels that the object has spoken. If inner vision "takes on structure as the [outer vision] is absorbed within it," the artist ends up "saying" what the work has said.

Dewey perhaps articulates his notion of "art as experience" most straightforwardly near the beginning of the chapter devoted to art's "challenge to philosophy" (Chapter 12):

. . .esthetic experience is experience in its integrity. Had not the term "pure" been so often abused in philosophic literature, had it not been so often employed to suggest that there is something alloyed, impure, in the very nature of experience and to denote something beyond experience, we might say that esthetic experience is pure experience. For it is experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself. To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is.

It should be said that art is "pure experience" if and when the reader/viewer/listener allows the experience its "integrity." This does not always happen, of course. Many predispositions can work to "impede and confuse" aesthetic perception, especially the aesthetic perception of works of literature, as readers subordinate the experience itself to various concerns that are finally extraneous to a concern for the work's aesthetic integrity, from the expectation

that a novel should have an "exciting plot" or "characters I can care about" to the assumption that a literary work should be scrutinized for what it "has to say" or what it "reveals about our society." Since it is art's aesthetic integrity—its ability to unify disparate elements into a seamless whole—that for Dewey makes art valuable in the first place, these obstacles subvert the very purpose of literature as an artistic form.

Most literary criticism, especially academic criticism in its current iterations but also much general-interest book reviewing as well, can be characterized as anti-literary in this way. Critics and reviewers seldom assess a work of fiction (the situation of poetry is not so dire in this regard) for its creation of (or lack of) aesthetic unity. The reviewer settles for plot summary and a cursory evaluation, usually based on unstated or unexamined standards, while the academic critic interrogates the text for its value as a cultural symptom. Later in this chapter, Dewey writes that "Since a work of art is the subject-matter of experiences heightened and intensified, the purpose that determines what is esthetically essential is precisely the formation of an experience as an experience." Unless critics attend to the way in which a literary work stimulates "the formation of an experience as an experience," and subsequently evaluate the quality of the experience so induced, they are missing what is "esthetically essential"—and for Dewey, as for me, to miss what is aesthetically essential is to miss what is essential about all art.

Dewey believed that although philosophers have long been inspired to investigate the nature of art and aesthetic experience, they have in particular failed to appreciate what is "essential" about both. And this follows from a more general failure to appreciate what is essential about experience. Philosophers from Plato to Kant to Croce have gestured at "something beyond experience" itself as the truly real. Experience as the humble, ordinary act of perceiving the tangible details of the world in front of us cannot possibly connect us to absolute reality, which is transcendent and ideal. Art, therefore, is a means of capturing this larger reality. Dewey is among those philosophers who reorient philosophy to the consideration of perceptible reality and in his philosophy of art tries to orient us to the concrete reality of aesthetic experience.

Dewey's conception of the role of criticism is finally quite straightforward and follows naturally from his conception of art:

The function of criticism is the reeducation of perception of works of art; it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear. The conception that its business is to appraise, to judge in the legal and moral sense, arrests the perception of those who are influenced by the criticism that assumes this task. The moral office of criticism is performed indirectly. The individual who has an enlarged and quickened experience is one who should make for himself his own appraisal. . . The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive. The critic's office is to further this work, performed by the object of art. (*Art as Experience*, Ch. 13)

One might prefer to think of the critic's task as simply the education of perception, although Dewey no doubt uses "reeducation" deliberately. So much of modern life inhibits the process of "learning to see and hear," making it all the more difficult than it is already given the influence of "wont and custom." Too often critics themselves work as impediments to clear perception, in particular those who intercede a "judicial" (Dewey's word for the approach to criticism that replaces explanation and analysis with a simplistic rendering of critical decision) and moralistic discourse between the work of art and those who need most to see and hear so they may finally judge for themselves. Both critic and audience need to be reeducated away from these habits.

For Dewey, a more useful form of "judgment" consists in distinguishing "particulars and parts with respect to their weight and function in formation of an integral experience." The critic must develop "a unifying point of view" with which to consider the work of art. However,

That the critic must discover some unifying strand or pattern running through all details does not signify that he must himself produce an integral whole. Sometimes critics of the better type substitute a work of art of their own for that they are professedly dealing with. The result may be art but it is not criticism. The unity the critic traces must be in the work of art as its characteristic. This statement does not signify that there is just one unifying idea or form in a work of art. There are many, in proportion to the richness of the object in question. What is meant is that the critic shall seize upon some strain or strand that is actually there, and bring it forth with such clearness that the reader has a new clue and guide in his own experience.

While a critic of the "better type"—the type that is lauded for his or her own critical writing to the extent that it comes to take precedence over the writing under review—might be tempted to "judge" a work by comparing it to the work the critic thinks should have been produced but wasn't, the critic who sticks to the "object" (in literature, the text) actually in front of him/her is the one who is finally engaged in the act of criticism. The literary critic is obliged to honestly examine the characteristics the text exhibits, although he/she is not obliged to account for every characteristic that might be felt. The "unity" the critic posits is not a global unity that exhausts the work's formal or thematic possibilities but could be simply a "strain or strand" that does give the text coherence when shown to connect its particulars in a satisfying way. As Dewey says, there are many such strands, "in proportion to the richness of the object in question," and one critic's analysis of "unity" can be supplemented by additional kinds of unity demonstrated by other critics.

In addition, the truly valuable critic avoids what Dewey thinks are the two "fallacies" of criticism. "Reductive" criticism occurs "when some constituent of the work of art is isolated and then the whole is reduced to terms of this single isolated element," or when the work is reduced to its historical, political, or economic circumstances. Dewey finds psychoanalytic and sociological criticism especially reductive. With the former, "If the factors spoken of are real and not speculative, they are relevant to biography, but they are wholly impertinent as to the character of the work itself." As to the latter:

Historical and cultural information may throw light on the causes of [the work's] production. But when all is said and done, each one is just what it is artistically, and its esthetic merits and demerits are within the work. Knowledge of social conditions of production is, when it is really knowledge, of genuine value. But it is no substitute for understanding of the object in its own qualities and relations.

Thus academic criticism of the historicist and cultural studies varieties may result in something that could be called knowledge (although not always), but it is not knowledge of literature.

The second fallacy, "confusion of categories," can be related to the first when the critic fails to acknowledge this autonomy of the aesthetic. It happens when "critics as well as theorists are given to the attempt to translate the distinctively esthetic over into terms of some other kind of experience." The most common manifestation of this fallacy is the assumption

that the artist begins with material that has already a recognized status, moral, philosophic, historical, or whatever, and then renders it more palatable by emotional seasoning and imaginative dressing. The work of art is treated as if it were a reediting of values already current in other fields of experience.

Thus the religious poet is declared to be the spokesman for a set of religious values, the philosophical poet for a particular philosophy, etc. But

medium and effect are the important matters. . .I imagine the majestic art of *Paradise Lost* will be more, not less admitted, and the poem be more widely read, when rejection of its themes of Protestant theology has passed into indifference and forgetfulness. . .The mise-en-scene of Milton's portrayal of the dramatic action of great forces need not be esthetically troublesome, any more than is that of the *Iliad* to the modern reader. There is a profound distinction between the vehicle of a work of art, the intellectual carrier through which an artist receives his subject-matter and transmits it to his immediate audience, and both the form and matter of his work.

Protestant theology is Milton's "intellectual carrier." *Paradise Lost* is what it is, aesthetically. The literary critic who confuses these things, who allows the "carrier" to supersede "the intrinsic significance of the medium" is not a literary critic.

The most problematic chapter of *Art as Experience*, in my opinion, is the last, "Art and Civilization." It is an attempt to delineate the role of art and the aesthetic beyond the experience of the individual, its influence on culture and its contribution to "civilization" as that has manifested itself in human history. Central to the whole discussion is Dewey's contention that "every culture has its own collective individuality" that "leaves its own indelible imprint upon the art that is produced."

On the one hand, this seems an innocuous enough reminder that artists emerge from a "culture" the assumptions and character of which are going to color the artist's work in one way or another. On the other hand, I don't really understand what is added to this acknowledgement by calling cultural influences a "collective individuality." It may be true that "the material of esthetic experience in being human. . .is social," but it seems to me that aesthetic experience is

social only in the most trivial sense of the term. The "material" of art and the experience of art is certainly human, but how could it be otherwise? The artist draws on his/her experience as a human being among other human beings and human institutions, but it seems quite a leap to affirm this undeniable fact by claiming that aesthetic experience "is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development." It is an awful burden to place on the solitary acts of aesthetic creation and perception to require they contribute to the health of both society and civilization.

"For while [art] is produced and enjoyed by individuals," Dewey writes, "those individuals are what they are in the content of their experiences because of the cultures in which they participate." While again I would not want to deny the truthfulness of this assertion, I can't see that it leads to any necessary insights about the relationship between art and culture. Artists can't avoid being, in part, products "of the cultures in which they participate," and to hold culture responsible for the artist's work, or to hold the artist responsible for culture, is a move that I can't myself make. It seems a strange one for Dewey to make, since he has spent the rest of his book making a case for the self-sufficiency of the individual's experience of art, however much he insists on aesthetic experience as continuous with human experience as a whole.

Ultimately I don't think Dewey does want to subordinate art to the social and cultural—indeed, much of the previous chapter of *Art as Experience* examines the flaws in critical approaches that do this. In a way, it's Dewey's high regard for art and the value of aesthetic experience that prompts him to associate them with "the quality of civilization." He knows that aesthetic experience consists of the intense, and private, encounter with the work of art, but he also thinks that the benefits of such an encounter ought to be as widely shared as possible, that finally the experience of art must have more than a private significance. It is hard not to sympathize with this aspiration.

Unfortunately, in order to elevate art to its rightful place, Dewey must dilute its effects. He thus surveys its role as a carrier of historical information, as supplement to religion, as cultural marker, as medium of universal communication, as a possible complement to science. He also discusses science's extension into technology through industrial practice, arguing that the split between "useful" and fine art has become so thorough as to be the real source of worker alienation, which won't be overcome "until the mass of men and women who do the useful work

of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work." For Dewey "enjoying the fruits of collective work" means the appreciation of work for its aesthetic satisfactions, not sharing in the monetary profits, but while this may be Dewey's sincerely held alternative to the Marxist solution of the labor problem, locating an "aesthetic" experience in operating heavy machinery only makes it a more diffuse concept less useful in accounting for actual works of art.

Dewey concludes the final chapter, and the book, by attributing art's greatest good to its exercise of "imaginative vision," leaning heavily on Shelley in evoking the "unacknowledged" influence of art.

The union that is presented in perception [of art] persists in the remaking of impulsion and thought. The first intimations of wide and large redirections of desire and purpose are of necessity imaginative. Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration.

This seems to me a rather tepid and overly familiar justification of art. I much prefer this, from the paragraph preceding the passage just quoted:

Because art is wholly innocent of ideas derived from praise and blame, it is looked upon with the eyes of suspicion by guardians of custom, or only the art that is itself so old and "classic" as to receive conventional praise is grudgingly admitted, provided, as with, say the case of Shakespeare, signs of regard for conventional morality can be ingeniously extracted from his work. Yet this indifference to praise and blame because of preoccupation with imaginative experience constitutes the heart of the moral potency of art. From it proceeds the liberating and uniting power of art.

### **Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience**

After almost two decades of tumult and transformation in university departments that still claim literature as part of their disciplinary domain, what is most remarkable about literary study entering into the twenty-first century is how similar it is to what passed for such study at the

beginning of the twentieth century. Like philology one hundred years ago, academic literary study today—at least at the most eminent universities and in the most prestigious journals—is a highly esoteric activity, unlikely to appeal to anyone outside its own “professional” boundaries, anyone whose foremost interest in works of literature is simply to read them. It is, therefore, an endeavor that could hardly exist outside the university’s institutional protection, and it is most strikingly concerned not with the appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of literature but with the historical and cultural “knowledge” that can be acquired from works of literature through a special kind of analysis. The effort, chronicled by Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature*, to make “literature itself” the focus of academic study and to establish “aesthetic criticism” as the primary mode of literary study must surely be judged a failure, the current academic scene clearly dominated by the sort of scholars Graff terms “investigators.”

But of course the motives for rejecting the “merely literary” as a focus of study are quite different among current scholarly investigators as compared to the philologists of 1901. The attitude of the latter can probably be captured in the words of one of them quoted by Graff: “Why then waste time and brains in thrashing over again something which is after all only subjective opinion? Mere aesthetic theorizing should be left to the magazine writer or to the really gifted critic.” Such “researchers” did not deny the value of reading works of literature; they simply considered this value to be essentially “subjective,” not an appropriate object of academic scrutiny. While these remarks do imply some condescension toward the “really gifted critic” and this critic’s “mere aesthetic theorizing,” they do not repudiate the very idea of an aesthetic approach to literature. The present generation of academics engaged in the investigation of literature, on the other hand, have repudiated the aesthetic approach, either explicitly, through the well-publicized critiques of the canon, of the very notion of the great work, or of the remaining approaches still associated with New Criticism, or implicitly through the gradual establishment of cultural investigation as the new norm for the professional training of graduate students and as the dominant mode of analysis in the influential journals. Moreover, the primary motive behind the renunciation of the aesthetic has more to do with politics than with methodology: for these scholars, the aesthetic is literally useless, quite irrelevant to the paramount goal of “intervening” in a continuing ideological struggle that is thought to be the main business of the university scholar.

In the context of the history of modern literary criticism (as opposed to the history of the American university), the current situation mirrors that which prompted the emergence of The New Criticism in the 1930s. Although Vincent Leitch identifies “the evocative mode of Impressionist criticism, the moralism of Neo-Humanism, the anti-modernist cultural criticism of Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks,” as well as the “sociologizing” of Marxist criticism” as the collective *bêtes noires* of the New Critics, it was clearly the latter they considered to be the most unwelcome (*American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s*). Not only had it effectively eclipsed the other practices, but it could be said to have exhibited most of those characteristics against which New Criticism expressed the deepest antipathy. Compared to the close reading New Critics would espouse, Marxist criticism was superficial, willing to settle for the most readily available interpretation (according to the Marxists’ own critical assumptions), moralistic, committed to the idea that the best literature was that which could be shown to be good for you, historicist, concerned to place works of literature in a larger historical scheme to which the works themselves were subordinate, and of course sociological, interested more in what literature could reveal about capitalist society than in what it could reveal about itself. Additionally, Marxism could only be deeply offensive to the Christian sensibilities shared by many of the important New Critics, from their primary inspiration, T. S. Eliot, to the writers probably most responsible for bringing final academic respectability to New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt. It is probably safe to assume that the New Critics would find it distressing in the extreme to witness the return of the politicized mode of criticism they thought they had successfully taught us to repress.

But in retrospect the New Critics cannot escape responsibility for preparing the ground that would eventually be occupied by the insurgents in their revolt against the very principles the New Critics had sought to secure. Both through the apparent dogmatism of some of their pronouncements and through their focus on the *university* as the instrument by which their method of taking literature seriously could be most productively practiced, the New Critics made it almost inevitable that not only their method but also their insistence on the autonomy of literature—and thus the idea that the study of literature should properly disclose what is “literary” about literature—would eventually be challenged and ultimately displaced. In this process, both literature and criticism would come to be so closely associated with the academy it is no wonder that for anyone with a lingering belief in the relevance of formalist criticism or who

continues to stubbornly believe that literature itself might still matter it now seems that with the advent of cultural studies (and before that, critical theory) what had until then been understood as literary criticism, as well as “literature” regarded as the works of art such criticism seeks to illuminate, have all but vanished from the scene.

Rather than indulging in the lamentations for the passing of the golden age of literary study so frequently to be heard from the old guard academic critics (after finally giving up on the attempt to muster reinforcements), they might more constructively begin to reflect on the way literary history and the institutional history of the university intersected over the course of the twentieth century to substantially transform the way we view “literature” in most of its determinative contexts: in its relationship to its audience, to the cultural media in and by which it is published and discussed, to the society in which it is created and received, and ultimately to itself and the tradition that sustains it. Although I want to highlight the role played by New Criticism in effectuating this transformation, it must also be said that the New Critics were by no means alone in fostering the new attitude toward literature; all of the critical approaches surveyed by Graff and Leitch in their chronicles of the victory of Criticism over philology and moral instruction—the “Chicago School,” “myth criticism,” etc.—played their part in what almost literally became a kind of institutional drama whose final act we may well be witnessing. Also, I would not want my account of the limitations of New Criticism and of the less desirable consequences of its apparent successes to suggest a lack of sympathy either for the purely literary assumptions it embodies or for the interpretive practices with which it came to be identified. Far from it. I am strongly drawn to New Critical ideas about the singular nature of literary texts, about “irony” and “ambiguity,” about the reductiveness of interpreting literature in crude political and sociological terms. What I wish to critique is not the validity of these ideas per se, but the premise on which the case for New Critical literary study was ultimately based: that serious criticism, and, indeed, literature as well would be best served by establishing them as disciplinary subjects designed to be part of the curriculum of the university.

