

FIGHTING FOR A COMMON CULTURE: LITERARY THEORY IN THE AGE OF REAGAN

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This dissertation examines the possibilities for creating social change through literary criticism by focusing on three American critics: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Frank Lentricchia, and Edward Said. All three wrote politically minded literary criticism during the 1980's and 1990's, decades that witnessed a broad-ranging attempt to roll back the change and turbulence associated with the 1960's. With regard to criticism, this attempt amounted to a challenge to literary theory, which was a radical way of thinking that crystallized in the 60's and early 70's and often carried revolutionary social hopes with it. As I suggest in the introduction, we are currently living in a moment in which the radical hopes fostered by literary theory co-exist uneasily with the counterrevolutionary movements of the 80's: the hopes and impulses still exist, but they have no adequate social outlets. Looking back to the 80's, I hope, will help clarify our moment, and possibly provide some resources for contemporary criticism.

My goal in each chapter is twofold: first, to understand the critic on his terms, second, to put the criticism in dialogue with another body of literary or critical work in order to suggest its broader ramifications. With Henry Louis Gates, Jr., I argue that his effort to move African American literature and criticism into the mainstream of American literary study led him to maintain a view of race as an essence. Comparing his critical work

with Hortense Spillers' proves this point, but also suggests that a more radical view of race remains in Gates' work. Frank Lentricchia tried to base a political program on the intimate experience of pleasure that he felt when reading poetry. Putting Philip Roth in conversation with Lentricchia reveals the impossibility of Lentricchia's program, but also a different and more socially productive path for Lentricchia's interest in pleasure. Edward Said tried to create spaces in his criticism where antagonism could be overcome. Reading Bharati Mukherjee's novel Jasmine (1989) next to Said suggests how useful Said's model can be, but also reminds us that Said only suggested, rather than applied, this model in his work.

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In a narrow sense, my sons, Reggie and Nate, had absolutely nothing to do with the composition of this dissertation. In fact they probably got in the way of it, for example when Reggie would come upstairs while I was writing, forcing me to quickly save my work before he climbed onto my lap and started "editing" it. More broadly, this work has

everything to do with them, as it says something about the kind of world I would like them to live in. (Plus I always secretly liked the interruptions, anyway.)

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INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to The Culture of Literacy (1994), Wlad Godzich argues that post-WWII literary criticism in the U.S. had two goals. The first was to incorporate the new, primarily class-based diversity of American university students. The formal emphasis of the New Criticism answered this call, as it did not depend on students sharing a cultural background. The second was to define a national identity, an interest that Godzich argues had been present in American literary study from the beginning. American Studies programs and departments answered this call. The result was that literary study in America was unprepared for the sixties. Since New Criticism was largely depoliticized, and American Studies focused primarily on collective identity, neither could account for the radical energies that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war demonstrations, and other protests of the period. "It was [...] inescapable," writes Godzich, "that in the late sixties and early seventies young Americans concerned with active engagement in their own culture would have the sense that something had gone terribly wrong in the organization of knowledge."¹ Godzich writes that young people reacted in three ways: some believed in conspiracy theories, some looked to foreign countries like Germany and France, and some looked to literary theory, which offered "a comprehensive and far-reaching critique of the existing organization of knowledge and of the Enlightenment ideology upon which it was based" (CL, 18).

¹ Wlad Godzich, The Culture of Literacy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 18. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated CL.

Godzich's connection between literary theory and the social unrest of the 1960's and 1970's is common. Terry Eagleton makes a similar link in the afterword to the 1996 edition of Literary Theory: An Introduction when he argues that theory was the result of an upheaval in routine social and intellectual practices. Theory was an attempt for Western institutions to "scrutinize [their] own conditions of possibility," he writes.² Both of these formulations posit theory as the result of social change, but Eagleton and Godzich, as well as many other theorists, also believe in theory's potential to cause change. The original conclusion to Eagleton's Literary Theory provides not only an endorsement of theory's potential to cause social change, but also an important account of how theory achieves these political results. Eagleton, like Frank Lentricchia in Criticism and Social Change (1983), denies the gap between "literature" and "politics" and instead asserts a common field of rhetoric. The key point, for Eagleton, is a focus on the *effects* of literature, or language use in general. Classical rhetoric, he writes, "saw speaking and writing [...] as forms of *activity* inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded."³ Eagleton's reintroduction of rhetoric enables him to argue that "there is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning" (LT, 169).

Eagleton, Godzich, and others had high hopes for the political possibilities of theory, fed in part by the social unrest of the 60's and 70's. But these hopes were dashed in the 80's, as Reagan's social and economic policies worked to roll back many of the progressive

² Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 190.

³ Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 179. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated LT.

changes that occurred in the previous decades. The 1982 conclusion to Eagleton's Literary Theory ended with a memorable allegory. "We know that the lion is stronger than the lion-tamer, and so does the lion-tamer. The problem is that the lion does not know it. It is not out of the question that the death of literature [an event that theory heralded, according to Eagleton] may help the lion to awaken," he wrote (189). He begins his 1996 afterword by acknowledging that this assertion was a product of its time, and that what has happened since is "not a defeat for [theory], which has indeed been gathering institutional strength ever since, but a defeat for the political forces which originally underpinned the new evolutions in literary theory" (192).

Wlad Godzich tells a similar story in The Culture of Literacy. Despite its beginnings as an oppositional resource, theory was being overrun by a focus on writing as job training. Whereas the "culture of literacy" began as a response to the Renaissance dream of "linguistic universalism," markets had expanded to the point where literacy was being subsumed by efficiency. In this setting, Godzich sees the emphasis on literacy as career training at the university level as an abdication of the original universal goals of literacy. Rather than using reading and writing as a way to be in contact with "all spheres of human activity," it was a way for students to take their place in the market. Theory, for Godzich, opposes an advance towards a state dominated by global markets, but he sees it as threatened by the same forces. If theory is overly professionalized, as he sees it becoming, then it will operate comfortably as a vocation, abandoning its oppositional role and taking its place in the global economy.

The 80's were not the first decade in the 20th century that saw radical political hopes for criticism dashed. Eagleton's method of using rhetoric to combine theory and

politics has a precedent in Kenneth Burke. In Literary Theory, Eagleton writes that political criticism's concern should be with "the kind of *effects* which discourses produce, and how they produce them" (179). In the opening to "Lexicon Rhetoricae" in Counterstatement (1931), Burke writes that he will provide "a discussion of effectiveness in literature."⁴ His opening essay in Counterstatement addresses "Three Adepts of 'Pure' Literature": Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, and Remy de Gourmont. Burke argues that none of these authors are as detached from reality as their reputations claim. In "The Poetic Process," Burke writes, "the artist [...] discovers himself not only with a message, but also with a desire to produce effects upon his audience" (54). In "Program": "a system of aesthetics subsumes a system of politics" (113). For Burke, as for Eagleton, literature is political whether it wants to be or not.

For Burke, as for many left literary intellectuals of the 1930's, the Communist Party was a source of political hope. Though never a party member, Burke was active in Writer's Congresses and radical politics throughout the 30's. Burke's most obviously political moment came at the 1935 Writer's Congress, when he recommended that the Communist Party work on behalf of "the people" rather than "the workers." Burke's suggestion, which he made by suggesting a change in terminology, was that the Communist Party widen its base and thus adopt a more inclusive political stance. Like many intellectuals, however, Burke pulled away from politics as the Cold War set in. For Burke, this withdrawal came through an increasing abstractness in his work. The title page of Grammar of Motives (1945), for example, features the phrase "ad bellum purificandum," or as Burke translates

⁴ Kenneth Burke, Counterstatement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 123. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated CS.

it, “towards the purification of war.”⁵ In the book’s final section he writes that the book works for this goal by introducing “a level of motivation which even wholly rival doctrines of motives must share in common” (GM, 442). In order to achieve this purification, Burke had to work at an extremely abstract level, away from the conflicts and difficulties of politics in the world.

Edmund Wilson’s turn away from radical politics was more directly tied to the reality of Stalin and life in Russia. In the introduction to the recent New York Review of Books edition of To the Finland Station (1940), Louis Menand outlines the change in Wilson’s view of Russia over the course of writing the book. When Wilson first conceived of it, in the midst of the Great Depression, he believed in the proletariat revolution, and that this revolution was taking place in Russia. His book was to be an account of “the writing and acting of history”—as he said in the book’s subtitle—that began with Vico and culminated with Stalin in Russia, realizing a better world for the Russian people. Over the course of writing the book (from 1935-1940) and visiting Russia (in 1938), Wilson confronted the reality of oppression in Russia, and could no longer convincingly give his book the narrative arc he had imagined for it. This conflict still makes To the Finland Station an interesting and important book. Wilson is awed at the scale of the achievement of the Russian Revolution, but Stalin—who Wilson writes has combined “the butcheries of the Robespierre Terror with the corruption and reaction of the Directory”—looms as the revolution’s legacy.⁶

⁵ Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), 442. Future references abbreviated GM.

⁶ Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 504.

After the war, Wilson turned away from politically active writing much as Burke did. He began writing about times or places other than the present, including books on Canadian literature, Haitian Literature, and the literature of the Civil War. Other critics, such as Lionel Trilling and many associated with Partisan Review, abandoned their radical politics and adopted stances that were more supportive of the U.S. This is most visible in Partisan Review's 1952 symposium "Our Country and Our Culture." The symposium began with the editorial statement that from roughly 1940-1952, American intellectuals and artists had gradually begun to see the U.S. as supportive of their work rather than hostile to it. Of the twenty-four respondents only three raised objections or challenged this premise; four took the opportunity to remind readers of the threat of the Soviet Union. Much like the U.S. during Reagan's Presidency (when it was "Morning Again in America"), this was not an environment that supported a desire for radical change.