It is doubtful that T. S. Eliot had anything like this premise in mind when he began writing the essays, most importantly, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “The Function of Criticism,” that from our current perspective still seem unmistakably to be the first expressions

of the critical outlook that would be articulated more elaborately and programmatically by the New Critics. Although Eliot himself had an academic background, albeit in philosophy, unlike those he inspired he never took up a university teaching position, and his own criticism, while certainly learned and high-minded, could hardly be called “academic” according to such criteria as “objectivity” or “detachment,” which New Criticism at least implicitly helped to promote. Eliot later in his career admitted, of course, that his early criticism was in part polemical—in Frank Kermode’s words, “a defense of the poetic practice of his friends and himself.” (*Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*). On the other hand, an important effect of the critical writing of Eliot and those allied with him was to in a sense “professionalize” literary criticism, as Louis Menand has pointed out. According to Menand, “[t]he ersatz products of unqualified practitioners could now be written out of the field on the authority of standards freshly articulated and generated from within the discipline—from the consideration of poetry as poetry, and not another thing. . . .” (*Discovering Modernism*).

Nevertheless, while one can imagine that Eliot would have been happy to see this more rarefied conception of criticism take hold among literary critics equipped with a newly-developed sense of professional purpose—not least because such a criticism would likely be sympathetic to his own preferred brand of modernist poetry—it is harder to believe he would have considered it necessary, or even possible, that the “discipline” of literary criticism literally find a home in academe. Perhaps the manifest elitism of Eliot’s position could be appropriately pronounced with an Oxbridge accent, and surely he would have found the notion of training new generations of advanced disciples an attractive one, but in the end Eliot’s ambitions went well beyond organizing what John Crowe Ransom would term “Criticism, Inc.,” and he could hardly have settled on the university (especially the American university) as the most effective instrument for fulfilling them. Although “saving civilization” was undoubtedly an aspiration shared by many New Critics, they were arguably not as thoroughly possessed by the idea, or at least were more aware of the obstacles in the way of accomplishing the task and thus were able to appreciate the benefits of a less all-encompassing movement that would at least secure one important cultural institution. Menand’s reminder that the “discipline” of literature was for Eliot essentially identical with the specific analysis of “poetry as poetry” is worth attending to as well, since many of the figures associated with the development of New Criticism were themselves poets (Eliot, Empson, Ransom) and most of the important criticism actually produced by New

Critics was in fact close reading of lyric poetry, including the arguably most distinguished book to be written by a New Critic, Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*. The suitability of poetry to a critical method built on a holistic approach to interpretation, that seeks to delineate what a poem does as opposed to what it "says," is obvious enough. If, as Wellek and Warren put it, "[t]he aesthetic experience is a form of contemplation, a loving attention to qualities and qualitative structure," how much more undivided an opportunity for such contemplation, how even more ardent can one's "loving attention" be, when the object of that attention is as textually compact and verbally concentrated as a poem—for example, the highly figurative and allusive verse of the metaphysicals, which the New Critics held in particularly high esteem.

But while one could argue that the analysis of poetry was simply the most expedient way of demonstrating the virtues of the New Critical method, many, if not all, of the New Critics, again taking their inspiration from Eliot, did in fact believe that the "existing monuments" forming "an ideal order among themselves" were works of poetry (albeit including both epic and dramatic poetry) and that "really new" work causing "the whole existing order" to be "readjusted" was the innovative lyric verse being produced by the modern poets. Although periodically "poetry" would be defined broadly enough to include certain exceptional works of prose (again modern examples such as *Ulysses* most often benefited from such efforts), it is not much of an exaggeration to say that for the New Critics "literature" and "poetry" were synonymous terms. Certainly when New Criticism was finally accepted as the critical approach of choice in American departments of English, which occurred more or less simultaneously with the creation of the literature curriculum in essentially the form it still holds today, fiction and modern drama would ostensibly be given an emphasis equal to that of poetry, but the legacy of the New Critics' veneration of poetry would just as certainly endure in the pride of place the study of poetry would implicitly, and in some cases quite explicitly, continue to assume in that curriculum.

Moreover, while the New Criticism is remembered first and foremost as the preeminent version of formalist criticism in the English-speaking literary world, now that it is so thoroughly out of fashion its more deeply rooted and mostly unarticulated assumptions are if anything more transparently in view. That for many of the poet-critics such as Eliot, Tate, and Ransom poetry had a strong association with religion, sometimes serving as the direct expression of a religious

sensibility, is obvious enough, but all of the New Critics conveyed an unmistakable sympathy for what W. K. Wimsatt called in the title of one of his essays “Christian thinking,” not least in their very preference for the metaphysical poets and their correlative disdain for most of the Romantics, especially Shelley. To be sure, they did not insist that great poetry should explicitly address Christian themes (if it did so, it would of course always qualify any treatment of these themes through paradox, ambiguity, and irony), and especially did not seek to reduce even poems authored by Christian poets to outright statements of Christian belief (such an effort would be guilty of the “heresy of paraphrase”). Rather, the New Critical method itself, despite the prescription that it arise from “the consideration of poetry as poetry, and not another thing,” could work to bestow a kind of religious status on poetry. As Wimsatt put it, “Christian thinking ought to be sympathetic to recent literary criticism . . . simply from the fact that recent criticism *is* criticism; that is, an activity aimed at understanding a kind of value, and a kind which if not identical with moral and religious values, is very close to these and may even be thought of as a likely ally.”

Looking at the motives of the New Critics in this context prompts a somewhat different view of, for example, Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn*. The conventional estimation of this book would regard it not only as arguably the most intelligent and assured application of the New Criticism, but as an attempt to widen the circle of poets who could be considered favorably to some that Brooks’s immediate predecessors had tended not to accept (Milton and Wordsworth, for example). And, indeed, Brooks does demonstrate in a still impressive way both that great poetry (of all eras) is endlessly subtle and open to fresh discoveries by attentive readers, and that his version of New Critical close reading is a resourceful method for revealing this subtlety and achieving such discoveries. His readings of Milton, Herrick, Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson exhibit a critical sensitivity that would well justify a belief that such an approach applied to literature as a whole might serve as a useful model of what could be done in a more broadly based system of literary study. Even more importantly, Brooks’s emphasis on the “dramatic wholeness” of poetry ought still to provide (although unfortunately seldom does) a compelling cautionary lesson to those who confidently claim to have uncovered a given work’s genuine (if displaced) subject or its author’s real (if disguised) attitudes and beliefs.

It is all too accurate a measure of how thoroughly Brooks's analysis is now ignored that the "attitude" conveyed by a literary text is precisely the feature most academic critics seek to expose. Paradoxically, many of these critics use, or claim to use, a variant of close reading they readily enough trace back to New Critics such as Brooks. This is especially true of the poststructuralist critics who have banished authors from the site of criticism and instead work only with text. But even those without a theoretical stake in the debate over how much "subjectivity" to permit while maintaining one's commitment to textuality, or even those who want to preserve some space for "agency" (feminists, for example), proceed mostly through some remnant version of New Critical close reading, and regrettably this cannot simply be called a perversion or abuse of the precedents laid down by *The Well Wrought Urn*. Perhaps Brooks and the other New Critics could have more keenly anticipated the mischief that might be done with their method by those not sharing their own absolutist assumptions—or with other absolutist assumptions of their own—but in many ways the damage done to New Criticism by subsequent responses to it was almost inevitable.

In Chapter 4 of *The Well Wrought Urn*, "What Does Poetry Communicate?," a reading of Herrick's "Corrina's going a-maying," Brooks writes: "I think our initial question, 'What does the poem communicate?' is badly asked. It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself." If any one excerpted passage from the numerous books and essays propounding the basic principles of New Criticism could be said to express its core proposition in something like its purest state, and to capture the view of literature that New Critical literary study would attempt to communicate to its pupils, this passage, in my view, comes close. A successful poem forever eludes our attempts to fully describe it in a critical language of interpretation. Presumably even the preferred terminology of ambiguity and paradox can only approximate the truly intricate devices the poem uses to escape from us. Subtlety is the keyword for the critic as it is for the poet, but the critic cannot expect to have access to the same resources as the poet in his attempt to fulfill this task.

Yet in this statement of the ambitions of New Criticism we can clearly enough see how its more doctrinaire assertions might be enlisted in critical projects not wholly consistent with the

conception of both literature and criticism enunciated here. Almost all of the critical approaches whose fortunes are recounted in Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* or Art Berman's *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* can be said to share an important postulate with New Criticism, or even when explicitly questioning a specific postulate can be described as doing so according to a principle or antecedent example set in place by the New Critics. Some of these approaches fairly obviously represent a variation on New Critical aestheticism or on its bracketing of "text" as the proper focus of the critic's attention. Although Susan Sontag declared herself "against interpretation," her call for an "erotics of art" if anything seeks to outdo the New Critics in dedication to the immediacy of one's ideal relationship to works of literature. The Wallace Stevens-derived notion of poetry as "supreme fiction" whereby, in Lentricchia's words, "[i]magination makes space between us and chaos," providing a "momentary release from sure engulfment, madness, and death" may allow us to break free of the claustrophobia of the text and find room both for the external world and for the poet's creative imagination, but of course encourages us to again retreat into the aesthetic consolation of self-acknowledged literary conceits.

Even those critical modes that in effect work to deny or undermine an important New Critical axiom really only do so by affirming an underlying premise held in common. Thus the version of reader response theory associated with Stanley Fish removes all interpretive authority from the text and relocates it in the subjective judgments of the reader, but only after acknowledging that the isolate literary text is indeed irremediably polysemic. Similarly, the poststructuralists/ deconstructionists don't reject the New Critical text-based approach but rather take it in an even more radical direction. As M. H. Abrams has put it, these critics "shared the ahistorical formalism of their predecessors but replaced their predisposition to discover coherence and a paradoxical unity of meaning with the predisposition to discover incoherencies, 'ruptures,' and the undecidable gridlock of opposing meanings called 'aporias.'" In perhaps the cruelest blow of all, the consortium of critics contributing to the rise of cultural studies (Marxists, New Historicists, all those who investigate representations of gender and sexuality) learned to use the strategy of close reading— even extending it to the analysis of nonliterary "texts"—in their own antipathetic scrutiny of canonical works of literature. But where the other critical approaches mentioned still attempted to take the full measure of the inherent qualities or the potential effects of works of literature, cultural studies at best relegates literature to a coequal

status with all other cultural artifacts but at its most cutting edge seems expressly to denigrate literature as a pernicious influence due to its attendant elitism, suppression of historical contingency, frequent collusion with oppressive power structures, and its nearly inescapable manifestations of misogyny and homophobia, both witting and unwitting.

If, as Brooks would have it, poetry “communicates so much and communicates it so richly,” it must do so in ways the poet does not completely control—or perhaps does not control at all—and presumably it may communicate notions the poet, should he become aware of them, might find repugnant (or might not) but could not for that reason declare proscribed for critical inquiry. Certainly the critic could not so declare on behalf of the poet; at most he could insist that all such notions, however flattering or however damaging to the poet’s reputation, are subject to the kind of “delicate qualifications” that Brooks is able to evoke in many of his analyses. The proponents of critical theory and cultural studies can with some justification maintain that when the New Critics declare that a poem *says* nothing in particular they effectively disarm themselves of a defense against the charge that it therefore says *nothing* in particular. Thus, perhaps the most coherent message a poem communicates is the fact of its own irrelevance to anyone but the most inveterate of aesthetes. From this vantage point, all of the responses to the doctrinal overreaching of the New Criticism, from Sontag’s eroticism to the latest form of cultural critique, show more respect for the agency of poetry than does Brooks’s exquisite formalism.

Of course, in the process all of the qualities that for the New Critic made a poem recognizably a poem gradually disappear, as the study of literature as this was envisioned at midcentury and in the name of which the first transformation of the modern English department was undertaken is wholly repudiated in a second transfiguration of English into a more fittingly “academic” department committed to “scholarly” investigation.

In this new dispensation, these investigators still exploit the lingering prestige attached to literature, but otherwise works of literature have value only as means to an end, instruments to be used in the ultimate task of leveling all distinctions between high culture and popular culture, between the poetic and the prosaic, between literary expression and all other forms of discourse. It is hard to imagine an outcome more disheartening, not only to the New Critics, but to all those who helped build literary study into a discipline that defined itself through its assumed duty as

caretaker of the literary tradition, however differently some of those assigned to the task may have carried it out.

This second transformation did not occur, needless to say, purely as a change of attitude toward poetry, a reaction against the extreme veneration of poetry and poets associated with New Criticism. The postwar literature curriculum would come to give increasing prominence to both fiction and drama, and academic critics would inevitably focus at least as much attention on these genres as on poetry if the claim of New Criticism on literature as a whole were to be made good. The analysis of fiction in particular has proved to be fertile territory for the expansion of cultural studies, and this may be the case in part because New Critical formalism, while it can provide insightful accounts of the aesthetic properties of fiction (and can serve as a useful classroom device for the consideration of works of fiction), cannot easily treat fiction in a way that approaches the both comprehensive and concentrated treatment of the typical New Critical reading of a poem. Certainly it is hard to identify a New Critical study of fiction that can really bear comparison with *The Well Wrought Urn* or *The Verbal Icon*.

Thus it seems almost unavoidable that the house of fiction with its many windows would encourage a diversity of perspectives beyond the purely New Critical and that academic criticism would thereby become increasingly fragmented, leaving aesthetic formalism at best as one thing among the myriad others one could do with literary texts, at worst as an evidently limited thing to do with them considering the grander ambitions that motivate the sorts of things being done by the more culturally engaged critics. That both fiction and drama have a more recent past as “popular” entertainment rather than high art only made this fragmentation more pronounced, as it is only a small step from the consideration of a novel or a play in its own generic or historical context to the analysis of other popular forms—movies, television, pop songs—using similar methods and from these to the implicit judgment that these forms can provide us with “knowledge” at least as valuable as that to be found through reading what have come to be called works of literature.

And here is where New Criticism is itself perhaps most culpable for creating the institutional conditions that would breed academic critics and scholars whose agenda was to displace the study of literature with the study of anything but. It is not so much that these academics make a claim on the techniques of close reading. A truly dispassionate examination of

their application of these techniques could only find it in most cases narrow and reductive, if not an obvious distortion of the New Critical attempt to fit the practice of literary analysis to the subtlety and complexity of texts meant to be the subjects of analysis. Instead, what makes the New Critics blameworthy for the trivialization of literature is the strategy of entrusting the guardianship of literature to the academy in the first place. And this was done, I believe, not because the academy was manifestly an institution that could successfully accomplish the task, but because it was, or could be, an institution of sufficient standing that henceforth it would not be mere pretense to spell “literature” with the capital L. When works of fiction, poetry, and drama—and specifically those works that most agreeably responded to the New Critical method—came to be officially marked as Literature, any real chance to make the academy a place where a sincere effort to understand and build enthusiasm for literature could be carried out was effectively forfeited.

It is hard now to read Eliot, Ransom, Wimsatt, and even Brooks without feeling that for them Literature had become the only available substitute for the lost authority of religion, the lost recognition of religion *as* authority—in an irretrievably secular, irreversibly scientific, and irresponsibly factionalized era. It is hard in this context not to see the individual poems comprising Eliot’s “tradition” as forming a collectively created sacred text and the New Criticism with its rigorous protocols as the accompanying commentary dutifully educating and delimiting the ecclesiastical significance of this text. Eliot, of course, said it directly: “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” “In ages like our own,” he goes on, “it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.” Brooks and Wimsatt, professors of English, not of religion or moral philosophy, would not have expressed themselves in this way in their own professional discourse, although Wimsatt’s assertion, previously quoted, that the value to be identified in works of literature “if not identical with moral and religious values, is very close to these” surely gives the game away. Perhaps it was naive at best to believe that the American academy could function with any stability as kind of seminary where one can learn to read poetry as scripture, although granting the demographic characteristics of the prewar university, it is easier to conclude that the intellectual training of a social elite might serve the purposes of those New Critics hoping to

smuggle Eliot's "ethical and theological standards" into the literature classroom along with the literary/critical standards they were also eager to impose.

That these standards could not be permanently imposed attests to the ultimate failure of the New Criticism as a specifically academic movement; a measure of its success in influencing literary opinion is the degree to which this other agenda could be successfully concealed from what might be called the New Critics' fellow travelers. Many who believed in the value of literary study and of text-based criticism as its proper method could not have accepted either the theological presuppositions or the authoritarian underpinnings of New Criticism once laid bare, and it is a further measure of what might remain valuable in the New Critical inheritance that accepting these buried assumptions is not necessary to a style of literary analysis inspired by the insights of New Criticism but that otherwise ignores its theology. Indeed, one could plausibly surmise that during the period in which that style of analysis was finally being supplanted, first by "theory" and now cultural studies, those who most vehemently resented the insurgents were precisely scholars of this sort who had no allegiance to the New Critics' vision of literary study as a form of religious instruction but who did believe the study of literature remained a valuable project in its own right that might still sustain itself in an academic setting. They did not necessarily worship at the altar of Literature, and might even have agreed that conventional literary study could at times become overly rarefied and exclusive (a flaw the insurgents themselves have hardly overcome), but they did contest the idea that the literary tradition was complicit in the various kinds of malfeasance increasingly attributed to the Western tradition more broadly. Unfortunately, the aggrandizement of Literature initiated by the New Critics cast a long and heavy shadow over such arguments, and given the conspicuously politicized conditions obtaining in the American academy during the 1980s and 1990s the chance they could prevail was always remote.

The rise and fall of New Criticism is thus ultimately a story that upon closer examination reveals, appropriately enough, its fair share of irony and paradox. A strategy intended to enhance the authority of literature, it winds up contributing significantly to the subversion of its authority. Designed to establish literature and literary criticism as indispensable elements in the academic curriculum, its most lasting effect may have been to demonstrate they are entirely inessential to academic study. Most remarkably, when we are now able to view New Criticism at some

distance from its formerly secure emplacement within the university, and judging it by its own announced decrees, it seems so undeniably to have violated the very principle its proponents were at such great pains to uphold: while claiming to protect literature from the incursions of those with other ethical and political objectives to advance, the New Critics themselves held literature hostage to their own utilitarian purposes. If the struggle for control of the literature curriculum is about the use to which the study of literature is to be put, an appeal to the New Critics on behalf of impartial, disinterested standards cannot seriously be made.

Which is not at all to say that in this struggle it is now impossible to make an appeal on behalf of “literature itself,” as long as it was made clear that the use one is partial to, that one is interested to foster, is that use to which works of literature most immediately lend themselves to begin with. If poems, stories, novels can at all be used to achieve ends that are in context specifically pedagogical, to provide those who read them with anything that might accurately be called an “education,” it can only be first of all an education in how to read poems, stories, or novels. This will seem an insuperable limitation only to someone who thinks that the act of reading literary texts does not differ substantially from reading any other written documents (or who think that any such difference that might be posited has been “constructed”)—to someone, in other words, who denies or disparages the value of aesthetic experience. Although it might seem that this notion is just another stale leftover from the era of New Criticism, in fact reflection on the nature of aesthetic experience was never really an imperative much emphasized in the writings of the New Critics. Their focus remained on describing the verbal devices analysis could reveal as the poem’s means of communicating its complex of meanings, not on the reader’s joint role in making that communication experientially complete.

Just such a consideration of the aesthetic as an existential activity, both on the part of the artist and the reader or perceiver, is, on the other hand, at the core of the theory of art presented by John Dewey in *Art as Experience*, a book that has not received very much attention during the curricular wars of the last two decades (and, curiously enough, at a time of renewed interest in Dewey’s work in general). That it has been relatively neglected is on the one hand surprising, since partisans of literary study that keeps “literature itself” as its focus would find in Dewey’s thinking much with which they would eagerly agree. On the other hand, Dewey’s reluctance to

speak of art objects as “icons” (except in the weak sense in which specifically visual art is of course iconographic), and his insistence that the poet and the reader are engaged in a collaborative effort to produce a kind of *experience* would undoubtedly make many with a lingering inclination to New Critical rigor decidedly uncomfortable, and not only because Dewey seems so blatantly to indulge in the “affective fallacy.” Furthermore, even if one were to acknowledge the soundness of Dewey’s ideas about art and the experience of art, it is undoubtedly somewhat difficult to see how they could be translated into a very extensive curriculum of academic literary study.

Nevertheless, a brief survey of those ideas should demonstrate they reveal an understanding of art and literature, as well as the role of criticism, at least as encompassing as that evinced by New Criticism (but without its dogmatism) and are in many ways wholly consistent with the more enduring insights of the best of the New Critics. As in all of Dewey’s work, “experience” in *Art and Experience* represents a distinctive human capacity, one that we all too often fail to exploit fully and that, more generally, Dewey attempted to put at the center of his human-focused, temporally directed philosophy. What makes aesthetic experience particularly important in this philosophy is that it is, when allowed to unfold in its own proper fashion, and to a successful completion, an especially ample kind of experience—perhaps the most ample kind of experience. In Dewey’s words, “it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.” It is not going too far to say that for Dewey aesthetic experience is perhaps the most profoundly human of phenomena and that a careful consideration of the conditions in which this sort of experience occurs would itself be one of the more valuable endeavors we could undertake. As in effect experience of experience, aesthetic experience could potentially provide as much genuine knowledge about the nature of human consciousness as we are likely to obtain.

But ultimately art itself is not merely a mirror of consciousness but actually extends or enhances it. Although drawing upon other, more mundane experiences, art works “in the very operation of creating” to transform these inchoate materials into “new objects, new modes of experience.” The artist, discovering these new modes him/herself in the act of artistic creation, also makes them available to an audience through a “pure and undefiled” form of communication: “Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common

what had been isolated and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen.” And for Dewey, “This force of art, common to all the arts, is most fully manifested in literature”.

One can easily enough imagine the New Critical objections to the “subjectivity” implicit in this account of art and experience. (And Stanley Fish, who seems to have taken to heart Dewey’s emphasis on the role of “those who listen” in the aesthetic/literary interchange, surely did verge on ceding all authority to the latter; furthermore, Fish’s emphasis is always on the *meaning* constructed by readers, rarely, if ever, on the “aesthetic” qualities of the reading experience.) But for Dewey the point is not that aesthetic experience is something nebulous or ineffably personal. Such experience, because it is fully motivated and mediated by the art object is, instead, concrete and, if authentic, thoroughly objective. Further, true perception or appreciation of art or literature requires quite rigorous effort: “We lay hold of the full import of a work of art only as we go through in our vital processes the processes the artist went through in producing the work.”

Thus is there also an important role for engaged and discerning criticism. Indeed, many of Dewey’s comments on aesthetic form and the practice of criticism seem strikingly consonant with the views of the New Critics, as a few salient examples might show: “Science states meanings; art expresses them”; “Criticism is a search for the properties of the object that may justify the direct reaction.” The reductive fallacy “flourishes wherever some alleged occasion in the life of the artist, some biographical incident, is taken as if it were a kind of substitute for appreciation of the poem that resulted. . . . Historical and cultural information may throw light on the causes of [literary] production. But when all is said and done, [a work of literature] is just what it is artistically, and its esthetic merits and demerits are within the work.”.

Even those contentions of Dewey’s that seem to reveal his philosophical pragmatism at its most antiessentialist (if not antihistorical) might betray more affinity with fundamental New Critical assumptions than would perhaps otherwise be expected. For example, the following claim could seem antithetical to a project that seeks to foreground the consideration of literature as a historical tradition: “A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of

parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced.” And yet, when Eliot famously proclaimed that “for order to exist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted,” was he not introducing an essentially pragmatic principle of literary valuation that accepts the unavoidable contingency of literary history? Whether or not Eliot was self-interested in doing so, the principle he endorsed remains eminently sensible: all works of literature have value only when they are alive to the present needs of those read them. Dewey adds to this, then, the important proviso that what all readers of serious literature need, what they implicitly seek if they are themselves serious readers, is the kind of “clarified experience” that art and literature can provide.

Perhaps the Deweyan emphasis on the distinctive value of aesthetic experience would have helped to make a better case for the preservation of postwar-style literary study in the dispute with critical theory and cultural studies than appeals to tradition or the methodological intricacies of New Criticism. At the least it might have forced the theory/ cultural studies side to more frankly acknowledge that its true goal was to finally discredit altogether the very idea of the “aesthetic” by freighting it with various repugnant political positions. And the Deweyan argument does provide a telling retort to the reflexive allegations of political delinquency, one that many of the traditionalists at times hinted at but rarely articulated quite straightforwardly enough: if one’s experience of works of literature seems always unavoidably tainted by the obtrusive stain of politics, the explanation is most likely to be found in the limitations of the reader rather than in something ascribable to the works themselves.

But it is admittedly improbable that even an argument informed by Dewey’s analysis in *Art as Experience* could have carried the day in the emerging academic culture of investigation. In the end, this culture is driven by the same disdain for the “frivolous” and the “impractical” that has always characterized the American temperament toward art and literature and that once kept literature out of the curriculum of higher education. For the theorists, the historicists, the polemicists, literature *will* be made useful to “real life”—as case studies in the exposition of some more profound conceptual construct, as tangible contributions to the advancement of various revolutions—or it must be discarded. No justification of the study of literature “for its

own sake” will likely ever make much headway against this view (although the justification implicit in Dewey’s philosophy of art is thoroughly sound, nevertheless) and the twenty-first-century corporatized university with its emphasis on “product” is an even poorer choice as a means of inspiring respect for literature than was the still genteel university the New Critics confronted. Those of us whose respect for literary art, perhaps first kindled by the New Critics, still persists may need most of all to concede to the university its disciplinary prerogatives and allow a disencumbered literature—that is, particular works of poetry, fiction, or nonfiction—to regain its own kind of usefulness in the distinct experiences of its readers.

### **Carnap and “Cultural Objects”**

In *The Logical Structure of the World*, Rudolph Carnap attempts to show how a "constructional system" can be built the purpose of which is "to order the objects of all sciences into a system according to their reducibility to one another." Among these "objects" are what Carnap calls "cultural objects" (which include works of art) and "psychological objects." The former, Carnap maintains, are reducible (for the purposes of this system) to the latter:

The awareness of the aesthetic content of a work of art, for example a marble statue, is indeed not identical with the recognition of the sensible characteristics of the piece of marble, its shape, size, color, and material. But this awareness is not something *outside* of the perception, since for it no content other than the content of the perception is given; more precisely: this awareness is uniquely determined through what is perceived by the senses. Thus, there exists a unique functional relation between the physical properties of the piece of marble and the aesthetic content of the work of art which is represented in this piece of marble.

To put it another way, the aesthetic experience includes an awareness of the piece of marble in all of its physical attributes, or of a page of text with its words printed in a particular style on paper of a particular color and weight, but it only begins there. "Aesthetic content" requires another step to be fulfilled:

. . .if a physical object is to be formed or transformed in such a way that it becomes a document, a bearer of expression for the cultural object, then this requires an act of

creation or transformation on the part of one or several individuals, and thus psychological occurrences in which the cultural object comes alive; these psychological occurrences are the manifestations of the cultural object.

Although he uses the word "experience" rather than "psychological occurrences," and although he is more rooted to the "physical object" than is Carnap in what seems an essentially phenomenological analysis of the experience of art, John Dewey in *Art as Experience* offers a philosophy of art and the reception of art that at least has a family resemblance to what Carnap is suggesting here. Both Dewey and Carnap avoid attributing metaphysical status to the "beauty" of art (a beauty that is intrinsic to the work) by locating the aesthetic in our apprehension of the work. As Carnap puts it, for the work to become a "bearer of expression," there must be "an act of creation or transformation on the part of one or several individuals." Similarly, Dewey would maintain that these "several individuals" include both artist and audience, as the work is not really complete until the viewer/listener/reader is able to "recreate" it in perception: "Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest."

Thus aesthetic judgment is unavoidably subjective, requiring the "transformation" Carnap describes, a process that will be bound to the "point of view and interest" of the "beholder," as Dewey has it. Still, the "sensible characteristics" of the work remain what they are, and aesthetic judgment cannot simply be cut loose from the work's sensible properties. Indeed, the more fully one experiences art according to Dewey's account of the process, the more, and the more intensely, those sensible properties will be felt.

It seems to me that both Carnap and Dewey remind us that, although the aesthetic is consummated in the "psychological occurrences" experienced by readers or viewers, the sensible characteristics of works of art and literature cannot be denied or dismissed. Thus, in reading fiction, we should not forget that neither people nor "things" are the subjects of perception. Words are. If, for example, we are reading a realist novel, we are not experiencing "the world" faithfully reproduced at all. We are not even, finally, experiencing a world of the author's creation, whether it's a world meant to be taken as a version of the real world or one the author has imaginatively brought into being. We are experiencing writing, which, through the

psychological processes Carnap and Dewey invoke, is "transformed" into a world of characters and their stories. Ultimately a sufficient accumulation of responses by readers in turn transforms the work into a "cultural object." In our haste to describe that realist novel as a convincing "picture" of reality or as something "that takes on the problems of social misery and class conflict," we should not forget that it's neither. As an object of aesthetic experience, it's just writing, skillfully arranged for your act of recreation.

## **DEWEY'S DISCIPLES**

### **Orchidaceous Extras: Richard Rorty**

In his essay "Trotsky and the Wild Orchid," the philosopher Richard Rorty describes the personal and professional discoveries that allowed him, finally, to abandon the attempt to reconcile the twin values implicated in the essay's title: the search for some kind of justice in the arrangement of human affairs on the one hand, with an appreciation of essentially aesthetic pleasures (represented by Rorty's youthful interest in New Jersey orchids) on the other. As Rorty himself puts it:

Insofar as I had any project in mind, it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me—in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats—"hold reality and justice in a single vision." By reality I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which. . . I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance. By justice I meant. . . the liberation of the weak from the strong. I wanted a way to be both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity—a nerdy recluse and a fighter for justice.

It is only after rediscovering the American pragmatic philosophy of William James, John Dewey, and Sidney Hook that Rorty is led to see not merely the futility of trying to unite "reality and justice" in some kind of seamlessly perceived whole, but the undesirability of doing so. The consequence of such an attempt is to harden political aspirations into rigid ideologies and to

distort reality by in effect aestheticizing it. A “single vision” might seem appealing as a theoretical construct, but, in Rorty’s words, “You risk losing the sense of finitude, and the tolerance, which result from realizing how very many synoptic visions there have been, and how little argument can do to help you choose among them” if you insist on constructing it. Paradoxically, I would add, one becomes not a “friend of humanity” but merely of an abstract concept of humanity, and such an “intellectual snob” that those interests that tempted you to become a “nerdy recluse” can finally be tolerated but not really taken seriously.

Which makes it surprising to me that Rorty concludes his essay by, appropriately, validating the creation of “human solidarity” and contingent “democratic communities” over delusions of objective certainties, but in so doing declaring that the “actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievements of our species. In comparison, even Hegel’s and Proust’s books seem optional, orchidaceous extras.” What is most surprising is that Rorty, having reached the conclusion that the search for the “real” is never going to get you where you think you want to go, that “justice” is itself a product of the human imagination, a kind of poetic conceit, never to be achieved in actual human life except partially and provisionally, would nevertheless suggest that finally it is indeed the achievement of the latter that ought to take precedence. That “private” enthusiasms for the likes of Proust would be judged “extras,” ancillary to the really real, after all.

Rorty’s pragmatism has always sought to puncture philosophy’s pretensions to supremacy as the arbiter of knowledge, as the place where all the ultimately important talk about the world and our experiences of it goes on, and he has also made the case for elevating “mere” literature to a status just as respectable as that traditionally occupied by philosophy or the other learned disciplines. At least in theory. Rorty has written about two sorts of books (at a certain point he ceases to make distinctions between works usually regarded as philosophy and those regarded as literature), those that “help us become autonomous” and those that “help us become less cruel” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*). The first produce “idiosyncratic fantasies” whose authors and readers use them in the effort to “become who they are.” The second help us “notice the effects of our actions on other people” and, perhaps even more importantly, point us “to the question of how to reconcile private irony with [social] hope.”

The problem with this formulation is that no matter how much Rorty tries to validate “idiosyncratic fantasies” and to celebrate the worthiness of “autonomy,” he can’t quite make his claims about them as endeavors just as valuable as the creation of social hope seem plausible. Irony and contingency notwithstanding, Rorty does value social hope more. Proust, whom Rorty uses as a primary example of a writer using literature as a way of asserting autonomy, is indeed an orchidaceous extra. It is as if Rorty can’t finally be as pragmatic about his pragmatism as he’d clearly enough like to be. Something about “justice” still seems to him a more desirable aspiration for human beings to express than whatever literally more self-ish impulses lead one to be a “nerdy recluse.”