One of the most basic questions guiding my work in this dissertation concerns the possibility for creating social change through literary criticism at the present moment. Given the history I've narrated here, what are these possibilities? Columbia professor Nicholas Dames' recent essay "The Theory Generation" (2012) in N+1 Magazine does not paint a hopeful picture. In his essay, Dames discusses six recent novels by authors who graduated from elite universities in the 80's or early 90's, and were thus "well placed to observe the first vehement arrivals of Theorists in the classroom."⁷ Dames concludes that the novels give up on theory's potential to create change, and simply internalize theory in

⁷ Nicholas Dames, "The Theory Generation," N+1, Oct. 24, 2012. <http://nplusonemag.com/the-theory-generation>. Accessed February 18, 2013. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated TG.

order to adapt to the status quo.⁸ They do this because there is no more need to reveal “buried assumptions” within orders of power. According to Dames, a character from Sam Lipsyte’s book The Ask adequately sums up these novels’ worldviews when he reflects on his college friends: “They’ll think they are special and that they suffer in distinct ways, but they are all hurtling down the same world-historical funnel. They will attempt to professionalize their passions, or else just get jobs. Some will do better than others. Some won’t have to do better because of their trust funds. Despite what are often radically different fashion aesthetics, not to mention politics, they are all fundamentally the same” (TG). In this world, Dames concludes, theory has no point. There is no need to uncover the mechanisms of manipulation because these mechanisms are all on the surface.

Dames’ piece is important because it is a contemporary expression of the frustration that comes from not having a social or political outlet for one’s desires. In this sense, it was echoed politically by the Occupy Movement of 2011-2012, which a recent essay in the New York Review of Books convincingly argued was less an attempt to reform the institutions of power in the U.S. than the announcement of “the membership of a significant portion of our population in a new form of Third World.”⁹ But Dames’ conclusion that theory is “rendered inert by a world without secrets” is ultimately an overgeneralization. Comprehensive and far-reaching critiques of the existing organization of knowledge (to use Godzich’s words) still exist, and are doing important political work in major American media sources. Two

⁸ The novels Dames discusses are Teju Cole, Open City (2011), Jennifer Egan, A Visit From the Goon Squad (2010), Jeffrey Eugenides, The Marriage Plot (2011), Ben Lerner, Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), Sam Lipsyte, The Ask (2010), and Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs (2010).

⁹ Michael Greenberg, “In Zuccotti Park,” New York Review of Books, October 13, 2011. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/10/zuccotti-park/?pagination=false>. Accessed December 12, 2012.

recent, high profile essays addressing gender, Anne Marie Slaughter’s “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” (2012) in The Atlantic, and Stephanie Coontz’s “Why Gender Equality Stalled” (2013) in The New York Times are cases in point. Both Slaughter and Coontz focus on equality in the workplace, and note that there are still important obstacles for women who want to be successful professionals and parents. Both also assert that broad economic realities are discouraging further change from happening, even if people want it. “Our goal,” writes Coontz, “should be to develop work-life policies that enable people to put their gender values into practice.”¹⁰ Slaughter develops this point even further, and displays the kind of revolutionary thinking that Terry Eagleton expected from literary theory early in his career. While recommending that workplaces adopt more flexible expectations concerning the hours their employees spend in the office, she notes, “space for play and imagination [...] emerges when rigid work schedules and hierarchies loosen up.”¹¹ The point of her essay is to encourage gender equality in the workplace, but the changes required for this equality are so foundational that they would literally remake the workplace from the ground up, basing it on new, more family-friendly values that leaders say they want, even if their actions speak otherwise. Slaughter knows that this will not happen immediately, so she takes small steps: ending faculty meetings at 6 P.M. and explicitly mentioning that she is doing so because she must go home to have dinner with her teenage sons, for example. Her essay shows the value of the theoretical enterprise, i.e., of questioning foundational assumptions in a broad-ranging way, at the current moment. In

¹⁰ Stephanie Coontz, “Why Gender Equality Stalled,” The New York Times “Week in Review,” Feb. 17, 2013, 7.

¹¹ Anne Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” The Atlantic (July/August, 2012), 101.

doing so, it suggests limits to the claims concerning the cynicism of power that Dames finds in his novels.

Even with regard to the novels, though, I see a different role for theory than Professor Dames. Rather than characters becoming habituated to “the anomic, precarious existence [they] were destined to lead in any case,” I see deep disjunctions in them. Sam Lipsyte’s The Ask is a perfect example. Dames is right that Milo Burke, the novel’s protagonist, seems “at the mercy of the world Theory has equipped [him] to deconstruct” (TG). He is also right to see a deep skepticism towards theory’s social possibilities in Milo, such as when Milo remembers his college days: “We drank local beer, smoked homegrown and shake. We used words like ‘systemic,’ ‘interpellate,’ ‘apparatus,’ ‘intervention.’ It wasn’t bullshit, I remember thinking at the time. It just wasn’t not bullshit” (TG). But Dames misses the depth with which Milo holds on to the desire for social change, and the way in which he formulates this desire in the language of literary theory. Towards the end of the novel, after Milo’s life has hit rock bottom—he has been fired a second time, his marriage is on the rocks, he has acted foolishly at a gathering of college acquaintances—he imparts a heartfelt message to his 3-year old son. Early in the book, Milo mentions offhandedly that every time he reads his son (Bernie) a story about a polite farmer’s son standing before a cruel ogre’s castle, Bernie asks why the boy has to knock on the door. Early in the novel, Milo recalls that he always chuckles at his son’s naïveté, and tells him that the boy has to knock for the story to progress. Late in the novel, after his life has fallen apart, Milo couches his advice to his son in terms of this story. “Here’s what you need to know,” he says, “the boy can walk away from the ogre’s castle. He doesn’t have to knock. Some people will tell you that it’s better the boy get hurt or even die than never know whether he could have

defeated the ogre and won the ogre's treasure. But those are the people who tell us stories to keep us slaves."¹² In other words, you can write your own story. You need not be beholden to those that others tell you, especially traditional and predictable fairy tales that have often been in our culture for generations. If Lipsyte had ended the novel here, it would have been a triumphant comedy about literary theory, complete with a callback (to Bernie's story about ogres). He does not end it here, of course. The events that Milo has set in motion before this epiphany need to run their course, which they do with predictably gloomy results. But after Milo's advice to his son, this gloomy ending creates a sense of disjunction in the novel, rather than a definitive hopelessness.

Keith Gessen's All the Sad Young Literary Men (2008) has a more hopeful conclusion than The Ask. It ends with one of its characters (Keith) deciding that he and his girlfriend, who has recently discovered that she is pregnant, will keep their baby. In fact, buoyed by recent Democratic victories in Congress (the novel ends in Spring 2007), Keith decides that he and his girlfriend will have several babies, "in order to ensure a permanent left majority."¹³ The idea is lighthearted, but Keith's enthusiasm for political change through intellectual work is real. Keith is a political writer who has recently published a deeply critical book about the Bush administration's foreign policy.¹⁴ In college, he had "grand notions" about the possibilities of intellectual life, and notes the seriousness with which he read Kierkegaard, Weber, and Foucault (SY, 16). Yet the book's hopeful conclusion exists side by side with other, more sobering moments of clarity. Many chapters earlier, after he has helped move an older literary critic (Morris Binkell) from Baltimore to New York, Keith

¹² Sam Lipsyte, The Ask (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 270.

¹³ Keith Gessen, All the Sad Young Literary Men (New York: Viking, 2008), 242. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated SY.

¹⁴ Gessen himself is one of the founders and co-editors of n+1 magazine.

recalls reading the first chapter of Binkel's unfinished book on Isaac Babel while riding the train back to Baltimore. Babel, Keith notes, had stopped writing when Stalin came to power. Keith's explanation is that Babel was "a sensitive instrument; under conditions of total fear, it was impossible to write" (SY, 75). As Keith continues riding "toward the roads and multitudinous lacrosse fields and the late-night ice cream shop of [his] youth," he compares his situation to Babel's: "No one would ever arrest me at my house, take me to the basement of Lubyanka, and shoot me in the back of the head. Nonetheless I knew what Morris's book was telling me, what the book he never finished was telling me. In that train, on those rails, some premonition of the truth brushed against my side" (SY, 75). This "truth"—the truth that writing, and with it individual identity and agency, was also impossible under conditions of advanced capitalism—stands next to Keith's determination at the novel's end, and renders his commitment to making a change only a passing mood, rather than a lasting accomplishment.

Gessen's novel ends by asserting the potential for change through intellectual work, but only after undermining the possibility in earlier passages. Lipsyte's ends pessimistically, but only after Milo's emotional plea for his son to make good on the possibilities of theory that Milo never did. These are far from the only examples of writers encountering impasses with regard to the political possibilities of theory. In 2007, the New York Times held an essay competition for college students in response to Rick Perlstein's essay "What's the Matter with College?" The winning essay, "The Post-Everything Generation," has the same structure as Gessen's novel: a deep, theoretically informed recognition of the difficulty of political action in a postmodern world, combined with a final

assertion of the possibilities of political action.¹⁵ As an example of how to go about doing important intellectual work at the present moment, all of these efforts come up short; but they are important illustrations of the shape our contemporary confusion concerning the broader social possibilities for literary criticism.