To examine the particulars of Rorty’s position just a little further: Again I find it curious that Rorty selects the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov as an instance of the kind of literary writing that might help us “become less cruel.” In “Nabokov on Cruelty,” Rorty claims that Nabokov was led “to create a private mythology about a special elite—artists who were good at imagery, who never killed, whose lives were a synthesis of tenderness and ecstasy, who were candidates for literal as well as literary immortality, and who. . . placed no faith in general ideas about general measures for the general welfare. . . Nabokov also knew perfectly well that his gifts, and artistic gifts more generally, neither had any special connection with pity and kindness nor were able to ‘create worlds.’ He knew as well as John Shade [of *Pale Fire*] did that all one can do with such gifts is sort out one’s relation to the world. . . Nabokov’s best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas.”

Such a passage, like the essay as a whole, is really an attempt to turn Nabokov, his oft-expressed preference for the aesthetic over the “moral” value of literature, and the weight of the collective critical response to Nabokov’s fiction more generally completely upside down, to in effect rescue Nabokov from his own artistic excesses and secure him as an ally in the fight for justice. Rorty wants us to believe that Nabokov’s preoccupation with aesthetic values, his insistence that literature is about aesthetic delight, manifested itself in his work, through such characters as Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote, as a kind of paradoxical warning about the dangers of becoming preoccupied with the aesthetic! As much as I admire Richard Rorty (and I do, immensely), I, for one, can’t believe it. As literary criticism, Rorty’s analysis of Nabokov’s project leaves much to be desired—most importantly, a real appreciation of what literature has to

offer as something other than an adjunct to ethics or a convenient object of “redescription” for the pragmatic philosopher.

Such lack of appreciation is common enough among those outside of literary criticism/study who venture into commentary on works of literature, who to some extent understandably are more interested in how literature can be used to illuminate issues related to their own disciplinary concerns. It is more discouraging that even those calling themselves literary critics and scholars more often than not these days also don't have much appreciation for the aesthetic properties of literature, although in their case such disdain is deliberate and not simply an unfortunate consequence of considering literature for its socially utilitarian implications. Rorty at least finds a socially utilitarian role for literature; academic literary scholars (who have, unfortunately, mostly cornered the market on what's left of literary criticism) have apparently concluded that the only socially useful role literature can play is as a fairly straightforward vehicle for politically acceptable themes and attitudes, or, more often, as case studies, usually illustrating how undesirable it is to neglect such themes or fail to uphold such attitudes.

Is the aesthetic, especially in fiction, so discredited, so reflexively perceived by the intellectual class as frivolous, that its potential value can't even be debated, must be dismissed out of hand? That even a writer as concerned with aesthetics as Nabokov can be taken seriously only if read so gratingly against the grain of his so obvious intentions? I have long been a sympathetic fellow-traveler with the New Critics and their dictum that authorial intentions cannot be the deciding factor in a close reading of works of literature, but in this case to so thoroughly ignore the very artistic goals a writer like Nabokov set for himself seems to me merely perverse, a critical move that only winds up denying the very possibility of having aesthetic goals that aren't, at worst, finally meaningless, at best self-defeating. Ultimately the approach to reading literary texts taken up by both Richard Rorty and academic critical theory/cultural studies makes the actual experience of literature as literature—as something other than expository discourse—so irrelevant, so unnecessary to whatever uses one can profitably make of the text at hand as to render it effectively an illusion.

Nabokov is especially a writer whose work discloses its deeper aesthetic purposes to the reader who understands that the aesthetic can be apprehended and appreciated only as an

experience, that as John Dewey describes it in *Art as Experience*, the free and unconditional experience of the aesthetic is the purest and most profound kind of experience one can have. (Although Rorty is certainly the most significant disciple of Dewey in American philosophy, he has devoted little attention to *Art as Experience*, and seems not to have assimilated much of its analysis into his own discussions of art and literature.) In Dewey's analysis, art provides us with the fullest sense of what human experience is like, of what an "experience" might consist when it is most completely receptive to its incorporated elements, its potential stimulants. In this conception of the aesthetic, the ultimate value to be gained from such an interaction—in which, as Dewey puts it, "there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in detail, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced"—is not the perception of beauty per se, although this is certainly part of what the careful viewer, listener, or reader will finally judge to have been the lasting reward of the encounter with great art. Instead, it is inherent in the act of perceiving itself, which in tandem with the artist's own creative efforts produces a kind of collective expression of the possibilities of the human imagination.

Nabokov is additionally a writer known to privilege aesthetic beauty, both in theory and in practice, but the aesthetic pleasures in Nabokov's fiction do not lie in such conventional features as harmony of plot or lyricism of prose style. Certainly almost everything in his stories and novels works against any possible association of them with the "beautiful" in its sentimental varieties. Nabokov's novels are not short on plot, but they're hardly of the "well-made" sort the subtle manipulations of which lead some readers and critics to find their dramatic delight. *Lolita* is basically a picaresque narrative that proceeds not through delicately modulated moments of emotional intensity, or even just skillfully rendered turns of plot, but through accumulated episodes of increasingly outrageous black humor that in themselves challenge received notions about aesthetic beauty. Similarly, Nabokov's prose, while energetic, expressive, even "lush," couldn't really be categorized as lyrical:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dottedline. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girlchild. In a principedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Such writing is surely delightful to read, but it doesn't seek to be conventionally elegant. It is in some ways a mockery of a "fancy prose style." The lilting cadences, the alliteration, the blatant interplay of assonance and consonance, all work to create an impression of liveliness that as Humbert Humbert continues with his account of his own pederasty comes to seem increasingly incommensurate with the sordid story being related. Thus, one of the most immediate issues a reader must grapple with in coming to terms with a work like *Lolita* is how to negotiate this breach between the narrator's impeccable and enlivening prose style and the fact that the narrator is himself otherwise an unsympathetic and finally thoroughly contemptible character.

What such negotiation requires, I would maintain, is precisely the sort of intensive concentration on the "ordered elements" that a literary text puts into play, even when the order seems at first a kind of disorder, a mismatch between style and substance. One could say that what is required is what is usually called "active reading," an affirmation that with works of literature readers have their own role to play in bringing a text alive, in making the reading experience a consequential one. But it cannot be the kind of active reading that seeks to confine the text to its perceived unitary meaning—even though it has partly been created by the reader—but instead ought to be open to even those features that want to disrupt the process by which we often want to construct such meaning. In *Lolita*, this requires being open to the possibility that Humbert Humbert won't be appropriated to any imposed scheme, ethical or aesthetic, that places him as a literary character in a pre-established context or according to a set of inherited expectations about characterization in fiction. Humbert Humbert is finally *sui generis*, which ultimately means that Nabokov has turned the stylistic and formal resources of fiction to account in a singular and distinctive way, giving *Lolita* aesthetic qualities only a careful, receptive reading can reveal.

The recent controversy about the possibility Nabokov “borrowed” the story of *Lolita* from another writer in my opinion only reinforces the case to be made for the properly aesthetic originality of this novel. Situation and plot provide only the scaffolding, the narrative skin, for a literary work the inner core of which has to be reached through the reader’s ability to accept this scaffolding for what it is: the means by which Nabokov summons up the voice of Humbert Humbert, by which Humbert Humbert himself is permitted to write in his inimitable way. Rorty begins to get at the complexities inherent in Humbert’s performance when he writes that Nabokov’s books “are reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen. . . .” But Rorty can’t quite settle for the literary exploration of such unsettling possibilities and immediately resolves Nabokov’s complexities into the simpler ethical problem by which these “masters of imagery” are incapable of “noticing that these other people are suffering.”

Rorty believes that Nabokov must finally be seen as an ethical writer who struggles with his unfortunate “aestheticist” tendencies but who even in this very struggle only demonstrates a paradoxical obsession with ethical matters, with, if nothing else, the ethical implications of struggling with aestheticism. Rorty further believes that the sort of aestheticism to which Nabokov was so strongly attracted doesn’t really exist, is just another essentialized concept the efficacy of which can finally be measured only in its real-world consequences. But it’s hard to see how, through assigning to works of literature the task either of illustrating “personal autonomy” or helping us “become less cruel,” Rorty himself has avoided closing off the potential utility of literature in an almost dogmatic way. “Master of imagery” is of course a description of Vladimir Nabokov as a writer of fiction as well as his “cruel aesthetes.” Can we readers not, if we choose, take Nabokovian “imagery” at face value, as the literary creation of a masterly writer able to provide us with aesthetic experiences, however disturbing, of a sort we’ve not really enjoyed before? Is it not at least as justified on purely pragmatic grounds to approach a novel like *Lolita* in this way, without having to pronounce the experience an “orchidaceous extra”? Perhaps Nabokov is himself never more the “pitiless poet” than when through his fiction he demands of us that we confront such choices in the first place.

### The Work That You Like to Do: Stanley Fish

In a 2011 profile of Stanley Fish, Fish is quoted as having said, "Literary interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward. I do it because I like the way I feel when I'm doing it." He further amplifies:

“You do this kind of work simply because it's the kind of work that you like to do, and the moment you think you're doing it to make either people or the world better, you've made a huge mistake. There's no justification whatsoever for what we do except the pleasure of doing it and the possibility of introducing others to that pleasure. That's it!” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*)

There is, of course, a paradox at work in Fish's formulation: To provide yourself and others with a positive pleasure is, however slightly, to "make. . . people or the world better." Since the pleasure that "interpretation" provides comes from the invigoration of one's mental faculties, it might be said that literary interpretation—literary criticism more generally—performs an especially useful service. But Fish is cautioning against the hubris of believing that literary criticism will perform any service beyond this modest one of engaging the mind in a productive activity.

This view is no doubt uncongenial to both those academic critics who want their work to be an "intervention" in culture that transcends the "merely literary" and to those traditionalists who think that literature itself can make us better, a goal to which the scholar or critic should help lead us. I agree with Fish that the "justification" for criticism and interpretation indeed cannot be found outside of the activity itself, although it is certainly true that any particular act of interpretation can prove useful or enlightening for others. And to the extent that the critic intends his/her analysis to be enlightening, this sort of utility could be said to "justify" critical analysis as well. Such analysis might even be narrowly and tendentiously focused, an attempt to "use" the subject text for partisan purposes that go beyond simply understanding or appreciating the text. But criticism has then become something other than *literary* criticism. "Interpretation" as Fish would define it becomes instead the means to some other end, an end deemed more important than simply coming to terms with the text itself.

Fish is perhaps the most well-known literary critic associated with philosophical pragmatism, as descended from John Dewey through Richard Rorty. His version of reader-response theory, in which meaning can only arise "in the reader," is a clear descendant of Dewey's notion of "art as experience." Since the highest pragmatic value is generally considered to be that of utility—an action or belief is justified if it produces an efficacious result—one might think that when applied to literary criticism whatever "use" might be made of a literary text is perfectly acceptable if it works to some desired end, but while of course finally any reader can make "use" of any text in any way he/she wants, this does not mean that all such readings contribute to the integrity of literary criticism understood as a practice or a discipline possessing definitional coherence. Indeed, if any reading can be appropriately considered "literary criticism," then the term has no meaning at all, no object that is its proper concern. Fish is implicitly insisting that the proper concern of criticism is the free play of "interpretation" unconstrained by agendas other than the imperative to carry it out intelligently and attentively. Interpretation of texts that do not themselves communicate meaning fully or directly is what literary critics do, and the most appropriate affirmation of its value comes from the critic who is able to convey "the pleasure of doing it" to responsive readers.

There are, alas, too few critics of this kind around. In my opinion, this is only partly because critics themselves cling too firmly to various non-literary and non-critical agendas. Those in charge of the most widespread source of literary commentary, book review sections of magazines and newspapers, seem seldom to assign works of fiction or poetry to capable, disinterested (as in "impartial") literary critics in the first place. In fact, a significant majority of reviews of novels and poetry collections seem to be written by other novelists and poets, a practice that is apparently founded on the assumption that novelists and poets are in the best position to assess other work in their chosen forms. This is a mistaken assumption.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom observes that "when a potential poet first discovers (or is discovered by) the dialectic of influence, first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself, he begins a process that will end only when he has no more poetry within him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again." Bloom is acknowledging that while the poet—the fiction writer as well—is initially inspired to write by the discovery of previous writing "external" to his/her own need for expression,

eventually he/she finds it difficult to still "discover" poetry in other writers because his/her own work now so thoroughly defines what poetry should be. This is especially true of the best poets and novelists, which all the more makes it a good idea to view even the most accomplished of such writers with suspicion when they turn to reviewing. We will probably acquire more understanding of the reviewer and the reviewer's perspective on his/her own work than we will get a trustworthy account of the book ostensibly under review.

There are, of course, always exceptions. Some writers are also such penetrating critics that one wants to read them even if it is likely the critic's analysis will reveal more about the critic's assumptions than about the subject of the analysis. William H. Gass would be one such writer, but as much as I value Gass's criticism, I would also acknowledge that it is at least as valuable as an adjunct to his fiction, helping to explain the nature of its departures from convention, or as part of a philosophy of literature that works in tandem with the fiction. Certainly Gass engages in this critical work because it his work he "likes to do" (or at least this is the impression his criticism leaves with me), but as much as Gass lends credibility to experimental fiction through his essays and reviews, ultimately such fiction is well-served as well by critics able to more comprehensively, and more freely, assess its failures as well as its successes.

The kind of work novelists and poets most like to do, presumably, is writing novels and poems. They might also like writing reviews perfectly well, but this is inevitably a secondary sort of gratification, and in most cases not something done for "its own reward." My impression of the reviewing done by these writers considered collectively is that all too often it is either an opportunity to disparage an approach to fiction or poetry that isn't the reviewer's or to praise one's colleagues, perhaps in the hope that such generosity might be reciprocated when the reviewer's own book appears. The first approach is an especially good way to dismiss unconventional fiction that might pose a threat to established practice, while the second helps to build "community," to elevate the status of current writing more generally.

Ultimately none of these motives do current writing much good, however, if it is to be considered as potentially part of "literature," if "literary" is to be a term that designates more than a lifestyle choice. Judging a work according to principles the work has rejected is hardly criticism in the first place, and seeks to encourage a conformity of method that would really only

drain literature of its vitality. "Community" is a pleasant notion that might help to blunt the edges of literary rivalries, but finally it has nothing to do with writing worthy poems and novels. Praising fellow members of one's community for anything other than creating worthwhile literary art is just a free form of publicity and reduces literature to just another act of social networking. New books need critics willing to regard them as efforts to be taken seriously as literature, to survive in the long run, not just their notices in the weekend's review pages. They need critics who regard criticism as the act of considering books in this way, as a valuable experience in and of itself, and who want to engage in it because it's a good thing to do.

### **The Ancient Enterprise of Interpretation**

As the author of *Theory of Literature* (long considered the primary theoretical pillar supporting the New Criticism), Rene Wellek surely exemplifies the imperative to separate theory from Theory. Wellek clearly believed in the efficacy of theory—which he defines as “concerned with the principles, categories, functions, and criteria of literature in general”—but as early as 1982 he feared that literary theory was undermining the very assumptions on which literary study had been based. Were his fears (at least about the kind of theory then being promulgated) well-founded? I think not.

His essay, "Destroying Literary Studies," reprinted in *Theory's Empire*, contends that Theory (primarily deconstruction and reader-response theory, but also extending as far back as Northrop Frye) was threatening “the whole edifice of literary study” in an “attempt to destroy literary studies from the inside.” In retrospect, this seems an absurd charge to have leveled against the likes of Derrida, Frye, Stanley Fish, and (!) Harold Bloom, and seems to vindicate the counter-charge that New Criticism was an especially narrow and insular movement. If even Frye and Bloom couldn't be countenanced as serious-minded rivals, wasn't it New Criticism that was doomed to destroy itself “from the inside”?

Wellek is the only scholar associated with first-generation New Criticism to be represented in *Theory's Empire*, so perhaps it would be unfair to take his remarks as representative of the attitude to Theory of the New Critics as a whole. (The editors of TE seem to present it as such, however. There are only two references to Cleanth Brooks in the whole book,

a few scattered references to W.K. Wimsatt—mostly summarizing “The Intentional Fallacy”—none at all to John Crowe Ransom.) And it is indeed disconcerting (to me) to come across such pronouncements as these from someone famous for having made the distinction between “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” approaches to literary criticism: that Theory “refuses to acknowledge that the relation of mind and world is more basic than language”; that Theorists “refuse to understand that words designate things and not only other words, as they argue”; that Theory represents “the rejection of the whole ancient enterprise of interpretation as a search for the true meaning of a text.”

This represents quite a retreat from, if not the letter, then certainly the spirit of New Critical practice. What other New Critic, faced with emerging methods somewhat more radical than his own but not finally that different in kind, would have resorted to the argument that interpretation is “a search for the true meaning of the text?” Did Wellek not read *The Well-Wrought Urn*? In my opinion, Wellek finally comes off as a crotchety old man rejecting everything unfamiliar to him, which really does no good for an enterprise such as *Theory’s Empire*, which presumably wants to reinforce the notion that some of the work done in literary study pre-Theory was valuable enough to be preserved.

Wellek’s dismissals of Derrida and Fish seem especially peculiar to me. Derrida, writes Wellek, “argues that all philosophy is shot through by metaphors, ambiguities, ‘undecidables,’ as is all literature and criticism. This view was welcomed by some literary critics and students as a liberation, since it gives license to the arbitrary spinning of metaphors, to the stringing of puns, to mere language games.” This may indeed have happened among some of Derrida’s followers, but that is no reason to throw out the deconstructive baby with the adulterated bathwater. Derrida’s work should have been welcomed because it actually gave added credibility to the notion that all unitary, totalizing readings are mistaken and further undercut the view, still held even by some poets and novelists, that writing fiction and poetry is a matter of “saying something.” The hysterical reaction to Derrida by people like Wellek only made deconstruction seem somehow relevant to the politicized varieties of academic criticism that followed, when in fact it was much closer to New Criticism itself, might even be seen as taking some of the assumptions of New Criticism to their logical conclusion.

Wellek's account of Fish and his version of reader-response theory is equally strange. "By absolutizing the power of [subjective] assumptions," according to Wellek, "he empties literature of all significance. . . Fish's theories encourage the view that there are no wrong interpretations, that there is no norm implied in a text, and hence that there is no knowledge of an object." Fish has repeatedly defended himself against the charge that he encourages interpretive anarchy, and I can't improve on what he has said. (Interpretive communities do have norms, if the text itself does not.) Reading works of literature indeed does not produce "knowledge of an object" (not the kind of knowledge Wellek has in mind) but it does provide an experience from which knowledge can be derived (knowledge for interpretation). In some ways this is perfectly compatible with the New Critical precepts that would have us consider the reading of poetry to be a kind of dramatic experience rather than a process of gaining "knowledge of an object." Fish can be taken as giving this approach to reading a sturdier epistemological foundation.

(Wellek seems to have a particular animus towards an experiential account of reading. Elsewhere in the essay he claims that John Dewey's view of art "as the experience of heightened vitality" is part of an "attack on aesthetics." It is not. It merely relocates the source of aesthetic pleasure from the "object" to the act of perception.)

The "theories" of both Derrida and Fish could have co-existed comfortably with New Critical formalism if everyone concerned had not regarded the differences between them as so considerable that they justified critical and curricular warfare. Judging from Rene Wellek's essay (and many of the others included in *Theory's Empire*), the New Critics and other traditionalists were just as responsible for initiating hostilities as the Theorists who ultimately defeated them.

## PRAGMATIC APPLICATIONS

### **Stimulating Through its Tropes: Liberalism and Literature**

Much has been written about the purported dominance of American universities-particularly in the humanities and the social sciences-by the so-called "academic left." And indeed acceptable scholarship in many disciplines is undeniably influenced in a virtually

uncontested way by left-wing and progressive ideas. In the field in which I was trained, English (more specifically, literary study), the current scholarly paradigm is almost exclusively determined by a left-wing critique of culture and the role of literature, as well as other forms of representation and discourse, in shaping and reflecting culture. Certainly few would deny that campus initiatives, student/faculty activism, and the collective weight of political opinion in general all help push the political balance on most college campuses decidedly to the left.

But the most noteworthy consequence of the ascendancy of the academic left is not, from my perspective, that academe is now permeated with leftist politics. Given the centrality of business and commerce as indicators in America of status and accomplishment, as well as our thoroughgoingly utilitarian approach to education (including now the privileging of “STEM” courses) and manifest impatience with the cultivation of intellect and sensibility for their own sakes—it is not at all surprising that those who choose what was once called the “life of the mind” at its universities would feel estranged from the official values that seem to animate the political and commercial life of American society. Whether such people would identify themselves as “liberals,” “radicals,” “progressives,” or just as independent thinkers, surely it is at the least unlikely that as a whole they would incline much toward the established conservative view of the way things ought to be.

As a liberal myself, I find the idea of a university overrun with left-wingers to be a prospect exceeded in its horror and repugnancy only by the idea of its being overrun by right-wingers. (Actually this latter prospect I find more dreadful by a magnitude approaching infinity, a dread the Trump administration has converted to horror). However, the real damage that has been inflicted by the academic left—and I do believe it has inflicted damage—lies in the extent to which it has managed to simplistically politicize academic scholarship, especially scholarship in the humanities. This reductive approach, whereby all subjects are political, either inherently so or made to be so, is detrimental to real politics, which can be safely disregarded in favor of the more tidy rhetorical kind; even more debilitating, however, is the harm done to the ideal of dispassionate, intellectually serious scholarship and criticism.

The discipline of literary study has arguably been the most devastated and disfigured by this kind of politicized scholarship. It is not going too far to say the study of literature as it was envisioned by those who helped bring it into the university curriculum in the first place has been

replaced by the inspection of literature for its ideological credentials, by the expropriation of works of literature for political purposes completely dissociated from the qualities that mark them as literary, that distinguish them from other modes of discourse. To deplore this myopic view of the usefulness of literature is not to deny that some poetry and fiction is motivated in part by a desire to represent political ideas or enlivened by a writer's sensitivity to the political forces at work in the world to which he/she must necessarily turn for inspiration. "Political literature" is not in itself a specious category. Nor is it always invalid to subject a literary work to a political reading, especially if the critic acknowledges the motive to do so and, most importantly, does not claim that such a reading cancels out all other critical values a different kind of reading might disclose.

But unfortunately academic critics now all too often do make this claim, at least implicitly. The increasingly uniform acceptance of the new orthodoxy—the cultural studies approach I have described—has in effect discredited criticism that does not set out to interrogate texts for their deep-seated assumptions about gender, race, sexual orientation, or other sources of culturally constructed "difference," their allegiance to the proper progressive attitudes toward these and other issues of concern to the politically enlightened. Adherence to this orthodoxy is to some extent the product of academic careerism, the homogenization of criticism that was almost certainly an inevitable result of the triumph of academic criticism to begin with. In some cases those conforming to the established method do so for entirely cynical reasons, advancing their own interests within the academy while suppressing whatever misgivings they may actually have about the simplistic formula they are obliged to apply, but for others this politicized criticism is undertaken in all sincerity, from a belief in the underlying political ideals they understand it to be expressing. This is the group on the academic left for whom the political imperative is most urgent, a cause so absolute in its demands as to make any other kind of critical work seem a dereliction of duty.

It is this group, as well, whose very presence in the discipline of literary study stands most in need of explanation. In a field dominated for most of the twentieth century by scholars and critics, whether philologists or acolytes of the New Criticism, who were considered advocates of a detached and disinterested approach to the study of literature, how has it happened that at the beginning of the twenty-first it has come to be dominated by such a radically disparate

approach, one that encourages those who adopt it to simply become advocates in the most blatantly tendentious sense of the term? Partly it can be explained as a reaction against the disingenuousness of the claims to objectivity and impartiality made by the earlier cohort of historical scholars and New Critics, almost all of whom sought to promote some writers over others, some beliefs about the nature of literature over others, and in many cases to advance agendas separate from the declared goal of encouraging a dispassionate “appreciation” of literature as a whole. It is an overreaction to be sure, and furthermore derives more than a little from the intellectual inconstancy and susceptibility to critical fashion of which literary scholarship has increasingly (and correctly) been accused. But in its very excess, the turn to cultural studies betrays a more significant lack of confidence in the role of the literature professor, as well as, ultimately, in the relevance of literature in a globalized media age that would seem to have little use for its inherent equivocations.

The rise of the academic left during the 1980s and 90s provoked its share of contentious sound and fury—in literary study, the most discordant notes accompanied the so-called “canon war,” a momentarily intense conflict that quickly enough turned into a rout—but in retrospect it was accomplished without much serious opposition, aside from those who could easily if often unjustly be caricatured as hidebound reactionaries. In some ways, in fact, the victory of the cultural studies left has about it a certain air of inevitability. The image of the genteel English professor fostering among his students an appreciation of Literature was always only accurate in the blurring: having created Literature as a proper “subject” of academic study, the older generation or two of professors on whom this image was projected were nevertheless unavoidably in the business of using works of literature in a more ambitious enterprise in which poems, novels, and plays themselves served only an intermediary function. One could less charitably describe it as indoctrination, as promoting an underlying and unarticulated agenda, although unlike the current dispensation, under which the indoctrination is blatant and the agenda all but advertised, the earlier paradigm did begin with the assumption that literature has an autonomy and integrity of its own. However, if the present generation of “literary scholars” has effectively abandoned the study of literature in favor of a more expansively conceived program of their own devising, they are in this sense only emulating their predecessors.

But where in the past literature in the academy was most likely to be seen as adjunct to or allied with religion, history, ethical inquiry, or simply a particular scholar/teacher's idiosyncratic brew of such secondary ingredients, today it is almost uniformly politics and political analysis to which the study of literature has become subordinate. Although the various accounts of the radicalizing of the academy in the United States that have been advanced over the last three decades are, however implicated in their own ideological bias, mostly accurate to the extent they identify a set of circumstances that further explain the generally leftist tilt of university faculty, in what remains of literary study the subordination of literature to politics is at least as much the consequence of the absence of a true disciplinary identity centered around literature as the exclusive subject of attention. While the prevailing wisdom of the academy clearly privileges the political as the most "serious" focus of one's scholarly attention, in departments of English and Comparative Literature especially the effect has seemed particularly acute because the politicization of criticism and scholarship has completed a process of virtually emptying out these disciplines of the subject with which they were originally invested.

I would like to challenge the apparently widespread assumption that spending one's time contemplating the literary qualities of literature is not only frivolous but that it also disqualifies one from maintaining a parallel if separate interest in politics and political commentary or, more importantly, that an interest in works of literature, and the development of the requisite facility in reading them, add nothing to an analysis of the social conditions that abide in or the political forces that affect the "real world" outside the library carrel or one's attic garret. I would not claim that the particular insights I believe I have gained from the cultivation of such reading habits are necessarily those everyone who takes literature seriously would reach, but neither are they simply the fortuitous results of an otherwise private enthusiasm. If anything, looking at politics from the perspective provided by literature is a more natural and ultimately more fruitful exercise than attempting to impose on literature a constricted and sadly uncongenial vision of politics.

The actual politics of the academic left strike me as a desperate and ineffectual politics: our views have no salience in mainstream American political discourse, no appeal to ordinary citizens, so we will instead expend our time and labor in an artificial environment where what we believe can be articulated but finally dismissed as inherently unworldly, on creating a simulated,

ersatz, merely textual politics. My own literary education, on the other hand, has encouraged me to favor a less impatient, more terrestrial liberal politics, a political outlook that welcomes progressive change but recognizes the manifest obstacles to achieving it, that prefers tangible results to free-floating attitude, that refuses to render “politics” itself a meaningless term by finding it everywhere, to reduce all human endeavor and expression to a conception of the political that is impoverished and unavailing. A true literary education (whether acquired through a formally established curriculum or through self-organized effort) is able to do this because learning to read works of literature unencumbered by anxieties about their secondary rhetorical uses can only over time lead one to share the perspective on human affairs that serious literature itself cumulatively provides.

This cumulative perspective emphasizes contingency, mutability, what in the title of Samuel Johnson’s famous poem is identified as “the vanity of human wishes.” The academic left is frequently attacked for its “relativism,” but in this regard they would actually be well situated to appreciate the worldview expressed collectively by serious works of literature. Although conservatives and traditionalists have always liked to speak of the literary canon as a kind of repository of wisdom and eternal verities, no one who really loves literature would make such a claim for it, or would have developed a love for it in the first place, except to say that the greatest works of literature portray the universal uncertainty of human life and the agelessly unresolved conflicts stirred up by human aspirations. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* may be stories about courage, fortitude, overcoming destructive emotions, but they are even more about the fluidity and inadvertence of experience, our sense of it as random and unstable, ultimately beyond our control and its meaning beyond our reach. Academic leftists with the courage of their allegedly relativist convictions would see such works as the strongest confirmation of their beliefs rather than the primary exhibits in their actually quite categorical critical briefs.

By “relativist” in this context I mean something closer to a tragic view, although this way of putting it perhaps seems more appropriate to the fatalism of conservatives than the cautious optimism of liberals. However, a recognition of limits, an acknowledgment of the imperfections inherent in the circumstances of human life—although not necessarily an insistence on equating these imperfections with “sin” or “fate” or “evil”—are the almost unavoidable, if mostly inferred, precepts offered up by literature as a whole, as they also ought to be, I would argue, by

liberalism as well. The philosopher of liberalism who presented a vision of it often associated with such a view as this is Isaiah Berlin, and it is notable that in advancing a version of liberalism that takes account of limits and alternative perspectives Berlin frequently examined the work of writers belonging more to the history of literature than philosophy, primarily figures prominent in the Russian and German branches of the Romantic movement. Although many of these writers gave expression to impulses Berlin considered illiberal, he nevertheless read their work with a respect that seemed to come from an underlying appreciation of the complexities and the outright paradoxes that literature especially is apt to expose and to which it is often the most useful guide.

Among current proponents of the liberal tradition, the philosopher Richard Rorty and the literary critic Stanley Fish have also, it seems to me, attempted to remind liberals of the dangers of self-certainty and an inflexible adherence to “principle.” Both Rorty and Fish are often counted as belonging in their own ways to the academic left, both loosely classed as postmodernists in their defense of what is finally a genuine epistemological and critical relativism. But here again the “postmodernist” label proves less appropriate as a characterization of the academic left than its common usage would suggest, as both Rorty and Fish are each more thoroughgoing in their relativism, not to mention more intellectually rigorous, than the partisans of cultural studies could ever allow themselves to be. Rorty wants the political left to give up on the idea of the all-encompassing narrative, the final explanation, including the belief that history itself unfolds coherently enough to justify claims of acting in its name. Fish reminds liberals of the hollowness of declarations of value-neutral principles that supposedly can be shared by everyone regardless of their prejudices or their deeply ingrained beliefs.

Neither Rorty nor Fish have been universally rewarded with the good favor of liberals for their efforts, much less the approval of the more radical left, for whom such pragmatism would require reconciling themselves to the inconclusiveness and outright muddle of practical politics, as well as a willingness to consider the consequences of political choices and actions in the broadest possible context. For the literary or academic left in particular it would require taking note of the role literature has played in the formation of the political analyses offered by these two writers. Fish, of course, is a highly regarded literary critic and theorist, perhaps the most distinguished Milton scholar of the second half of the twentieth century, whose ability to “read”

the larger cultural text composed so prominently by the ongoing legal and political discourse examined in *The Trouble With Principle* is clearly derived from his undeniable mastery as a reader of literary texts. Rorty has long given respectful attention to poets and novelists, has even suggested that works of philosophy ought now themselves be read essentially as works of literature, and evokes as the presiding spirits of perhaps his most direct and sustained statement of his political philosophy (*Achieving Our Country*) the American writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Far from imposing on literature external political or philosophical conceptions, each of these important American thinkers has in part allowed their understanding of literature to inform and enrich their perception of the ambiguities inherent to politics and philosophy.

One could perhaps say that the political orientation of the academic left also is informed by their understanding of literature, except that unfortunately their understanding of it is hopelessly restrictive. A simplistic and misinformed view of poetry and fiction as instruments for invoking an expressive order—even when (sometimes especially when) ostensibly presenting an appearance of disorder—and a moral clarity most often missing in the ordinary experiences of real life characterizes academic literary study over the past twenty years or so. This is a curious vestige of the era of New Criticism—and a misreading of it—that accepts a caricatured version of the idea of the autonomy of the literary text, but only to assist in isolating and emphasizing the political content to which the poem, story, or novel can more usefully be reduced. But this one-dimensional, circumscribed vision of the nature of literature has another, even more telling consequence when considering the recent wholesale politicization of literary study.

From my perspective, the most noteworthy quality of the political ideals motivating both the theory and the practice of the academic left is the apparent transposition of the orderliness assumed to be constitutive of literature to the frustrating irresolution of the conflicts and controversies of actually existing political life. These ideals substitute well-made fictions for the stubbornly open-ended realities of life as it is lived. It might be argued that it is in the nature of ideals to seem beyond what has so far been achievable, or even ever likely to be achieved, and I would largely accept such an argument. But it has been among the least admirable characteristics of the academic/cultural studies left to have converted what might be perfectly admirable as aspirations, as cultural abstractions useful in forwarding one possible kind of analysis, into

ideological certainties that discount and disparage any other form of analysis. As we will see, this propensity is not peculiar to the academic left—or even to the “left” or to political ideology in general—but for scholars whose nominal subject is literature, it is a particularly dismaying if not wholly antithetical habit of mind.