The chapters that follow are attempts to respond to this confusion. Each chapter focuses on a literary critic who made political change a central focus of his critical work. The first focuses on Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (b. 1950), the second Frank Lentricchia (b. 1940), and the third Edward Said (1935-2003). In each chapter, I try to spell out the critic's project as clearly as possible before putting these projects in broader perspectives by bringing them into contact with other authors who extend or challenge them in important ways. Of the three, I find that Said provides the best model for doing criticism that is sensitive to both literature and politics, and which works for social change. But I also find shortcomings in Said's work, as I find value in both Gates and Lentricchia. Ultimately, I hope that the chapters that follow can be a starting point for people who, like the characters in the novels I discuss above, are committed to the social importance of literature and literary criticism but unsure of how to describe that importance at this point in time. I don't imagine that any of them will say the final word about the critics or issues they discuss, but I hope they are sensitive, thorough, and generous enough to inspire a similar response.

In my first chapter, I discuss Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In the preface to his memoir, Colored People (1994), Gates presents his life as one of division. "So I'm divided. I want to

¹⁵ The essay, by Nicholas Handler (then a Junior at Yale), is available at <http://essay.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/27/the-college-pastiche/>. Links to Perlstein's essay are also available on the page, as are all the other response essays the Times received. Link accessed February 18, 2013.

be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time—but to do so in order to come out the other side, to experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color. Bach *and* James Brown. Sushi *and* fried catfish.”¹⁶ One of the most powerful sources of this division, for Gates, is his intelligence. Early in his memoir, Gates writes that his hometown was a big sports town: “Everybody knew the latest scores, batting averages, rbi’s, and stolen bases” (19-20). But sixty pages later, sports becomes a source of division in his family: Gates finds baseball boring, and instead of “everyone” following baseball, only his father and brother do: “*They* knew who had done what and when, how much everyone had hit, in what inning, who had scored the most runs in 1922, who the most rbi’s” (79, emphasis mine). Gates writes frequently about the warmth and community he feels in segregated Piedmont, yet several other passages question the degree to which Gates felt like he belonged in public gatherings: “I liked to play with other kids,” he writes, “not so much because I enjoyed the things we did together but because I could watch them be happy” (80). The picture that arises from these pages, seemingly unintentionally, is of an intellectual, complete with the distance necessary for contemplation and analysis, as well as the loneliness that this distance can produce.

Gates reproduces this division in his critical work, affirming both an allegiance to literary theory and an “authentic,” transhistorical conception of blackness. In my chapter, I argue that Gates uses the language of theory to assert that race is discursively constructed, while maintaining an underlying belief in race as an essence. As I will argue, the two levels operating in Gates’ work mirror those that have existed in U.S. foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson. In both cases, radical, egalitarian pronouncements give way to a kind of

¹⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Colored People: A Memoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xv. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CP.

aggressive self-interest in action. This argument has been made elsewhere, most thoroughly by Adolph Reed in W.E.B. DuBois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line (1997). But I want to take the division that Gates discusses in his memoir more seriously than Reed. To finish my chapter, I will put Gates in dialogue with Hortense Spillers, particularly her essay “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed” (1988). In her essay, Spillers develops a divided critical stance similar to the one that Gates announces in his memoir but fails to enact in his critical work. Putting Gates in dialogue with Spillers allows us to see radical openings in Gates’ work that he fails to develop. Along with my argument about Gates upholding the status quo, I will end my discussion by suggesting that Gates’ openness as head of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute and his efforts to raise the national profile of the discipline of African American studies also carry a potential for radical change.

The central moment of Frank Lentricchia’s memoir The Edge of Night (1994) occurs when Lentricchia watches a married couple and their daughter come into a restaurant called Angelo’s in New York’s Little Italy. The husband sits down at the table while his wife and daughter go to the ladies’ room. By listening closely to the conversation between the waiter and the husband while the women are gone, Lentricchia concludes that the husband has recently come to the startling realization that his masculinity isolates him in his family, and that his destiny in the family is to play the role of “*la signora* number 3.”¹⁷ From what he has seen, Lentricchia believes that the man has accepted this role graciously, and that he will devote himself to producing a “definitive” performance. A few pages later, Lentricchia writes that he has “sacrificed [himself] to something more valuable, in the text of Angelo’s”

¹⁷ Frank Lentricchia, The Edge of Night (New York: Random House, 1994), 94. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated EN.

(110). This moment of sacrifice, or of giving one's self up to a text, is the experience that Lentricchia defended in his "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic" (1996). In this article, Lentricchia claimed that he was leaving literary criticism because this experience of sacrifice, which he also calls "pleasure," was unavailable in contemporary literary study.

Lentricchia tried to recreate this state of pleasure in his criticism. He came closest to achieving this state in his reading of Wallace Stevens in Ariel and the Police (1988), so this reading will play a central role in my chapter. To show that the reading uses theory to create a kind of erotic connection with the poems, I compare it to Lentricchia's work before his encounter with theory and after. I also compare it to other important critics of Stevens, Helen Vendler, Joseph Riddel, and Harold Bloom. These comparisons show that Lentricchia was steadily moving towards recreating pleasure in his own work, and that he was unique in making this a goal for his criticism. In his work after Ariel and the Police, when Lentricchia realized the impossibility of exporting his experience to a large audience, he turned on his audience and literature itself. Lentricchia's disappointed tone in Modernist Quartet (1994), his lashing out at the profession in his "Last Will and Testament," and his most recent book of criticism, Crimes of Art and Terror (2003), are all violent reactions to the impossibility of his project. Thus, Lentricchia's career ultimately demonstrates the risks of making pleasure a goal of literary criticism. But this is not the only possibility for pleasure. To end this chapter, I give a reading of Philip Roth's fiction, particularly his novel The Human Stain (2000), that shows the positive ethical potential of pleasure for literature. I end by suggesting that Lentricchia's recent novel The Italian Actress (2010) shows that he is aware of this potential, even if he does not develop it.

My final chapter addresses Edward Said. One of the most memorable scenes from Said's memoir, Out of Place (1999), comes when he is nine years old and he reads Hamlet together with his mother. She played Gertrude, Ophelia, and Polonius; he played Hamlet, Horatio, and Claudius. Said describes the scene at length. The Shakespeare collection had a "handsome red morocco leather binding and delicate onion-skin paper."¹⁸ They sat in the front reception room "with a smoky smoldering fire in the fireplace on her left" (51). Said recalls "the two of us completely alone and together, for four afternoons after school, with Cairo, my sisters, and father totally shut out" (52). "We were two voices to each other," he writes, "two happily allied spirits in language" (52).

In the chapter that follows, I argue that Said tried to use literary criticism to enact the same sort of togetherness, which he sometimes calls "Utopia." In Beginnings he attempted to bring various genres of writing together under the umbrella of Vico's *verum-factum* principle. In After the Last Sky (1986) he attempted to write Palestinian identity into existence as an ever-shifting set of relationships between text and image. As he acknowledged in Humanism and Democratic Criticism, he knew that these attempts would ultimately fail. The question, for Said, was not whether one can achieve a pure Utopian state in writing, but what kind of worlds one creates while trying. For Said, as important as it was to locate and analyze the power differentials at work in the concepts of the "Orient" and the "Occident," it was equally important to remain in touch with the realities of life in these geographical locations. I will argue that Said was successful in combining these theoretical and historical obligations by comparing his work with Fredric Jameson's. Both have addressed the intersection of politics and literature at length, but Jameson's criticism

¹⁸ Edward Said, Out of Place (New York: Vintage, 1999), 51. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated OP.

is more abstract than Said's, and thus less likely to motivate social change. This is not to say that Said provides anything like a blueprint for politically conscious criticism, however.

One of the missed opportunities in Said's work was his failure to read more deeply in texts from "the global periphery" in Cultural and Imperialism (1993). Thus, I finish my chapter with a reading of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine (1989) that I hope will deepen and extend Said's work.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.: BUILDING ON THEORY

In 1990, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gave a paper titled “Good-bye Columbus? Notes on the Culture of Criticism” at a symposium on canon formation at the American Studies Association. Gates’ goal in the paper, which he would later publish in Loose Canons (1992) as “Trading on the Margin,” was to move towards “a truly common public culture, one responsive to the long-silenced cultures of color.”¹⁹ For Gates, moving in this direction meant that literary critics had to give up their commitment to oppositional criticism. Gates’ argument is not so much that opposition is unnecessary as that it has gone too far. As he retells it, literary criticism in the 70’s and 80’s moved from literary theory to something he calls the New Moralism, which refers to critics who seek ideological weaknesses in other critics’ works and attack them accordingly. Gates acknowledges the seriousness of these debates, but also writes that “we know, on some level, that it’s mostly make-believe”; in other words: these arguments have no affect on what goes in the “real world.”²⁰ For Gates, the way beyond this stalemate lies in retrieving useful fragments from American liberalism, which means staking out a middle position between radical and conservative critiques. Gates does not provide many specifics for these positions. He cites Cornell West as a philosopher who values this middle position, and also cites several legal scholars who have objected to the “radically utopian strain” in critical legal studies. But his point is not to fill

¹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “Good-bye, Columbus? Notes on the Culture of Criticism,” *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), 713.

²⁰ Gates, “Good-bye, Columbus?,” 717.

out his picture of reconstituted liberalism, it is to move literary study away from totalizing theories, which preclude the possibility of a truly common public culture.

One of the respondents to Gates' essay was Myra Jehlen, who broadly agrees with Gates that oppositional criticism can go—and has gone—too far. Jehlen summarizes Gates' aims by saying that he wants a commensurate relationship between political and cultural representation: political representation so that individuals are not discriminated against based on race or gender, say; cultural representation so that individuals are not *only* defined by their race or gender. But she also highlights a point that she claims Gates leaves "sotto voce": that he makes his claim that "the margin" is losing its value as someone who has already theorized frequently and successfully from the margin. As she writes, Gates "arrives at this point of going on to explore a dialectical relation with the seated culture *via, having traveled through*, the arguments and the achievements of otherness."²¹ For Jehlen, this process of working through otherness changes Gates, just as it changes all those who identify themselves with centers and margins and argue from those positions. More broadly, it changes liberal culture itself. Jehlen generally agrees with Gates that literary criticism needs to build on liberalism rather than jettisoning it, but she criticizes Gates for suggesting Melville as a representative of that tradition. The liberalism that Jehlen feels is capable of supporting dialectical relationships between individuals of different colors and classes (a "truly common" liberalism, to use Gates' terms) is not Melville's liberalism, but a liberalism that has been through decades of oppositional dialogue already, and been transformed by that process. As Jehlen reads Gates, the liberalism in which he invests hope is this latter-day, more open kind, i.e., a kind that will continue to need theorizing from the

²¹ Myra Jehlen, "Response to Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), 730.

margins to sustain itself, not the sort he recalls when he references Melville and Lionel Trilling.

We can fill out Jehlen's picture of the "transformation" that individuals and cultures undergo through confrontations with otherness by looking at her essay on gender in Critical Terms for Literary Study (1990), a volume designed to teach literary theory through concentration on several key terms. Jehlen focuses on the scene in Huckleberry Finn in which Huck impersonates a girl, but has his disguise discovered by Judith Loftus. Judith knows that Huck is a boy, Jehlen argues, because of what he *does*: he successfully throws a lead weight at a rat, fails at threading a needle, and claps his knees together to catch thrown objects. For Jehlen, Judith revealing femininity as a performance not only implies masculinity as a performance; it also opens up every identity category (such as race, class, and sexuality) in a similar way. Thus when Huck leaves Judith's house and famously tells Jim "they're after us," his ability to group himself with Jim across racial lines comes from his awareness that a similar grouping is possible across gender lines. This may be a basic instance of a theoretically informed reading of a literary text, but I want to make its implications clear because of its bearing on Gates. For Jehlen, the shift in Huck's view from nature to history has important moral consequences; it "culminates Huck's moral and political ascension in the novel."²² It also holds enormous possibility for future realignments: "With Huck sitting in Mrs. Loftus's kitchen got up like a girl, nothing any longer is given, anyone can be anything."²³ As Jehlen points out, this possibility is not easy to sustain, as the rest of Twain's novel becomes more conventional and Jim comes to seem

²² Myra Jehlen, "Gender," in Critical Terms for Literary Study, ed. By Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 267.

²³ Jehlen, "Gender," 271.

more stereotypical. But the moral, political, and cultural potential in this moment is significant.

I stress these possibilities because as I will argue in this chapter, they are not ones that Henry Louis Gates seriously attempts to realize in his work towards “a truly common public culture.” Jehlen, I think, inaccurately claims that Gates has moved through otherness to a dialectic relationship with the mainstream. Gates’ broadest goal throughout his career has been, as he writes, to “move [the black literary and critical traditions] into the mainstream of critical debate in the profession.”²⁴ To this end, he has brought previously neglected works of African American literature to national attention. In editing the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, he has taken steps to ensure that African American literary works become and remain readily available to academic and non-academic audiences. His work building the African and African American Studies Department, as well as the W.E.B. DuBois Institute at Harvard have made the study of African American literature and culture a permanent part of the most prestigious institution of higher education in the country. These are undeniably important achievements, yet they are all shaped by Gates’ investment in fighting past injustice by bringing previously marginal voices into the center, or “the mainstream,” without changing the structures that determine margins and centers in the first place. In other words, the “common culture” towards which Gates works is not one that works *through* (or exists on the other side of) otherness, but one in which different populations get labeled “others.”

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Figures in Black: Words Signs and the ‘Racial’ Self (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated FIB.

This argument adds to a line of thought established by Kenneth Warren, Adolph Reed and Eric Lott, among others. Warren, Reed and Lott offer distinct criticisms of Gates' work at different points in his career (1987, 1997, and 2008, respectively), but they all agree that despite claims to the contrary, Gates' work never significantly moves away from a belief in "blackness" as a racial essence. One of the things I want to do in this chapter is look at Gates' early literary criticism, particularly The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (1988), to clarify this claim, i.e., to argue that Gates' work shares more in common with traditional ways of thinking about race and literature than it does the kind of thinking that Jehlen sees in Huck Finn after his encounter with Judith Loftus. I will do this by looking at the literary readings in The Signifying Monkey and suggesting that Gates limits the texts he reads by narrowly focusing on their racial content, and by showing that the language and ideas that Gates uses to discuss literature at this point were developed earlier, at a point when Gates was avowedly writing Black Arts criticism. I also want to suggest that Gates' use of Mikhail Bakhtin is telling, as it accurately reflects an important impulse in Bakhtin's writings on language and literature, and that the critical position that Gates develops works largely in service of the American status quo, rather than challenging it or calling for change.

But I am not satisfied that this is all there is to say about Gates. I wrote that Gates works "largely" in service of the American status quo for two reasons. First, he is writing on behalf of a marginalized population. In the 80's, when Gates wrote most of the criticism I will focus on here, African Americans faced severe marginalization in academia, at least in terms of numbers of faculty members and resources for scholarship. Gates' work on behalf of this population must be recognized as work for change, even within narrow limits.

Second, though Gates' work does ultimately support the idea that race is an essence, he continually asserts the opposite—that it is a discourse. He developed this position at length while editing the *Critical Inquiry* volume "Race, Writing, and Difference (1986), and also his introductory essay "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes." The frequency of these comments suggests that his conflicting commitments to race-as-essence and race-as-discourse represent a legitimate dilemma rather than a secret plot.

In 1988, Hortense Spillers responded to Gates' work with her essay "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed." The essay does not name Gates, but in it, Spillers reads an Ishmael Reed novel, references Ellison's criticism, and quotes Tzvetan Todorov—all important components of Gates' work. More importantly, it addresses the question of how to mobilize Reed's indeterminacy. Spillers' essay has no racial essentialism in it and acknowledges that the resources of theoretically informed literary criticism are ideal for dealing with the history of slavery in a discursive realm. But writing as a black woman, Spillers also acknowledges that part of her wants to react to the historical fact of slavery with work like Gates'; that is, work that demands its share of prosperity and comfort without aiming at radical change. Spillers is more self-aware of her conflicting allegiances than Gates. Frequently for Gates, this duality is expressed in flat contradictions. But the conflict remains, and thus keeps open the possibility of a more radical position within Gates' work, even if he doesn't take advantage of it. To finish the chapter, then, I want to show how some of these opportunities for more radical positions exist in Gates work, and then suggest that they also appear in his work as head of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard.

SIGNIFYIN(G) AND ESSENTIALISM

Gates' most important book is The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, published in 1988 by Oxford University Press. For Gates, the criticism in The Signifying Monkey was the culmination of a decade long move away from the Black Arts Movement. In Gates' previous book, Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self (1987), he groups his critical reaction to Black Arts into three stages: "Repetition and Imitation" (in which African American texts are read as illustrations of various literary theories), "Repetition and Difference" (theory is changed due to its contact with African American literature) and "Synthesis" (theory grows out of the black vernacular tradition). The essays that Gates characterizes as "Repetition and Imitation" grew out of a Yale seminar held in June, 1977, which was convened to address the fact that, as Robert Stepto wrote in the introduction to Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction (1978), "on most campuses, Afro-American literature is still an agreeable entrée to black history, sociology, and politics."²⁵ The essay that represents the "Synthesis" stage is "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," first published in 1983. In the preface to The Signifying Monkey, Gates explains that "The Blackness of Blackness" essay is a "blueprint" for the current book.²⁶

When it was published, many of the responses to The Signifying Monkey argued that Gates' work was "transforming" or "changing" literary study in much the same way that Myra Jehlen sees Huck Finn's view on gender "transforming" in Twain's novel. Wahneema

²⁵ Robert Stepto, "Teaching Afro-American Literature: Survey or Tradition," in Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction, ed. by Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 1979), 9.

²⁶ Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xiii. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated SM.

Lubiano encapsulated much of the positive response to Gates' work when she commented that it opened up the possibility of "transforming dominant Euro-American theorizing about African-American culture and the African diaspora, [and] discussing the relationship of language to a political world."²⁷ The most memorable negative response was Joyce Joyce's, in which Joyce criticized what she saw as the inappropriate importation of Euro-American literary theory into discussions of African-American literary texts. Joyce's response remains the most memorable because of the debate it sparked with Gates and Houston Baker in New Literary History, but she, too, worried that Gates' use of literary theory would radically alter—even "disfigure," in one critic's words—African American literature.²⁸ Since 1988, Gates' book has remained important for both critics and supporters of his work.

Gates' characterization of the book, particularly the fact that he calls it the culmination of a progression away from the Black Arts Movement, deserves closer examination. For Gates, the Black Arts Movement sought principles on which a "genuinely black" experience could be represented in a text. Gates knows that Black Aesthetic writers did more than propose a clear set of principles for "black writing" and judge literature accordingly. In his reading of Stephen Henderson's Understanding the New Black Poetry, Gates accurately writes that Henderson was concerned with formal aspects of poems just as Gates claims to be, but that he eventually "succumbs to the tendency of advancing

²⁷ Wahneema Lubiano, "Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and African-American Literary Discourse," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Dec., 1989), 571. See also Adeleke Adeeko, [Review of The Signifying Monkey], *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (May, 1990), 179-181.

²⁸ Norman Harris, "'Who's Zoomin' Who': The New Black Formalism," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), 39. See also Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, No. 6 (Spring, 1987), pp. 51-63.

specific ideological prerequisites" (FIB, 32). Gates wants to differentiate his work from theirs based on his belief that blackness is not an inherent, metaphysical quality, but something produced through literary form. "'Blackness' is not a material object, an absolute, or an event," he writes, "but a trope; it does not have an 'essence' as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity" (FIB, 40).