For these literary leftists, this habit of mind can be seen at work both in their specific scholarly writings about literature and in the larger political program—sometimes merely tacit, sometimes quite straightforwardly announced—of which such writings are clearly a part. The former generally take two forms: either writers whose perceived political attitudes are deemed acceptable are celebrated for expressing them, or writers with dubious political credentials are subjected to a remorseless kind of scrutiny designed to uncover their political defects. The first enlists the writers in question in a critique to which they may or may not actually be sympathetic; the second manages as well to advance the same critique and to enlist the writers concerned, despite their manifest lack of sympathy, as a result ultimately diminishing all works and writers to the same uniform level of value as tools in a political analysis that often has precious little to do with the values a less dogmatic reader might take from such works—much less the values even the most critically favored of these writers would be willing to endorse.

But it is in the political program that politicized cultural studies scholars believe themselves to be promoting that the most blatant transfiguration of the real into the fictional can be seen. It is not so much that so many of them persist in sustaining the Marxist vision that the 20<sup>th</sup> century surely proved, at the very least, illusory, but that they thus persist in the full knowledge that their political desires will never be fulfilled in political reality, giving some poignancy, perhaps, to their continued devotion to the fiction that left-wing radicalism has become, but otherwise only reinforcing the sense they inhabit a world of literal make-believe. Or at least one would think so. I am not entirely certain, finally, exactly how to explain the psychological appeal of acceding to this kind of make-believe, nor do I want to engage in a parallel kind of intellectual fabrication by resorting to the explanation provided by the Freudian psychoanalytic story or any other convenient psychologizing fiction. It could be, however, that immersion in the radical worldview provides, like certain kind of popular escapist fiction, an opportunity to leave behind the muddle of ordinary life in exchange for the narrative clarity and enhanced drama stories make available.

Of course, readers of genre fiction or viewers of Hollywood movies know that these fictions have been created for their entertainment and that their pleasures are momentary, time-limited. Belief in the radical fiction, unfortunately, doesn't often show much awareness of its artificial status and far too many of its enthusiasts choose to pretend that keeping up the faith is a sign of their superior principles. Luckily, most settle for the superiority of their beliefs in the abstract—are satisfied with fiction, in other words—and act on them only in the most cursory and ineffective ways. The academic left is an enclave dedicated almost entirely to theory, for most part disdaining genuine political activity, especially if it might only result in the political empowerment of mere liberals. (Although increasingly maintenance of the fiction has exacted its price: three of the last five Presidential elections arguably were decided in favor of the least progressive candidate due to the refusal of progressive voters to support the merely liberal alternative.)

But the predisposition to live within one's own fiction is by no means restricted to cloistered and starry-eyed academics. And while first-hand observation of this tendency in academe has made me particularly aware of its characteristics and its most common effects, I would again maintain that my primary interest in literature—my belief in its capacity to sharpen the mind's apprehension of the shaping patterns at work both in the imaginative creations of poets and novelists and in the imaginary creations many of us attempt to make of the social, political, and cultural arrangements we must unfortunately settle for in lieu of the more vivid if less tangible worlds evoked by the poets—has made me more alert to the many different forms the aestheticizing of mundane reality can take. If academics are not exclusively susceptible to this confusion, certainly neither are those whose political sympathies lie to the left. Conservatives—especially contemporary American conservatives—are if anything even more eager to impose on a recalcitrant and distasteful reality their favored and well-wrought fictions, despite their professed belief in original sin and the imperfectability of human nature.

Early modern conservatism, exemplified by such figures as Edmund Burke and Henry Adams, was indeed skeptical of utopian and radical thinking, preferring the relative security of the already known to the grand designs for the future of the reformers and revolutionaries. This is not an outlook to be lightly dismissed, although it can easily enough harden into a churlish refusal to countenance the possibility of beneficial change. The subsequent history of

conservatism, however, has not so much displayed this particular failing as it has seen the conservative frame of mind evolve into a rigid ideology, a “movement” as ready to impose its own version of the way things should be as any left-wing visionary. It is impossible any longer to think of the “conservative”—at least in the United States—as one who simply resists impulsive change; instead, the postwar American conservative comes fully possessed of a complete collection of well-made fictions, chief among them the unequivocal faith in the “free market” (taken over, to be sure, from 19<sup>th</sup> century liberals), a fiction so powerful in its influence that conservatives have almost managed to conflate it with democracy itself.

Clearly the free market is a notion of potential utility in a number of contexts, but contemporary conservatives have long since abandoned any concern for utility or consequences in favor of an all-encompassing belief system of which the free market has become the central tenet. So all-encompassing has it become that few conservatives bother to notice the way in which it clearly conflicts with, in some cases even undermines, other equally firm beliefs and ideals to which conservatives claim to be committed. The free market necessarily encourages innovation over stasis, relentlessly overturns established methods, practices, and assumptions, ensuring that change becomes the rule, and not even in the more deliberate, managed way—applying what John Dewey referred to as “intelligence”—that liberals prefer. In its cultural effects the free market inherently suggests that all values are ultimately up for grabs, that the most praiseworthy artistic endeavors are those that sell, that those ideas able to attract the greatest number of devotees are the ones best qualified to be regarded as embodying “truth.” The free market would seem to be the most immediate agency of “relativism” itself, for many conservatives the central error and besetting curse of our time.

One suspects that this valorization of the free market by conservatives can partially be interpreted as a function of post-World War II conservative anti-Communism, in the expression of which free markets became one of those features of American life that clearly distinguished it from life under communism, that made America America, even though previous conservative thinkers—the Southern agrarians, for example—considered capitalism an element of modern culture disruptive of tradition and traditional values. In the effort to counteract the influence of one monstrous fiction, communism, conservatives resorted to the promulgation of another, less monstrous, fiction, one that continued to animate American conservative discourse at least until

the election of Donald Trump, and the subsequent fealty to Trump's "ideas" the Republican party at least has apparently pledged. Although superficially evoking capitalist "enterprise" through Trump's (entirely spurious) reputation as a businessman, the real tenets of Trumpism are fear of the "other" and an accompanying white nationalism, allied with outright authoritarianism. Perhaps we might say that conservatives are beginning to trade their fiction of the free market for a more viscerally appealing fiction of a "white America."

The embrace of free market doctrine in the first place might be further related to the conservative proclivity to idealize the American past, and to measure the present according to a romanticized, fictionalized version of an America that more directly reflects current conservative presumptions. Thus the NRA image of gun-toting colonials and self-reliant frontiersmen; the family values image of the dutiful wife, the bread-earning husband, of America as a sex-free zone, aside from the respectable bearing of children; the strict constructionist image of a Constitution fixed into place once and for all by a group of white founding fathers whose supreme wisdom literally cannot be challenged. Together the various conservative constituencies create a fictionalized story of America and American customs and institutions that guides political consideration rather than the actual appraisal of present conditions that exist, as they say, on the ground. Such an idealization of one's country is no doubt a precondition for the development of nationalism, and the all too frequent conservative assault on the "patriotism" of their political opponents seems to me more a product of their phantasmal nationalism than anything resembling true patriotism.

And of course a crucial element in the formation of contemporary conservatism is the role of religion. Here we find a curious convergence between fundamentalist Christianity and the religious tradition against which it has increasingly set itself in order to maintain its self-identity, which it obviously believes to be in danger, fundamentalist Islam. Both the Islamists and the Christian right derive their inflexible and self-certain doctrines from a blinkered and unimaginative reading of their respective holy books, a phenomenon that from a literary point of view reveals equally the most egregiously mistaken of reading strategies and the inevitable havoc to be wreaked by all designated holy books. Those of us drawn to the literary point of view would like to think that acquiring it would ultimately cure both of these ills, but this very source of perspective also leads to the recognition that they are unlikely to be eliminated quite so

easily. An approach to both literature and to life allegedly more open to ambiguity and complexity that allowed itself its own kind of self-certainty would hardly deserve to be called liberal.

It is not unusual to find offered by many colleges and universities courses in the Bible or the Koran “as literature.” Such courses seek to help students to read these texts for the literary qualities that might not otherwise be perceptible through the more common historical or devotional readings of them. While I would not deny that such qualities can be found in both holy books, we are, in my view, well beyond the point where either of them could be rehabilitated as works of literature (“mere” literature, some would no doubt say). Such literary features as they may have—their poetry, their arresting images, their narrative force—can never be seen as more than adornments, must always be subservient to the message for which they have been supremely valued by the devout. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that so many of these must compensate for their inability to settle for the potential literary power of such books by invoking it in their fearful struggles against the innocently prosaic, ordinary confusions of real life.

Ultimately the cultural studies/academic left exhibits a similar intolerance of the literary representations of these confusions, preferring to cast literary works that reveal them to be synonymous with human reality itself as politically deficient, to valorize instead the evasion of this reality by what are interpreted at least as strategies better suited to reconstructing the world according to more enlightened precepts. The fundamentalist commitment to illusion of the academic left does not, needless to say, pose the same kind of threat that the zealotry of the religionists represents. The academics threaten only to trivialize and undermine the study of literature, and the humanities more broadly. This is a serious enough danger in the long run, although literature will most likely survive its injuries, nevertheless. Still, among those questioning the removal of literature from literary study, if not actively resisting it, ought to be anyone who believes (as I do) that with its loss liberalism would lose an important potential source of strength.

Suffice it to say that such strength does not come directly from literary works that themselves convey an obviously liberal “message.” To insist that liberalism be served by incorporating it in this way into the thematics of literature would be as doctrinaire as the

ideologies I have here criticized. Instead the strength of literature, and its potential to strengthen liberalism, lies elsewhere. In “The Poet,” Emerson writes that “The poets are thus liberating gods. . . They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward when we arrive at the precise sense of its author.” In “stimulating us through its tropes,” a great work of literature frees us from previous conceptions and preconceptions that ought always to be challenged. Indeed, it takes away from us our most comforting fictions. Liberals would do well to consider the value of this work.

### **Breaking the Code**

Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate* is as thorough a refutation of the premises underlying radical social constructionism as the proponents of a Darwinian-informed view of human culture and behavior could hope for. In his characteristically lucid style and buoyant manner, Pinker convincingly, and one would say definitively, demonstrates the implausibility of the social constructionist’s belief in the all-encompassing effects of environment in the shaping of behavior, a belief inseparable from such essentially metaphysical notions as the “blank slate,” the “noble savage,” and the “ghost in the machine.” And although one could question the degree to which he demonstrates the correspondingly determinative effects of genes, or what Pinker generally refers to as “human nature,” that genetics are determinative of many human characteristics and activities seems ultimately uncontested.

However, in the chapter on the biological origins of art and the appreciation of art (easily the weakest chapter in *The Blank Slate*), Pinker comes close to suggesting that art and literature are necessarily restricted to fulfilling biological functions assigned by human nature and that any artists or writers failing to meet the terms of these requirements are thereby derelict in their duties. Pinker’s implicit defense of representational art, tonal music, and traditional narrative is unmistakable, and at times even strident, as if Pinker’s impatience with those who persist in their ignorance of the imperatives of Darwinian selection has finally broken through his usually charitable manner (as revealed in his previous books). It seems a peculiar overreaction to the transgressions of these parties, and it almost invites closer scrutiny. In Pinker’s account, the culprits here are not merely the usual postmodern suspects so frequently identified by critics of

contemporary art and literature, but can be traced all the way back to the early modernists: the painters and their “freakish distortions,” the fiction writers, with their “disjointed narration and difficult prose,” the poets who “abandoned clarity,” the “dissonant” composers unable to appreciate rhythm and melody, the whole lot producing nothing but “weird and disturbing art.” Given the public’s presumptive preference for the familiar and comforting, the work of modernists and postmodernists alike is characterized not only as artistic failure but as a kind of moral decadence as well.

This is only a slight exaggeration of the animus Pinker seems to feel toward the unconventional in art and literature. And although one might agree with him that much twentieth-century art—but not only twentieth-century art—represents a rejection of the mass audience’s preference for the recognizable pleasures of the pictorial, the harmonious, or the dramatic, this hardly seems a wholesale rejection of “human nature.” The denial of inveterate human desires and predispositions in social science and public policy surely does have baneful consequences both for intellectual inquiry and for the general welfare, as Pinker spends much of his book demonstrating. It is hard to see, however, how the iconoclasm of modern artists yields similar consequences. As Pinker himself argues, the mass audience manages to find the art it needs anyway, despite the misguided labors of the highbrow artists. Can it really be said that these artists have in any significant way truly endangered the public weal?

Pinker further muddles the case against experimental art by entirely collapsing what ought to be an obvious distinction between artists and writers on the one hand and, on the other, the theorists and scholars in the academy who claim authority over the critical consideration of art and literature. Manifestly, his quarrel is with “postmodern” theory (itself an overly capacious category mixing different and conflicting intellectual approaches) far more than with the works of art often tagged with the postmodern label, scarcely any of which are actually cited by Pinker as examples of the kind of harmful art he has in mind. Pinker is certainly not alone in reflexively associating serious art with the academy; all of the arts, but literature especially, have indeed been firmly affixed to, if not completely subsumed by, the academy and the protocols of academic study, perhaps even to the point that we can no longer think of the arts or humanities as anything but “subjects” taken up by the university.

Nevertheless, one might still presume that individual artists and writers could break convention, reject established methods, even attempt to shake readers or viewers out of complacent habits, all in good faith and without any intention to deny human nature or participate in a political crusade to enforce rigid or radical doctrines. One might even presume that such artists could consider these kinds of efforts to be in the interest of art in a purely aesthetic sense, not because art will thereby “progress” in some dubious and implausible fashion but because art includes as part of its own nature the capacity, if not the imperative, to explore the boundaries of the human imagination. Pinker comes close to suggesting that any art that does not confirm the hypothesis that art originates in other human attributes—adaptations that helped us to navigate and control what Pinker and the evolutionary psychologists he cites like to call our “ancestral environment”—is perforce bad and irresponsible art. But how could this be? Why should otherwise serious and creative works of art or literature be disparaged because they allegedly do not reflect the use of faculties developed to confront conditions our ancestors confronted hundreds of thousands of years ago?

Pinker has elsewhere discussed the fallacy of thinking we cannot in some cases overcome or simply ignore the prescriptions issued to us by our genetic inheritance. Referring specifically to the biological command to bear children, Pinker advises that it is possible for us to metaphorically inform our imperious genes to “go jump in the lake” (*How the Mind Works*). In her book *Homo Aestheticus*, Ellen Dissanayake, herself a well-known proponent of a Darwinian approach to art (and cited by Pinker in *The Blank Slate*), puts it somewhat differently: “Unlike cats and dogs, we are not prisoners of either our aggressive or our sexual drives. Our more complex abilities to remember and foresee, weigh alternatives, imagine, and reflect allow us to think of our long-term interests and choose not to do what our ‘natural’ (or short-term) interests and inclinations might first suggest.” At the very least, it seems worth asking why, if we are capable of redirecting “drives” as powerful as these, we cannot also similarly modify, even ignore, the effects of those biological prompts Pinker considers the ultimate sources of art: “hunger for status,” the “pleasure of experiencing adaptive objects and environments,” as well as “the ability to design artifacts to achieve desired ends.”

This last-named endowment (no doubt itself originating in other genetic expressions) in particular seems an odd sort of feature to emphasize in an analysis that essentially maintains

there are limits on what artists and writers should try to achieve. Of course, one could quite plausibly believe some “desired ends” are more desirable than others, but Pinker’s argument all but reduces itself to the proposition that only art appealing to an audience evincing the preferences with which natural selection provided it can really be called art. It is difficult to distinguish here between Pinker’s own taste in art and literature and his need to find a place for “the genes” in all human activities, but it can’t be the case that popularity is the final arbiter of what can be considered art, even if what is popular coincides with the Darwinian account of the provenance of art favored by the evolutionary psychologist—or the psycholinguist (Pinker) sympathetic to this account.

Ultimately, then, Pinker’s underlying argument is that due to a confluence of genetic attributes, not through a simple “art gene” but through a contingent intermeshing in our genetic wiring, human beings are predisposed to take pleasure in symmetry and proportion, harmony and progression, structured drama and linear narrative. Plenty of great art and literature has exhibited these characteristics, without question, but if one takes Pinker’s attitude toward such accomplishments, their greatness would seem to have little to do with the genius or even the mere creativity which they embody but is more a matter of the art lessons written in to our genetic code. It doesn’t finally seem much of an achievement to fashion supposed artworks one couldn’t help but produce anyway—and if not produced by one artist then surely, eventually, by another.

It might be possible to embrace an argument like this while also, for example, acknowledging that opinions about such things as “beauty” or “coherence” might differ and that there is room for disagreement about what comes off as compelling in works of art and literature in specific instances. In my view, however, Pinker doesn’t much care to affirm this possibility; he conveys the distinct if cursory impression that successful art can only be so not merely because it taps into the source of possibilities provided by nature but because it carries out the original directives communicated by the genes in the most pristine and ingenuous way. That human artistic abilities might be rechanneled in a modern environment, where those directives have at the least a more muted urgency as instruments of “fitness,” seems an idea not worth considering. Certainly art cannot escape its evolutionary origins; but must it be strictly coterminous with them?

Any plausible philosophy of art must of course start with the biological/genetic foundation of the creative impulse. To this extent Pinker and other writers seeking to relocate the study and criticism of art and literature on more scientifically credible ground are providing a salutary and needed service; as manifestations of the exercise of human imagination, works of art and literature are unavoidably expressions of how the mind works. In some ways, in fact, since acts of the artistic imagination are a kind of deliberate (if not exactly deliberative) synthesis of various of the more immediate functions (Pinker likes to refer to them as “modules”) of the brain, works of art might be seen as particularly illuminating of human mental processes. Similarly, since such processes have evolved in accord with the logic of natural selection, they are undeniably the product of the working out of genetic imperatives.

It might seem that literature in particular—both fiction and poetry—is especially destined to reflect its genetic origins, given that its medium, language, is so obviously an example of a human faculty produced directly by natural selection and deeply rooted in the physical properties of the brain. Further, because the evolved function of language is plainly as a tool of “communication,” literature might be said to be tied more securely to its physiological foundations even than the other arts. And indeed there is little point in denying that poets and fiction writers begin with a medium whose immediate object is to represent the real world of experience in an orderly and coherent way and, more to the point, as transparently as possible. However, precisely as a consequence of these apparent constraints inherent in the use of language, literature is actually by its very nature an effort to escape the habitual and ingrained assumptions about the status of language that are involved in its ordinary applications.

Both poetry and fiction—the latter increasingly so over the course of its history, as distinctions between the two modes become less significant—are most immediately the deliberate assertion of language as something other than ordinary communication. While language is certainly not always simply a medium of plain speaking (even in everyday usage words are often employed for figurative or expressive effect in a manner that calls attention to the very fact that language can be made to perform in these ways), works of imaginative literature insist on the potential for all words to be parts of an entirely artificial discourse in which language is free to explore the limits of what it is capable of disclosing. One might say

that literature makes systematic this ability of language to transcend its innate function and to become in a specified context self-reflexively the “material” for artistic creation.

Most works of literature, at least prior to the twentieth century, call attention to language as a potentially malleable medium (as an instance of what Dissanayake calls “making special”) in a relatively conventionalized way, such that most of us simply accept this somewhat more plastic quality of written language when employed by poets and novelists. Moreover, in many cases such “crafted” writing continues to be taken as a mode of communication, albeit one whose meaning is imparted indirectly and in a stylized manner that marks it off from both speech and other forms of writing (as in most “realistic” or “well-made” narratives). Yet, finally, it is very difficult to see how, once literature is granted this special exemption from carrying out the work assigned to language in its “natural” state, it is plausible to insist that it may go only so far in asserting the purely aesthetic potential of writing but no farther. We have indeed moved substantially toward what Dissanayake calls a “hyperliterate” culture (a designation she does not intend kindly, especially toward the literary-intellectual exemplars of the trait), one in which all of our language-use has become increasingly self-conscious. But is it possible or even desirable that we somehow relinquish this culturally evolved disposition?

Indeed, we would need to relinquish as well the whole enterprise of literary criticism, at least in its modern form, unless we were to agree that any attention to form and style in works of literature is not to be considered. Granting that much current academic literary criticism is ideologically driven in the “postmodern” direction Pinker deplures, such a moralistic content-focused critical approach is arguably more consistent with Pinker’s own preference for readily assimilable art than more “old-fashioned” formalist or rhetorical criticism. One suspects that Pinker objects precisely to the ideology of postmodernism rather than any particular method of critical analysis it might employ, since in fact his consideration of “the arts” shows almost no serious concern for what might legitimately be the function of criticism, if anything implicitly dismissing it as an unnecessary imposition on the immediate response elicited by art in its authentic state. Perhaps those proponents of art-as-biology less inclined to regard criticism as a wholly marginal activity would find compelling instead the model offered by Frederick Turner in his book *Natural Classicism*: literary criticism as a kind of mutual performance between reader

and text, a model that preserves both the organic essence of art and a way to bring a degree of unity and definition to the interpretation of literature.

Like Dissanayake, Turner fears that too much emphasis has been placed on the textuality of literature, in the process allowing us to lose sight of the “ritual” qualities someone sympathetic to the Darwinian/anthropological account of the role of art would predictably enough choose to highlight. Pinker, who finally seems less convinced than either Dissanayake or Turner of the human centrality of art in the first place, does not belabor the anthropological confirmation of the impulse to make art, but his impatience with modern literature seems no less consistent with the charge both Dissanayake and Turner bring against unconventional or aesthetically provocative work of literature without ever quite stating it explicitly: such works fail to remain in their proper place, their authors revealing themselves altogether too willing to engage in too much writing. To use language to create poems and stories that “reflect the perennial and universal qualities of the human species” (Pinker) while conforming to equally “perennial” and formulaic patterns is one thing, these authors seem to agree, but to do so, in part, at least, in order to potentially augment the resources of imagination and of writing itself is, well, unnatural.

“In postmodernist literature,” Pinker sneers, “authors comment on what they are writing while they are writing it.” Putting aside the fact that writers going back at least as far as Shakespeare and Chaucer have committed such an offense, it is to say the least unclear why in itself this strategy (as well as similar self-reflexive gestures in the other arts) should be regarded as an aesthetic outrage. Is it (barely) acceptable for literary critics to reflect on the processes or techniques involved in composing works of literature but required that the author of these works must agree to maintain the illusion that they are never the result of such processes but rather sprang full-born from the brain, or better yet, composed themselves?

It’s taking the principle of “suspension of disbelief” pretty far to insist that all awareness—on the author’s part or the reader’s—of the artifice inherent in all works of literature be suppressed. Not only have indisputably great writers, of whom Pinker would presumably approve, indulged in various forms of “breaking the frame,” but the nature of art and of the “literary” has always been among the subjects these writers have treated, especially the nature of artistic representation as a way of organizing experience. We need only think of Shakespeare’s digressions on theater, the Romantic poets’ incessant lyrical celebrations of art and of poetry

itself, Henry James's stories about artists, or Hawthorne's stories about creation, artistic and otherwise, to know that this is true. Such recursiveness, one could argue, is not an unnatural imposition on an otherwise unmannered art form, but is inherent in the effort to use language to create literary art in the first place.

Quite frankly, one gets the impression in reading Pinker that he doesn't have much use for either art in general or literature more specifically unless they are taken simply as diversions for the multitudes, a nice way of illustrating how the human mind is equipped to create symmetry and order out of raw experience, but not to be valued beyond that. It's as if Pinker, and to a lesser degree Dissanayake and Turner, are almost offended at the notion that artists and writers might want to challenge accepted if unexamined assumptions about the function of art, that some of them might even presume to create works manifesting qualities sadly inconsistent with the biologically determined dictates about what proper art will be allowed to do.

This impatience with more adventurous art and writing is even more perplexing if we consider art in other than purely aesthetic terms. All art, perhaps especially literature, is also a means by which the human mind enhances its own ability to have meaningful experiences, to experience experience, as it were. As John Dewey in *Art as Experience* describes our encounter with art, it is an effort both to approximate the kind of experience the artist or writer went through in creating the work (in order to understand the work itself as thoroughly as possible) and to clarify most intensely the very nature of experience as a human capacity. In a very real sense, an attentive consideration of a work of art in all of its particulars is the act most revealing of what the human mind has evolved to attain: a level of consciousness by which the mind becomes aware of itself and its own operations, is able to understand what it means to undergo an experience and to self-consciously appreciate it. One would think that a psychologist such as Pinker might be interested in this activity, but one might as easily conclude from *The Blank Slate* that where aesthetic experience is concerned the mind might just as well be a blank slate.

Furthermore, the cumulative effects of such intense acquaintance with works of art and literature can only work to sharpen this ability of the mind to take stock of experience, both the more concentrated awareness provoked in our encounter with art but also our mundane and otherwise less accentuated alertness to the world we live in. In this sense, it represents an amplification of consciousness itself, in effect an aggrandizement of the biologically developed

mechanisms that Pinker or Dissanayake seem to insist are the limits of the human capacity to make and profitably comprehend works of art and literature. Moreover, such an educated familiarity with the particulars of aesthetic experience might even—ideally, in fact, would—perform the additionally useful service of more brightly illuminating the distinction between our experience of works of art—experience that is highly organized and artificially induced—and the very different kind of experience in which we find ourselves occupied in our ordinary, much more disorderly and prosaic reality.

Literature especially ought to provide us with the ability to distinguish adequately between aesthetic arrangement and reality, between fiction and life. Novels, stories, plays, many poems, give a shape and direction to an imagined reality that frequently stands in sharp contrast—either favorably or unfavorably—to reality as we live it. While on the one hand the kind of order to be found in works of literature is an attractive alternative to the disorder of real life, might even be exactly the sort of thing the human mind has evolved to perceive, on the other hand the appeal of such constructed patternings as are made available in literature ought to be regarded with caution, especially when this patterning explicitly presents itself as “story.” The power stories have in seeming to “make sense” of experience (although not necessarily always in a reassuring way) is sufficient to influence us to propose organizing ordinary reality in ways that give it the more consistent shape of fiction. (Most strongly-held ideologies partake of this tendency.)

Taking literature seriously in this context means being alert to the formal organization, narrative and otherwise, that defines it as literature, and equally alert, not merely to the absence of this kind of organization in reality as we know it, but to the incommensurability between the necessary distortions by definition required by literary narrative and the contingent and cumulative nature of the circumstances in which we are irretrievably implicated, between the manifestly make-believe and the unavoidably real. Indeed, the more familiar one becomes with the narrative strategies and aesthetic designs employed in works of literature, the more apparent it becomes when such strategies are used in interpreting the world (inappropriately, as with social constructionism) and to devise schemes that force reality to conform to more convenient and more satisfying stories.

I would contend that the simplistic and passive appreciation of the kind of unexamined storytelling that Pinker valorizes in *The Blank Slate* only encourages an approach to literature that at best sees it as offering lessons for life, intimations of a better way to arrange things. (Although Pinker himself does not suggest this; he's clearly more inclined to regard art as mere entertainment.) Rather than understanding literature—all works of the imagination—as a potential tool of consciousness, helping us both to clarify the nature of aesthetic experience and to dispel the illusion that we cast over the rest of our experience, this assumption about what literature can do for us arguably allows consciousness to become the acquiescent screen on which fanciful stories are projected—another version of the blank slate. I don't claim that only art and literature help us, in effect, to face reality—certainly science remains the most direct means of coming to terms with the real—but the converse view, that art is an escape from reality, arises primarily from a lack of interest in discovering the potential of art in the first place.

Surely the human mind is not destined to remain undeveloped beyond its adaptation to the ancestral environment, unable to use in new ways those capacities with which it is equipped, incapable of exploring its own possibilities, possibilities that might be at odds with the purely utilitarian functions its primordial environment programmed it to serve. Is self-referential or iconoclastic fiction and poetry to be condemned because it represents an attempt to seek out these possibilities, to examine and interrogate the conventions that, no matter what biological process has influenced their development, are taken to define the very practice of these forms of writing, that supposedly identify them as literary? Such an effort is probably inevitable in almost all artistic endeavors, and might even itself be an unavoidable result of the human impulse to create art and thus just as biologically natural as the prettiest picture or the most compellingly told story. Is it really possible to maintain that artists and writers ought to observe some preconceived instructions as to what their chosen media might be employed to accomplish, solely in order to demonstrate that Stephen Pinker's insistence that the human brain comes pre-equipped with an artistic paradigm is correct?

Ultimately, where art and literature are concerned, neither side in this version of the nature/nurture argument does much justice to either the demonstrated or the potential reach of human creativity. In this way they are remarkably similar. Both the view that artistic creativity is the sum of different biological functions and the view that it must be socially constructed want to

reduce the creation of art to a conjunction of forces working on the artist in ways of which he/she cannot be aware, something that accounts for the complexities of art in a neat and seamless formulation that requires no further debate or needless elaboration. Both views, when considered not as tentative explanations of an otherwise irrepressible human activity but as final and all-encompassing truth, finally have very little to say about what artists and writers really do, although they might provide insight into how difficult it is for a mass audience to appreciate what these artists do. But perhaps if scientists and social scientists didn't encourage this audience to accept the idea there ought properly to be normative standards for the creation of art, standards based on the most unreflective assumptions it is further encouraged not to question, for the creation of art and the violation of which is not only an offense against the acceptable in art but a violation of the laws of human nature, perhaps both artists and audience would stand a better chance of finding common cause.

### **The Singularity is Near**

The very title of Derek Attridge's *The Work of Literature* announces it as a deviation from what has become the usual sort of academic study of literature. No subtitle indicating that whatever work literature does for the critic is in the service of something other than itself? "Representation as Political Resistance"? "Style and the Cultural Determinants of Language"? Just the "work of literature," in isolation from its historical and sociological context, as if such a work might actually be approached on its merits as, well, art, or some other reactionary, now discredited and outdated practice? Heavens to Betsy!

Attridge makes it clear soon enough that "work" in this book can be understood both as a way of identifying a poem or novel ("a work of fiction") and as the labor involved in the work's actualization (its "performance," as Attridge has it). Still, the focus of his analysis is unmistakably on the experience of reading literature: "Can we do justice to literature?" Attridge asks. "More specifically, can we do justice to literature *as* literature when the institutions within which we engage with it—as teachers, students, researchers, and critics—exert constant pressure to treat it instrumentally—to reduce it to a set of rules, or a source of information, or a deployment of skills?" What complicates the attempt to do justice to the literary work (that is, if it is truly "literary") is the difficulty of grappling with its "singularity," the "particularity of the

work's power, intellectual and affective." Singularity occurs not in fixed features of the text (which Attridge regards simply as the words printed on a page) but as an event, an "act-event," Attridge's coinage intended to capture the activity of both writer and reader. "Singularity" refers more broadly as well to literature as a whole, accounting for its "distinctiveness among linguistic practices, allowing us to appreciate what is different about a novel or poem in comparison with a letter, a factual article, an opinion piece, a sermon, a historical study, a scientific treatise, a philosophical argument, an after dinner speech."

Attridge's concept of singularity was first introduced and developed in his 2004 book, *The Singularity of Literature*, and he describes *The Work of Literature* as a supplement to that book and an extension of its argument. Fortunately, for readers unfamiliar with the earlier book, Attridge provides a recapitulation of sorts in the form of a self-interview comprising the first chapter of the new book. In this chapter the reader will learn not just what Attridge means by "singularity" but also how writers display "invention" to invoke "otherness," the latter of which (although Attridge also uses the term "alterity" as a term for this) is for Attridge the defining feature of the reading experience, bringing to the reader's awareness the absolutely different, something never before apprehended "because the modes of encounter made possible by the state of things. . .do not allow for it."

. . .Otherness is not just out there, unapprehended because no-one has thought of apprehending it, or because it bears no relation whatever to existing forms of knowledge, but because to apprehend it would threaten the status quo.

"Status Quo" does not refer simply to the reigning political order but includes all existing categories of thought, cultural, psychological, or aesthetic. The disclosure of otherness represents for Attridge the singular value of literature (and to an extent, art more generally), taking the place of aesthetic beauty, moral suasion, or political enlightenment in other accounts of the efficacy of art and literature, not least because those kinds of value can be affirmed in many other, non-artistic endeavors and experiences. In the subsequent chapters, Attridge further pursues questions posed but not fully explored in *The Singularity of Literature*, especially the salience of the alternative approaches to literature that have dominated academic discourse over the last several decades and within the context of which Attridge's theory must compete for recognition and respect. What is the proper role of the critic of literature? How does historical context shape our

response to the literary work? To what extent does cultural difference affect our reception of the work?

Attridge answers all of these questions by maintaining throughout that literature's singularity, for both writer and reader, is, while unavoidably conditioned by context and culture, always present to the reader approaching the work as an artistic expression, in fact must be present if the work is to be experienced as such. (Some works no longer afford this kind of experience, while others, not originally written to afford it, can begin to do so.) It is not that a work of literature can only be encountered in its singularity—all literary works can be read for many other purposes (as historical document, as cultural symptom, etc.). But Attridge insists that they exist as "literature" only when they are allowed to manifest in the "event" of conscientious reading open to the unknown and unexpected. Although he also repeatedly acknowledges that literary writing can be considered from other perspectives for a variety of motives, Attridge clearly believes that it is the transformative power of poetry and fiction that most warrants our attention to it, that, indeed, justifies creating the category of "literature" in the first place.