In light of this desire, his definition of the "Synthesis" stage of his development ("the black vernacular tradition as a source field in which to ground a theory of Afro-American criticism") is curious, as it seems to reinstall a modified version of "blackness" at its base (FIB, xxix). The momentum of the progression that Gates charts moves away from any kind of foundational reality. Black Arts critics believed that "blackness" determined literature. In the "Repetition and Imitation" stage, he believed that literary theory fully explained texts. In the "Repetition and Difference" stage, theory explained the literature, but the literature got to talk back, and changed the theory in the process. The "Synthesis" stage, then, should be an equal conversation between the two, but Gates' definition does not phrase it in this way. Instead, he exchanges "transcendental blackness" for "the black vernacular tradition." Theory is still determined by a prior ontological reality, but the reality has changed from a metaphysical presence to a vernacular tradition.

On the first page of the preface to The Signifying Monkey, Gates writes that Geoffrey Hartman issued him the challenge of his project when he returned from Cambridge (in 1975). "The challenge of my project, if not exactly to invent a black theory," writes Gates, "was to locate and identify how the 'black tradition' had theorized about itself" (ix). Hartman's challenge to Gates is consistent with Hartman's interest in "saving the text," or not reducing literature to philosophy or history. "Saving the text" is the title of Hartman's

1982 book on Jacques Derrida, philosophy, and literature, but he also uses the phrase to introduce The Fate of Reading (1975). In the introduction, he warns against treating psychoanalysis as a kind of “answer” to questions that literature raises. “Instead of pretending to save literature for psychoanalysis, and showing a Pygmalion condescension toward all those dumb if beautiful works of art,” he writes, “let us rather claim to save psychoanalysis for literary studies.”²⁹ This is roughly the shift that Gates describes in the introduction to Figures in Black: from reading African American texts through Euro American theories (“saving” the texts for the theories) to developing theory from the texts.

Hartman demonstrates his method of “saving the text” throughout his work, perhaps nowhere more clearly than his essay “Poem and Ideology,” from The Fate of Reading. Hartman’s goal in the essay is to take a poem that has historically been considered lacking in “a message,” Keats’ “Ode to Autumn,” and discuss its involvement in social and historical vision. Hartman argues that the poem’s well-established impersonality expresses an overcoming of an epiphanic, Eastern consciousness, and represents a new stage in Western consciousness. In keeping with his interest in “saving the text,” Hartman wants to make this argument without leaving whatever is specifically literary about the poem—the “scandal of form,” as he puts it—behind (125). Thus, he begins with a close reading of the poem.

Hartman begins with the first stanza, in which Keats invokes Autumn. The abundant images of fruitfulness remind Hartman of a strategy employed in Keats’ other poems: the images work to keep the poet’s imagination from waking into an impoverished reality for as long as possible. But “To Autumn” refuses this “waking/dreaming” duality. What initially

²⁹ Geoffrey Hartman, The Fate of Reading and Other Essays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), ix. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated FR.

seem like sumptuous images of the natural world in Autumn turn out to be plans, i.e., acts of the imagination. Having invoked Autumn in the first stanza, the second stanza brings “conspiring Autumn” to life, setting it in physical locations such as a granary floor or a half-reaped furrow. According to Hartman, we approach “epiphanic personification” in this stanza, but the poem remains meditative thanks to Keats’ repeating “sometimes”:

“sometimes” people see autumn sitting on a granary floor, or lying on a half-reaped furrow; “sometimes” Autumn looks across a brook like a gleaner (132). This casual personification makes way for Keats’ broadest confrontation with epiphany in the third stanza, in which he compares Autumn to Spring. The stanza’s opening line—“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?”—invokes a thought of passing time, and threatens to render Autumn a symbol of emptiness. Instead, Keats turns the absence into “a granary of sounds, a continuation of the harvest”: small gnats create a “wailful choir,” a lamb bleats, and hedge-crickets sing (132). In “Ode to Autumn,” a moment of silence that could have inspired disenchantment is filled with sound—not as a triumph, but as the final act of an expanding imagination. Having invoked Autumn, Keats expands his figure by imagining it in various natural settings, then expands it once again by comparing it to other seasons—each time without any sense of loss or failure.

Having established the mechanisms by which Keats produces impersonality in “Ode To Autumn,” Hartman widens the context of his investigation and connects “Ode to Autumn” with William Collins’ “Ode to Evening,” creating a tradition of impersonality. According to Hartman, Collins’ poem takes an important step in the direction of impersonality by substituting the transitional figure of Evening for the Day/Night dichotomy that dominates epiphanic forms. Collins also replaces sublime poetry’s

emphasis on vision with his own emphasis on sound, much as Keats will do in the final stanza of "To Autumn." Hartman ventures an explanation for the impersonality in this tradition—in other words, he offers a theory of the tradition—by suggesting that it grows from the English land and climate. Whereas the East's "sudden dawn and sudden darkness" is "epiphanic country," England "has a more temperate, even, evening effect" that produces the meditative mood of Collins and Keats' poems (140). Hartman draws support for this theory from Keats' letters. He cites a passage from a letter in late September, 1819, that refers to the composition of "Ode to Autumn." In the letter, Keats writes of the beauty of the season, commenting on its "temperate sharpness" (141). Continuing, Keats writes that he always associates Thomas Chatterton with Autumn, that Chatterton "is the purest writer in the English language," and that his language is "entirely northern" (141). In his close reading of the poem, Hartman had noted the predominance of "northernisms"—or lack of romance language phrases—in the poem (133). To slightly overstate Hartman's conclusion, then, we might say that these letters show Keats grouping himself with Chatterton as a writer who represents England by writing temperate, Northern verse.

Hartman closes his essay by asking about the implications of his theory. Is it possible, for example, to understand the temperance he finds in English poetry within a broader frame, namely, "a progressive idea with Enlightenment roots" (143)? He answers yes, there is a kind of "enlightenment" in Keats' work, but of a kind that matches the progression away from epiphany that he sees occurring in "To Autumn." Not, in other words, the sort of reason-based enlightenment associated with Voltaire and Isaac Newton, but an "enlightening" or unburdening, achieved in terms provided by Keats and other poetic works. This does not mean that Keats is content to live with a kind of isolated "poetic

truth,” according to Hartman. Like Wordsworth, Keats believes in “a dispersion of older—poetical or religious—superstitions” (144). Unlike Wordsworth, whose poems center around “charged spiritual places,” Keats’ poetry centers on a symbol or image, in keeping with the example of the Greeks (144). This connection between Keats and Greece reminds Hartman of Hegel’s writing on Greece, specifically Hegel’s claim that modern consciousness began there. Hartman then cites a number of Hegel’s claims about Greece from The Philosophy of History that echo those that Hartman has been making about Keats. For the Greeks, writes Hegel, formal beauty mediates “between the loss of individuality...as in Asia [...] and infinite subjectivity.” For Hartman, the compatibility between Hegel’s claims about Greece and his own about Keats calls into question “the whole enterprise of dividing consciousness into historically localized phases” (145). In other words, it calls all of the theorizing that he has presented in the essay into question and brings Hartman back to where he started—the poem itself. In September, 1819, when Keats wrote the poem, he already feared an early death from tuberculosis. The season must have tempted him to identify with it, or to employ what Hartman refers to as “self-defeating empathy” (146). Yet each of the three times Keats calls Autumn forth, he refuses this identification. Even on this biographical level, Hartman concludes, the poem remains impersonal.

Gates names Hartman’s work as the model for his own, but the degree to which Gates’ work achieves this sort of transformation is unclear. In Gates’ later work, both “The Blackness of Blackness” and The Signifying Monkey, he inverts the form of Hartman’s “Poem and Ideology.” Whereas Hartman begins and ends with the poem, Gates begins with the theory and then reads literary texts in light of that: Part I of The Signifying Monkey is titled “A Theory of the Tradition,” Part II, “Reading the Tradition.” With regard to

“tradition,” the language Gates uses to discuss “the black tradition” makes it sound as if it were a historical fact. In the first paragraph of the preface to The Signifying Monkey, Gates explains that the idea for his book began when he delivered an essay in a seminar on Parody, and became convinced that he had “at last located within the African and Afro-American traditions a system of rhetoric and interpretation that could be drawn upon both as *figures* for a genuinely ‘black’ criticism and as *frames* through which I could interpret, or ‘read,’ theories of contemporary literary criticism” (ix). This formulation clearly posits “the black tradition” as an objective entity, suitable for Gates’ investigation. In the next paragraph, Gates puts “the black tradition” in quotations when referencing Hartman’s challenge. But in the next paragraph, and for most of the rest of the book, Gates writes again about “the black tradition” without quotes, as if it exists objectively in the world.

We could reasonably say that “Poem and Ideology” ends with the suggestion that there is an objective connection between the English land and climate and the consciousness of writers who spend time there. Hartman is tentative about this conclusion, but it is a conclusion nonetheless. My point in spending so much time discussing his essay was to suggest the way that Hartman builds to this conclusion: he spends a significant amount of time reading Keats’ poem, comparing it to Keats’ other poems and Keats’ journals, comparing it to Collins’ poem (which he also spends a great deal of time with), and then comparing these two to “Eastern” verse. The conclusion gets its plausibility from this careful attention; the poems speak for themselves, rather than Hartman imposing his idea on them. More than anything, this is the reason that Gates’ invoked Hartman in the opening pages of The Signifying Monkey. In his attempt to move beyond “race and superstructure” criticism, Gates was looking for a critical method that allowed black texts

to be more than “expressions of blackness,” just as Hartman wanted them to be more than expressions of prior psychological truths, or nationalities.

Critics frequently link Hartman’s style with his personal experience as a refugee from Nazi Germany. For Hartman, art’s perplexity can work against the certainty and simplicity that characterize the vision of repressive governments or societies.³⁰ So there is a broader political reference for Hartman’s patience. There is greater urgency in Gates’ political context, but his claiming Hartman as an influence highlights his desire to consider “blackness” as textually produced. In other words, if Gates is representing a tradition that feels a greater urgency than Hartman’s, he will seek to represent that urgency textually, with a focus on the literature, in a way that resembles Hartman’s literature-based account of nationality. But this is not what Gates does.

Gates claims to avoid imposing a tradition on literary texts when he asserts that African and African American authors read each other’s works, but he has insufficient evidence for this chain of influence. Gates deals with his lack of evidence in a number of ways. On more than one occasion, he points to the “functional equivalence” of Esu-Elegbara in Yoruba mythology and the Signifying Monkey in African American tales (11, 14, 42). But both Esu and the Monkey are trickster figures, and as Adolph Reed points out, without further evidence, there is no reason to believe that this equivalence establishes a meaningful connection between these two particular cultures.³¹ Gates also uses language

³⁰ For an example, see the introduction to the interview with Hartman in Imre Salusinszky, Criticism in Society (New York: Methuen, 1987), 74. The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism also makes this connection. See the essay “Geoffrey H. Hartman” by G. Douglas Atkins. <http://litguide.press.jhu.edu/>

³¹ Adolph Reed, W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143-144. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated WPT.

that implies a family relation between Esu and the Monkey, calling the Monkey Esu's "first cousin, if not his American heir" as well as his "relative" (SM, 20, 44). More than once, Gates also acknowledges the fact that he has been unable to establish a historical connection between the Signifying Monkey and African trickster figures, and in these cases falls back on his own will to assert a continuity: "whereas the rich parallels between Esu and the Monkey cannot be demonstrated historically, these are the rhetorical figures of the critic's enterprise that I am positing a relationship between, a functional and rhetorical equivalency and complementarity" (42).

Gates repeats his claim that African American authors read each other's works in his chapter on "The Trope of the Talking Book." In this chapter, Gates presents reasonable evidence for the claim (all of the slave narratives he reads contain figures of a talking book), but he draws the connections so tightly and insistently that the narratives seem to be little more than part of an insulated conversation. In his reading of John Marrant's The Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black, for example, Gates argues that the trope of the talking book revises the trope as it appears in James Gronniosaw's narrative. In Gronniosaw's narrative, Gronniosaw is driven to self-loathing when a book that he sees his master reading will not "speak" to him as it had to his master. Gronniosaw "[registers] his presence," according to Gates, when he narrates the story of his life 45 years later (139). In Marrant's narrative, the "talking book" appears when Marrant has been captured by Cherokee and sentenced to die. The Cherokee King asks Marrant to read from the Bible, and afterwards the King's daughter takes the Bible from Marrant and tries to read it, but it will not "speak to her" (143). According to Gates, Marrant's use of this image of the talking book signifies on Gronniosaw's use of the image by "capping"; that is, it

“seeks to reverse the received trope by displacement and substitution” (145). In this case, the “capping” relation depends on the fact that while Gronniosaw is unable to hear the book speak in his narrative, Marrant locates this inability in one of the Cherokee, while he escapes his sentence, in part, thanks to his ability to read.

This is an interesting connection, but Gates narrows it by suppressing the vital role that Methodism plays in Marrant’s text. The trope of the talking book occurs about halfway through the narrative, and is the only direct reference to literacy in the text. From beginning to end, however, the narrative is dominated by appeals to God. When Marrant describes nine days of travelling on foot, he writes that he “muses upon the Goodness of the Lord” as he walks; he “returns thanks to the Lord” for sleeping safely each night; he “prays to the Lord” for food; and he “willingly resigns himself to [God]” when his food runs out.³² The scene involving the talking book is announced on the narrative’s title page as “An account of the conversion of the King of the Cherokees and his daughter.” He thanks God for saving him when he is thrown off a war ship and into the ocean three times.

This is a particularly important omission from Gates’ analysis, as the text foregrounds religion much more strongly than race. Marrant ends his narrative with the hope that “strangers may hear of and run to Christ; that Indian tribes may stretch out their hands to God; that the black nations may be made white in the blood of the Lamb” (47). Marrant makes specific reference to “the black nations,” here, but only to hope that they may be “made white,” and only in the midst of hoping that Christianity will save several ethnic groups. This duality—between his specific concern for Black peoples and the

³² John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Life of John Marrant* (Halifax: J. Nicholson and Co., 1813), 19-23. Accessed through openlibrary.org. http://archive.org/stream/cihm_50141#page/n5/mode/1up. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated JM.

universality dictated by his religion—is a central tension in Marrant’s narrative. A recent essay on Marrant’s narrative concludes that he “set out in his ministry to address and encourage social and spiritual equality among Black peoples and British Americans,” but also that “his ultimate goal was to develop a Christian ministry and theology that would address the particular social and spiritual circumstances of Black people living in post-Revolutionary North America.”³³ This is a complex issue, in other words, but Gates narrows it to fit his thesis, writing, “For all of his apparent piety, then, Marrant seems to have been concerned to use the text of his sole predecessor in the Anglo-African tradition as a model to be revised” (145). In other words, the religious context is merely a superficial cover for the real, racial content of the narrative.

Gronniosaw and Marrant’s texts both contain the figure of a talking book, but Gates’ claim that Marrant revises his predecessor by “capping” is not specific enough to determine the nature of the relationship between them. Gates introduces “capping” in The Signifying Monkey in a chapter on “Figures of Signification.” Borrowing from Geneva Smitherman’s Talking and Testifyin (1977), Gates introduces several ways in which a person can signify, and gives several examples from African American novels. He notes that according to Smitherman, signifying “can be employed for insult, ‘to make a point,’ or ‘just for fun’” (SM, 96). But Gates’ description of the change from Gronniosaw to Marrant’s talking book fails to clarify how Marrant is signifying: “If in Gronniosaw’s trope voice presupposes a white or assimilated face, in Marrant’s text voice presupposes both a black face and an even more luminous presence, the presence of God himself” (144). It seems like Gates is suggesting that Marrant no longer views literacy as a means to enter a white world, but he never says

³³ Cedrick May, “John Marrant and the Narrative Construction of an Early Black Methodist Evangelical,” *African American Review*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 2004), 569.

this, and the dominance of Christian themes in Marrant's narrative suggests a Christian context more readily than a racial one. As with his failure to connect Yoruba and African American myth, the gap left by Gates' failure to sharpen this distinction is filled in by his underlying belief in transhistorical blackness.

Gates' tendency to impose his Signifying theory on texts is less obvious in his readings of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mumbo Jumbo, and The Color Purple. But it is not absent. In his reading of Mumbo Jumbo (the novel that Gates credits for leading him to his theory of criticism), Gates repeatedly reasserts Reed's relation to the African American canon, seemingly to keep it from escaping to other contexts. Gates also unproblematically links Reed's work with Ellison's, as both "critique the received idea of blackness as a negative essence" (237). This unproblematic connection resembles the one that Gates establishes between James Gronniosaw and John Marrant in that it glosses over important differences between the two. In his recent biography of Ellison, Arnold Rampersad notes several points of contention between Ellison and Reed, including differences concerning the attitudes of Jewish intellectuals towards blacks and the state of the American academy.³⁴ On both of these issues, Reed was critical, Ellison hesitant.

More importantly, Reed and Ellison bring indeterminacy into their fiction in different ways. Gates' narrative of 20th century African American fiction depends on a growing self-consciousness amongst African American writers: "Whereas Ellison tropes the myth of presence in Wright's titles of Native Son and Black Boy through his title of Invisible Man, Reed parodies all three titles by employing as his title the English-language parody of *black language itself*" (BB, 703). For Gates, there is an important connection between

³⁴ Arnold Rampersad, Ralph Ellison (New York: Vintage, 2008), 507.

Reed's phrase "Jes Grew has no end and no beginning" and Ellison's "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (BB, 719-720). Gates argues that Reed "signifies upon Ellison's gesture of closure here, and that of the entire Afro-American literary tradition, by positing an open-endedness of interpretation, of the play of signifiers" (720). But Mumbo Jumbo is not without a sense of closure. After Papa Labas' narrative reveals the ways that Hinckle Von Vampton and Herbert Gould have attempted to cover up or destroy the text of Jes Grew, Labas and Black Herman bring the two conspirators to a boat captained by Benoit Battraville, one of the leaders of a Haitian uprising against a recent invasion by the U.S. Marines. Reed clearly suggests that Battraville represents a *distinct* authority from that granted by the American legal system. When Von Vampton claims that Herman and Labas are "so-called, would-be detectives," Labas replies "we're jacklegged detectives and don't have a license from New York authorities, but we have jurisdiction in Haiti though. We are delivering you to Other Authorities."³⁵ In the closing pages of the novel before the epilogue, Labas' daughter expresses an interest in learning about "our HooDoo cultures" and suggests that older generations passing on these specific traditions carries the promise of change (206). Even the end of the epilogue expresses the possibility of change. After Labas gives his lecture on the Harlem Renaissance, he concludes that while students couldn't understand him in the 30s through the 60s, they can again, even better than they once had: "Chuckling to himself he thought of the lecture: the flights of fancy, the tangential excursions, a classroom that knew what he was talking about" (218). None of these moments produce an optimistic conclusion for the novel, but they view indeterminacy as a more meaningful resource than Ellison in Invisible Man. In Ellison's novel, the character

³⁵ Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 197. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated MJ.

that makes use of indeterminacy most clearly is Rinehart, but when the narrator is talking with Brother Hambro after being mistaken for Rinehart, he equates “Rinehartism” with “cynicism.”³⁶ The narrator of Ellison’s novel engages in wordplay when he wonders, after a sexual encounter, why white people “insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle”—but the narrator dislikes the confusion (IM, 418). He wants the two words to remain separate, in their own categories. Though Gates claims that Ellison’s novel has a stronger sense of closure than Reed’s, I would argue the opposite: in Mumbo Jumbo, Reed’s belief in the power of indeterminacy allows him to close the novel off more successfully than Ellison in Invisible Man. Regardless, Gates glosses over this distinction because both texts Signify.