To illustrate how the various concepts employed in his theory might be applied, Attridge offers a number of close readings of specific works, from Emily Dickinson's poem "As imperceptibly as Grief" to Alaa al-Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2004). These readings are uniformly effective in the context of this book, demonstrating both that Derek Attridge is a skilled and discerning reader and that terms of the theory as he defines them can indeed be coherently applied. But the very success of these readings in exemplifying Attridge's own apprehension of literary invention and its revelations of otherness raise questions about how his method could be transferred to the formal study of literature. Arguably New Criticism gained the prominence it once had because the strategy of close reading proved effective not just in generating a distinctive kind of academic literary criticism but also in organizing a classroom in the still-developing discipline of literary study; however, for this strategy to really succeed, analysis should lead to conclusions that can be generalized, even if only toward a broadly shared "appreciation" that nevertheless is anchored in manifest features of the work at hand. Attridge's mode of analysis discourages us from thinking that a literary work actually has manifest features to which all readers will respond in a similar way.

For Attridge, the “text” is simply the otherwise inert printing of words. The “work” is the text as brought to life by the reader, whose experience of its singularity is itself singular. Attridge speaks of the possibility that the teacher might “encourage and leave a space for the encounter with otherness,” but it scarcely seems plausible that a curriculum of literary study could be justified according to how felicitously it enabled its students to register the singular experience of reading assigned literary works. If the kind of close reading associated with New Criticism was ultimately discredited because the appreciation it was intended to foster seemed hopelessly indistinct as an object of knowledge, it is hard to see how the kind of approach implied by Attridge’s description of the reading experience would be perceived as rigorous enough to become a generally accepted practice. Indeed, however much notions like the “autonomy” or the “singularity” of the literary work (Attridge rejects the former as a denial of reality, it should be said) are legitimate names for the artistic integrity many of us feel a work of literature should be granted at some point in our consideration of its value, using the literature classroom (the literature curriculum more generally) simply to reinforce this particular value, the possibility of a potentially transformative experience, can’t finally be the solely sanctioned strategy for “teaching” literature. There is, after all, a difference between studying literature and reading it, and there would seem little need for formal programs in literary study if joining a book discussion group might work just as well.

That Attridge underplays the practical applications of his theoretical construct suggests he knows those applications are problematic. Thus *The Work of Literature* ultimately seems more preoccupied with ethics than with either pedagogy or aesthetics (certainly not formalist aesthetics), in the process locating the book comfortably enough in currently respectable academic discourse after all. Attridge’s precepts are expressed in unequivocally ethical language—“doing justice,” “responsible” reading—even in the final chapter recasting the activity of readers and critics as a form of “hospitality”: “effective hospitality to the literary work involves informing and energizing one’s conscientious, careful, rule-governed reading with the unlimited, unpredictable force of unconditional openness to whatever might arrive.” It would seem that for Attridge academic criticism can provide in its attentiveness and solicitude, its scrupulous accountability, a model ethical project, his book becoming an extended gloss on the ethical theories of Derrida and Levinas. Literature itself, it turns out, is most valuable in making this sort of ethical reading and criticism possible, provoking the question whether Attridge

doesn't de facto stress the instrumental convenience of literature himself, prizing it more as a source of ethical reflection or inquiry (including the inquiry resulting in this book) than for its intrinsic value as aesthetic expression.

It might be said further that Attridge's analysis of literary value and its embodiment in the event of reading, to the extent it relies on widely-accepted ethical concepts ("hospitality" is rather unconventional in its bearing on literary criticism, but the term identifies an attitude toward reading the ethical status of which is readily apparent) is also dubiously faithful to his own stated preference for a criticism that recognizes literature's singularity, pursuing ends that could not be accomplished just as well using other kinds of illustration, other rhetorical means. Surely the ethical considerations that inform Attridge's analysis could be explored in numerous contexts apart from reading poems and novels. If Attridge makes a good case for the singularity of literature as realized through the reading experience, his book itself serves as a less persuasive model, except in isolated flourishes designed to reckon with that singularity in its tangible expressions.

The most tangible element of a literary work's artistic expression—its formal and stylistic features—would presumably correspond to what Attridge designates as "invention," but just as (deliberately, it seems) he defines "otherness" as broadly as possible, he also does little to specify what characteristics constitute invention, or whether some forms of invention might be aesthetically superior to others. We can get some sense of how he measures it by looking at his sample readings, such as the discussion of Emma Donoghue's novel, *Room* (2010) at the conclusion of Chapter 3. Attridge asserts that Donoghue accomplishes "something new" in her novel related from the perspective of a young child, but exactly what is new about it is never made clear. The novel is somewhat unorthodox in that the child's at times opaque language is allowed to be the novel's center of discourse, but that hardly seems an innovation, however much it does condition the reader's perception of the story's immediate circumstances. Ultimately the novel's language and its oblique narration serve the fairly standard function (standard in contemporary fiction) of delaying the full revelation of setting (a single room in which the child and his mother have been imprisoned by a rapist abductor) and creating a kind of mystery plot. Donoghue's invocation of her character's verbal reality may be done skillfully

enough, but that it represents some kind of advance over, for instance, *The Sound and the Fury* is not a sustainable claim.

Attridge's case is not strengthened by the arguably circular reasoning employed in his elucidation of the connections among his central concepts: "A work that is inventive is necessarily one that introduces otherness and is singular; a work that brings the other into the field of the same is necessarily singular and inventive in its handling of the available materials." The notion that a work of literature has managed to introduce something unprecedented and heretofore unknown because it is inventive in a particularly "literary" way seems perfectly sound, but when "otherness" is defined so loosely that the perception of it can only be subjective ("It's 'other' to me!") then invention comes to seem a rather indeterminate activity—since I feel the work reveals an unfamiliar subject or technique, it must be inventive because, according to Attridge's formula, the two qualities always appear together. In his readings of passages from poets such as Milton and Wordsworth, Attridge is quite persuasive in showing how specific elements of these passages can lead to a recognition of invention, but when such features are irretrievably tied to the "act-event" disclosing otherness, it is not at all certain that different readers will respond to them with the same sort of facility.

However attuned to the subtle effects of literary language Attridge proves himself to be in his close readings, there is also a certain modesty to them, in keeping with his assertion that "a critical method should be no more powerful than is absolutely necessary for the task it is called upon to carry out." Attridge explicitly poses such modesty against the criticism of someone like Christopher Ricks, whose considerable skills are "deployed to move, delight, and persuade" more than they are used to convey the critic's direct experience of the work at hand. Attridge suggests that the critic instead pause to ask, "does what I am pointing out really matter in my experience of the works?" This seems at first a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but when "experience" in effect overrules the claims that might be made for the existence of more or less objective—or at least stable—features possessed by the literary text that predispose the reader's experience, it merits further reflection. For one thing, the notion of "my experience of the works" here seems surprisingly static. Does criticism so easily capture that experience, as if recording a unitary reading, unalterable in its results? As a way, perhaps, of making the concept of "singularity" seem less absolute, Attridge stresses that it is subject to change according to time

and circumstance, that a work can gain or lose it, so it is curious he would enjoin the critic against attempting to “move” or “persuade” the reader, to introduce critical matters that might, for example, modify and enhance some readers’ future experience of the work.

Even if we were to accept that the experience of reading can be regarded as something unified and discrete, how, finally, would we determine what “really matters” in an assimilation of that experience? Is it what matters to the integrity of the experience, or is it what matters in our attempt to do justice to the literary work itself? Perhaps Attridge would say there is no way to separate the two questions, since they are both answered in the affirmative and describe the same phenomenon. But for the critic’s attempt to be either just or unjust, the “literary work itself” must have palpable qualities that are not simply functions of the reader’s perception. There must be the possibility that some critics might do greater justice to the work than others, even the possibility that some critics might simply get it wrong. “Getting it wrong” is not something that applies to the act of reading taken purely as a psychological state; the retort, “That’s the way I read it” is impossible to counter with an admonition to read better, not unless it is acknowledged that the “text” exists as more than a rumored presence enabling the act-event of literature, that the singularity of literature begins in the writing, the very material medium through which all literary art is irreducibly given its form.

## CODA

### The Experience of Experience Itself

In her book, *Dewey for Artists* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) Mary Jane Jacob admirably attempts to explicate the philosophy of John Dewey--not just *Art as Experience*--as a useful guide for artists (and also curators and art teachers) in considering the implications of their own practices, as well as the social and cultural role of art in a democratic society. The book effectively explicates the main ideas of *Art as Experience* and also provides a generally reliable (if brief) synoptic survey of Dewey's thought as a whole. However, in correctly emphasizing Dewey's abiding commitment to democracy, both political and cultural, and his equally abiding dedication to upholding human rights and achieving social justice, Jacobs misrepresents Dewey's

conception of "aesthetic experience" and leaves the misleading impression that Dewey believed art was most beneficial as an aid in effecting social and political change.

Jacobs appropriately devotes her first two chapters to "Making" and "Experiencing," Dewey's twinned activities that when bound together through an act of perception is the realization of art. Jacobs is right to emphasize the extent to which Dewey wanted to challenge then-standing distinctions between "high" and "practical" art, which he did by defining "art" not as the product of certain long-established forms but as a process. In the maker's case, the process is one of heightened care for the very act of making, a fully engaged attention to the act in and for itself--any human creation most immediately carried out not to accomplish a utilitarian purpose but to validate its own creative integrity (by, in Dewey's terms, becoming an "integrated" experience) can be regarded as art. Activities that might have been considered merely "artisinal" rather than "artistic" can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities (as long as the artisan was him/herself preoccupied first of all by aesthetic quality) just as readily as the greatest masterpieces of traditional art history. There are still differences between these kinds of artistic practice, but one of Dewey's ambitions in *Art as Experience* is to establish that the making of art is not confined to the chosen few but is something that is available to all, in whatever medium they might work.

To this extent, the "democratization" of art is certainly one of Dewey's aspirations as expressed in his writing about the aesthetic, but it is a misreading of *Art as Experience* to maintain that "democracy" in art entails that all artistic activity is inherently equal simply because it is available to everyone. Effort and attention are required in both the making and experiencing of art, and rendering each of these in the way that Dewey prescribes is an exacting task that some people are not willing to undertake. Dewey indeed believed the satisfactions of creativity and aesthetic experience were widely attainable human aspirations, and that existing social arrangements too often impeded their fulfillment, but even if those arrangements were altered (something Dewey tried diligently to effect in both his public activism and his other writing), obstacles to the creation and the vibrant reception of art might remain.

These obstacles would arise from individual human imperfections, not from social constraints. When every citizen is finally free to cultivate whatever kind of artistic inclination he/she might possess (or perhaps acquire), some will succeed less readily than others. Some will

not succeed at all, although not necessarily because of lack of the requisite "talent" as conventionally understood. "Sensitivity to a medium as a medium is the very heart of all artistic creation and esthetic perception," Dewey writes in Chapter 9 of *Art as Experience* ("The Common Substance of the Arts"), and here is the explanation of the potential for failure. By "sensitivity to a medium as a medium," Dewey does not mean some sort of exquisitely calibrated sense of "taste," but the ability to achieve something like a pure state of attention. Attention to "medium" entails not just appreciation of the particular raw material of the artist's chosen form but a kind of a radical attention in itself, a state of being rather than an artistic act per se.

There will always be failures of attention. On the artist's part, such failures could originate in clichéd or rote execution, a lack of insight into the possibilities of the medium, but also in devoting disproportionate attention to the *subject* of the art work, the "message" or "statement" to be taken from it. Efforts to treat art as "communication" and "expression" can also misdirect the artist's interest, replacing concern for the "medium as a medium" with the opportunity to "say" something or convey "inner feelings." Dewey would not deny that art can communicate or express, but these are done indirectly, as the secondary effects of "making," giving order to emotions and integrating message and means. In this way, the making of art, a general human capability, remains a rigorous act, or else it would not be the source of such profound value of the sort Dewey ascribes to it.

This value inheres in the experience of art as well, thus a focus on medium in and for itself is also a prerequisite for "esthetic perception." If the making of art requires diligent attention by the artist, so too does aesthetic experience if such experience is to redeem its full potential, both for aesthetic appreciation and for the consummation of experience itself. And, since for Dewey "art" takes on substance only in the meeting of a perceiving consciousness and the artist's effort as manifested in the work, art is, most immediately and unavoidably, an existentially particular phenomenon, an individual encounter not a social project. Indeed, Dewey describes it as an almost inescapably personal abandonment of inhibition: "I do not think it can be denied that an element of reverie, of approach to a state of dream, enters into the creation of art, nor that the experience of the work when it is intense often throws one into a similar state" (*Art as Experience*, Ch. 12).

An "intense" aesthetic experience is not something that suddenly happens but again, as in the making of art, requires concerted concentration. Jane Jacob acknowledges the requisite effort involved in this process, noting that "Dewey was clear that perception involves hard work" and quoting his warning that "the one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear." Yet at times in *Dewey for Artists* she seems to deny Dewey's admonition in favor of a more comfortable appeal to "real life" as source of art's attraction, both for artist and perceiver. She takes Dewey's insistence that both the creation of art and the ability to appreciate are natural impulses continuous with other forms of human experience to mean that the practice of art should make explicit connections to the "everyday," as if "life experience" itself somehow needs to be made art's explicit subject, so that we don't forget that life and art are inseparable.

The work of art offered by the artist and our attentive experience of that work are continuous with "life" simply because they proceed from the activity of what Dewey calls a "living creature"--a human being. When Dewey maintains that art and life are not separate, he is trying to extricate art from the ossified carapace of its "classic status" that has accumulated over time and to return it to "the human conditions under which it was brought into being" and "the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience" (*Art as Experience*, p.1). I think Dewey would have it that all art is connected to the "everyday" as long as it is an honest response by the artist to his/her experience of the world that is transformed through the "ordering" the artist provides. There is *always* "a direct transmission of experience at an aesthetic level" in successful art, notwithstanding that Jacob seems to think this is some special accomplishment of what she calls "social practice art." What else would the artist be transmitting?

According to Jacob, Dewey is urging us to accept that "When we have an aesthetic experience, we experience the world in a revitalized way," but it is difficult to know whether she is saying that after an aesthetic experience we are more open to heightened experience in general (which certainly could happen), whether during the aesthetic experience we are somehow encountering "the world" as depicted in the work of art, or whether she is speaking not of art at all but of the aesthetic response we can have to elements of the "real" world. Since she makes this statement while discussing "socially engaged art" that "goes directly to the source--to life itself--drawing out the aesthetic experiences that the everyday affords and bringing life for a time

into the frame of art," it is likely the second, but the assertions she is making verge on incoherence: Why go to everyday life for its sort of "aesthetic experiences" that are then reproduced in a work of art? Why is the art needed if life itself has already provided the experience? And what can it mean that the socially engaged artist "goes directly to the source--to life itself?" Where are all the other artists going for subjects or inspiration? Somewhere other than life?

One of the examples of this socially engaged art that Jacob cites is *Future Library*, by Katie Paterson, an installation employing "a forest of spruce trees and library of books." This work "is not an avant-garde gesture but. . .a reinvestment in the world around us through art. . .The duration required to grow a forest suggests it is worth investing in the future, expressing the hope that humanity will survive another hundred years and more. . . ." Everything about Jacob's description here suggests that this art work is making a political statement, that it exists in order to advance that statement, not to offer an aesthetic experience of the kind Dewey describes in *Art as Experience*. One could very well agree with the statement, even find the installation itself inspiring, but also consider it to be something other than art, unless it does in fact invite the viewer to consider it first *only as* a work of art--at which point its status as "a reinvestment in the world around us" becomes irrelevant. If instead a work's primary ambition is to "express the hope" that we make such a reinvestment, it is not in that aspiration functioning as art.

Nothing in my reading of *Art as Experience* suggests to me that Dewey thought the goal of art is to "revitalize" or "invest" in the world, or to "express hope" (or despair). These are all gestures, pronouncements made by the artist *through* the art but seem to have little room for the perceiving consciousness that must complete the process by which art comes to be. It certainly might happen that an ancillary effect of the experience of a work of art would be to further think about the work's subject or theme, even to be energized by a presumed "message." But if these are the only felt effects, then the point of art has been lost. Although Jacob goes beyond "making" and "experiencing" as topics in *Dewey for Artists*, providing a rather wide-ranging (especially for a fairly short book) discussion of Dewey's thought as she believes it might apply to art practice and curation, these are the crucial concepts underlying his theory of art as articulated in *Art as Experience*, his most thorough and most essential inquiry into the subject. In my view, Jacob distorts this book's careful delineation of the nature of aesthetic experience by

overemphasizing John Dewey's concern with social context and underemphasizes his recognition that art is first a phenomenon of human awareness that can become aesthetic only when the social drops away in the experience of experience itself.