The picture that emerges from a close reading of Gates’ texts is one of a critic who seeks a new, nonessential approach to race and literature on the surface, but who will not let go of an essentialized view of race underneath. This picture only gains strength from Gates’ early essay, “Of Negroes Old and New,” published in the Ugandan version of Transition in 1974. “Of Negroes” is a critical evaluation of the Harlem Renaissance from a Black Arts perspective. Gates’ central point is that the Harlem Renaissance failed to sustain itself as a cultural movement because its writers were out of touch with the daily existence of black Americans, particularly those living in Harlem. Criticizing the Harlem Renaissance writers in language that directly echoes race and superstructure thinking, Gates writes, “the Harlem literati adopted a stance, a posture, which ultimately severed their legitimate ties with the well-springs of their art, the racial element” (48). He bases this argument primarily on a reading of Alain Locke’s The New Negro, which he claims argues that black

³⁶ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage, 1980), 504. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated IM.

Americans are ready and willing to assimilate into mainstream, white America. This effort, according to Gates, was ultimately dependent on white encouragement and financial support, and thus crumbled in 1929 with the Great Depression. Gates contrasts the literary efforts of the Harlem Renaissance with the music of the 20s, primarily that of Bessie Smith, which he claims was successful because it was rooted in (and in turn expressed) “the reality of the populace, the every day nitty-gritty of the everyday black man.”³⁷

Most readers will come to “Of Negroes Old and New” after reading Gates’ other work and be surprised—Gates’ critics ignore it and Gates chose not to republish it in the 75th anniversary issue of Transition in 1997. On closer inspection, what stands out is how much of Gates’ later thought seems present in this early essay. For example, phrases that play important roles in later essays are already present. In the *Transition* essay, he suggests that the Classic Blues were based on an “*unbroken arc* [...] of a mythopoeic tradition, which extended straight into the psyche through reverberations of the tribal drum” (49, emphasis mine). In The Signifying Monkey, Gates will write of an “*unbroken arc* of metaphysical presupposition” that grounds the use of trickster figures in African and African American narratives” (SM, 6, emphasis mine). In “Of Negroes,” Gates writes, “the literati failed to maintain their position as the “*point of consciousness* of their people” (54, emphasis mine). In one of his essays in The Reconstruction of Instruction, he writes, “the black writer is the *point of consciousness* of his language.”³⁸

³⁷ Skip Gates, “Of Negroes Old and New,” *Transition*, No. 46 (1974), 49. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated ON.

³⁸ Henry Louis Gates, “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” in Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction, ed. by Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 1979), 67. Emphasis mine.

Gates also repeats specific ideas from “Of Negroes Old and New” in his later work, specifically one concerning the relationship between music and literature. In “Of Negroes,” Gates argues that during the Harlem Renaissance, music expressed black experience in a way that literature could not, in large part because African American musicians such as Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington remained connected with the realities of life in Harlem, rather than looking to white culture for encouragement and support. In Figures in Black, Gates repeats his claim that black literature has failed to “match pace” with black music, but here his focus is the status of both music and literature vis-à-vis representation. For Gates, literature during the Black Arts period failed to keep pace with music because the literature focused too heavily on making a political statement. Finally, in an essay from 1988, Gates historicizes Locke’s New Negro in a tradition of “new negro” announcements, beginning with Booker T. Washington and others in 1895. These announcements, according to Gates, were designed to redefine African Americans in terms borrowed from white, European cultures. As such, the literature that accompanied the movement was disconnected from everyday black life. Again, Gates repeats his point, this time adding a reference to class: “It was *not* the literature of this period that realized a profound contribution to art; rather, it was the black creators of the classic blues and jazz whose creative works, subsidized by the black working class, defined a new era in the history of Western music.”³⁹ These connections demonstrate that Gates’ fundamental beliefs, as well as his ways of thinking and talking about them, were shaped in the Black Arts moment, at a time when he explicitly adopted a “race and superstructure” pose.

³⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “The Trope of New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations*, No. 24 (Autumn, 1988), 148.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND GATES' CRITICAL TRADITION

In a moment I will turn to the impact of Gates' work beyond the academy. First, however, I want to suggest a theoretical context for it by connecting Gates with Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically Bakhtin's work with language in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1929) and "Discourse in the Novel" (1935). When Gates originally published "The Blackness of Blackness" in 1983, he used Bakhtin's ideas concerning "double-voiced" discourse (from the 1971 translation of Problems) to specify the relationship that Ishmael Reed bore to Ralph Ellison, and that Ellison bore to Richard Wright. In "Race, Writing and Difference and The Signifying Monkey, Gates added a new quote from "Discourse in the Novel" as an epigraph to the first part of his book. In both of these cases, Bakhtin plays a foundational role.

In the passage that Gates uses as the epigraph for Part I of The Signifying Monkey, Bakhtin writes that language absorbs meaning in social contexts rather than gaining that meaning from a metaphysical source. For Bakhtin, this "social-embeddedness" is true of language in general, but the degree to which individuals are capable of orienting themselves amidst competing discourses differs. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin provides an example of an illiterate peasant who unknowingly speaks in a number of different "language systems": "he [prays] to God in one language (Church Slavonic), [sings] songs in another, [speaks] to his family in a third," etc.⁴⁰ In Bakhtin's illustration, when the peasant has a moment of awakening and realizes the necessity of actively orienting himself amongst these languages, he achieves an "actively *literary* linguistic consciousness," which,

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 295. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated DI.

he continues, “comes upon an even more varied and profound heteroglossia within literary language itself” (DI, 296, emphasis mine). All language is dialogic, then, but individuals vary in terms of how much agency they have with regard to it. As individuals approach mastery of language usage in their everyday lives, they approach the condition of the novelist.

For Gates, this “novelist’s vision” is granted African Americans by virtue of their being marginalized. “Never does the relation of marginality that the black tradition bears to the Western tradition,” he writes in the introduction to Figures in Black, “allow the critic to see beyond the textual nature even of the most seemingly transparent literary theory” (FIB, xviii). Gates introduction to Figures in Black describes his own coming to consciousness (or “double consciousness,” to borrow Du Bois’ formulation) in terms similar to Bakhtin’s. Though Gates is never fooled into thinking that “white” critical theories are “natural” languages, he is too close to Black texts to feel the same way. His teachers at Cambridge allow him to experiment with literary theory in African American literature to “achieve a certain critical distance or stance as a reader of a literature I was too close to experientially to be able to see its rhetorical strategies” (xvi). This “coming to consciousness,” along with his alienation from the language of “white” critical theories, allows Gates to see the interactions between literary theory and African American texts.

This is Gates’ explanation of his work. As I have argued, what Gates actually does is use Signification to reproduce a “race and superstructure” account of African American literature. Gates’ work may seem to undermine Bakhtin’s, but Gates is being truer to Bakhtin (or at least the Bakhtin he cites) than he knows: in using Signification to smooth over differences between writers in an African American tradition, Gates echoes Bakhtin’s use of dialogism to smooth over differences in literary texts.

My claim about Bakhtin is specifically relevant to Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and "Discourse in the Novel." I see these texts as transitional in Bakhtin's work, between his early, more philosophical work, e.g., "Towards a Philosophy of the Act," and his later, more historically informed book, Rabelais and His World (1946).⁴¹ Aesthetics plays a central role in "Toward a Philosophy of the Act," but Bakhtin spends little time addressing literature directly. His dialogue is mainly with philosophers, specifically Kant. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, he focuses on Dostoevsky, and thus acts on his belief, expressed in "Toward a Philosophy of the Act," that aesthetic experience is closer than philosophical discourse to the reality of humans living in a social world. In Rabelais and His World, he maintains his belief in the unique character of aesthetic experience and thus focuses again on a novelist, but pays attention to the historical context of his novelist instead of using Rabelais to illustrate a philosophical point. As a result, Rabelais appears much more fully as a person in his book than Dostoevsky does in his. Rabelais and His World is still somewhat schematic. In his chapter on "Rabelais in the History of Laughter," for example, Bakhtin traces the history of comic writing from medieval times to the 20th century. In this chronology, "[t]he sixteenth century represents the summit in the history of laughter and

⁴¹ I am thus more in agreement with Tzvetan Todorov's periodization of Bakhtin's career in Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle (1984) than Ken Hirschkop's in Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy (1999). Todorov seeks a break between the years 1929-1935 and 1936-1941. He writes that Bakhtin undertook mainly "theoretical research" during the first period and "reinterpreted" that work in the second. Hirschkop groups all of 1930-1946 together under the title "Work on the Novel." See Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle, tr. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 12. Hirschkop, Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 169.

the high point of this summit is Rabelais' novel."⁴² Reading Rabelais' text as an expression of his age inverts the method that Erich Auerbach uses in Mimesis (1946). Auerbach's method matches the one that Hartman uses in "Poem and Ideology": it draws its general conclusions by beginning with the literature. Bakhtin does not use this method, but Rabelais is still a living, historical person in Bakhtin's book. The landscape in Gargantua and Pantagruel is drawn from the French countryside that Rabelais knew, a drought in the first chapter of Pantagruel is an exaggerated version of conditions that Rabelais experienced in his life, and many of the characters in the books are related to historical figures. These connections, brought into dialogue with Bakhtin's usual attention to the formal aspects of Rabelais' work, bring out the particularity of the texts. In his introduction, Bakhtin writes that he wants these details to help show "the true Rabelais" (RW, 58). This is not at all the way that Dostoevsky appears in his book.

Two examples will suggest the ahistoricism with which Bakhtin treats Dostoevsky in Problems, though many others could be added. In his reading of "Notes from Underground," Bakhtin clarifies Dostoevsky's style by contrasting it with Turgenev's prose-poem "Enough." According to Bakhtin, the Underground Man's self-awareness keeps him from taking his agony seriously, while Turgenev's poem allows the speaker's frustration full expression. The formal contrast is enlightening, but it also signals a broader discussion about Russia's future that Bakhtin leaves untouched. Turgenev's Western European experience and liberal political views led him to suggest that adopting Enlightenment ideals would best suit Russia. Dostoevsky's Orthodox Christian conservatism set him

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, tr. By Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 101. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated RW.

directly against liberalism and democracy, and focused his attention on the spirit of the Russian people. This contrast is reflected in the novelists' styles—Turgenev's controlled composition and Dostoevsky's "loopholes," but Bakhtin never addresses this context.

Similarly, when Bakhtin discusses ideas in Crime and Punishment, he notes that Raskolnikov's article "On Crime" never appears as it was published. Instead, we only see characters discussing it: first Porfiry presents the ideas to Raskolnikov in a deliberately provocative manner, then Raskolnikov responds, but only while being interrupted by Razumikhin and Zametov. Later Raskolnikov brings the ideas from his novel up again, but in conversation with Sonya, thus changing the context for the ideas once again. Bakhtin's point is that ideas always exist in dialogic communion between characters in Dostoevsky, rather than in a pure abstract state. He makes the point well, but misses the fact that the absence of certainty was a fundamental characteristic of Russian society in the era in which Dostoevsky wrote. Reviewing Crime and Punishment upon its publication, a friend of Dostoevsky's (N. Strakhov) made sure to note that Dostoevsky surrounded Raskolnikov "with a milieu which had become confused, in which particularly the sacred traditions had long since ceased to exist."⁴³ As with Gates, the point is not that these readings are wrong, just that they are limited.

Also like Gates, the limitations in these readings undermine claims they are designed to support. In the opening chapter of Problems, Bakhtin asserts that Dostoevsky's polyphonic thinking "found its expression in Dostoevsky's novels, but its significance

⁴³ N. Strakhov, "The Nihilists and Raskolnikov's New Idea," in Crime and Punishment (New York: Norton, 1989), 486.

extends far beyond the limits of the novel alone.”⁴⁴ Later in the same passage he writes that “Dostoevsky created something like a new artistic model of the world, one in which many basic aspects of old artistic form were subjected to a radical restructuring.” (PD, 3) These comments suggest that Bakhtin’s focus on poetics does not come at the expense of attention to non-poetic concerns. Bakhtin confirms this approach at the end of the first chapter when he writes that because the majority of writing on Dostoevsky has ignored formal issues, “the content itself is inevitably impoverished” (42-43). Bakhtin wants his focus on poetic aspects of Dostoevsky to *enrich* our understanding of ideological concerns rather than dismiss them. But his lack of attention to history keeps him from achieving this goal.

When Bakhtin’s work became widely known to Western critics in the early 80s, many saw this view of language as a way of bridging political and aesthetic accounts of the novel. In his essay “Back to Bakhtin,” Robert Young quotes a British critic writing that Bakhtin “paved the way for a theory and practice of textual politics whereby literary criticism would avoid the twin reductionisms of formalist poetics and vulgar Marxist sociology.”⁴⁵ Michael Holquist argued that Bakhtin “reminds us that literature is important not merely because it gives pleasure or leads us to a kind of arcane we might otherwise lack. No, literature is important because it gives the most rigorous on-the-job training for a work we must all as men do, the work of answering and authoring the text of our social and

⁴⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated PD.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Robert J.C. Young, “Back to Bakhtin,” in Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 34.

physical universe.”⁴⁶ Bakhtin’s idea that offered critics such promise was dialogism, which, when carried through, offers a way to bridge novels and social life through the medium of language. Gates offers similar promise when he defines Signifying as a rhetorical practice that “turns on the chain and play of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified” (SM, 52). Like Gates, however, Bakhtin ends up using the texts that generated his fundamental insight to prove the insight, rather than letting them speak as individual texts, with their specific historical interests and concerns.

GATES AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

This claim that Gates and Bakhtin use novels as merely examples of theories recalls Dorothy Hale’s argument in Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present (1998). In her book, Hale includes Gates and Bakhtin in a line of what she calls “social formalists,” a critical position that “[attributes] social efficacy to the form as well as the content of novels.”⁴⁷ For Hale, this tradition begins with Henry James’ Prefaces to the New York edition of his work, in which James argued that form mediated between novel writing as subjective expression and objective representation. For James, she writes, “point of view serves as the motive and structure for novelistic representation” (45). In other words, the novelist is spurred on by the possibility of emptying his own personality in a character’s point of view, but the act of this emptying must be conditioned at all times by the concreteness of the character, i.e., the real world object that solicits his attention. The

⁴⁶ Michael Holquist, “Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Trans-Linguistics,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Dec., 1983), 318.

⁴⁷ Dorothy Hale, Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 13. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated SF.

contingency of James' "point-of-view" is crucial for Hale, yet she still concludes, as she will for all the "social formalists," that James is unable to theorize his novels without installing his own expressive desire as a controlling force. In other words, social formalists' attempts to use form to mediate between the artist's subjective expression and objective representation always ends up reasserting the unearned primacy of the artist.

Hale's point in uncovering what she feels is the social formalists' unearned imposition of form is to expose the work as overly idealist. She never says this outright, nor does she offer a more "properly" material criticism, but she quotes Catherine Gallagher, from a review of books by Terry Eagleton (Criticism and Ideology (1978)) and Raymond Williams (Marxism and Literature (1977)), writing that "when such solid, material objects as shoes and potatoes are themselves 'read' as signifiers within complex signifying systems, the distinction between material and symbolic products breaks down" (SF, 12-13). In her review, Gallagher argues that Eagleton and Williams' books are "encumbered by awkward and outmoded theoretical baggage," which presents an obstacle to achieving "a nonreductive yet genuinely historical marxist criticism."⁴⁸ But Gallagher's "nonreductive yet genuinely historical" criticism is a utopian endpoint from which all critical work will look the same. The distinction between Hartman and Gates/Bakhtin should suggest that while Hale is right to claim that some degree of authorial imposition is always evident, there are still different degrees and kinds of imposition, and criticism can vary widely according to the approach a writer takes.

We can see what is at stake in making these distinctions when we note the similarities between Gates' line of thinking and the rhetoric that has dominated American

⁴⁸ Catherine Gallagher, "The New Materialism in Marxist Aesthetics," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Jul., 1980), 646.

foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. In his book American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (2002), Andrew Bacevich argues that in the first decade following the end of the Cold War, the U.S. developed its foreign policy according to the “Big Idea” of “openness.”⁴⁹ Bacevich argues that American foreign policy has changed little across a century or more, including before and after the end of the Cold War. Throughout the 20th century, the U.S. has consistently acted in its own self-interest, while accompanying its actions with talk of universal ideals. Bacevich traces this kind of veiled self-interest back to Woodrow Wilson and even James Monroe. In a speech to the Senate in 1917, Wilson proposed “the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but that every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful.”⁵⁰ Yet the American military intervened in Mexico and Latin America numerous times in Wilson’s first term, including an intervention in the Dominican Republic just weeks before his speech.

Wilson’s interventions were driven more by idealism than any American president since. Clinton was not completely immune: while on the campaign trail in 1992, he criticized George Bush for subordinating democratic values and human rights to economic interests in dealing with China. Clinton vowed to value human rights more highly, but went back on his promise once in office, demonstrating greater concern for

⁴⁹ Andrew Bacevich, American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 88. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated AE.

⁵⁰ Woodrow Wilson, “Peace Without Victory,” Speech before the U.S. Senate, January 22, 1917. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/filmmore/fm_victory.html. Accessed April 16, 2012.

economic opportunity than human rights in dealing with both Bosnia and China.⁵¹ In general, however, Clinton and his advisors recognized the value of markets more directly than their predecessors, who were able to deflect this self-interest with the threat of Communism. In remarks at Howard University in 1998, Madeleine Albright defined U.S. foreign policy as the belief that “we are more comfortable living in a world that has countries in it that are democratic and have free market systems because that allows all people the greatest hope of peace and prosperity and the ability to become people that can travel and learn and invest in a global economy and feel that our interests are being pursued.”⁵² There is a revealing ambiguity in the first-person plural pronouns in Albright’s comment. Her first “we” seems to represent an American perspective; the second, after her reference to “all people,” seems to refer to all global inhabitants. That Clinton’s administration saw virtually no distinction between the two is clear from the fact that the administration’s attempts to create “openness” around the globe were dictated by American interest and power. As Clinton’s national security advisor Anthony Lake put it in a 1993 speech entitled “From Containment to Enlargement,” the U.S. would focus its attention on areas in which it has both “leverage” and “a strategic interest” (AE, 102). Thus, as Bacevich shows, the U.S. paid close attention to Europe, Latin America and the “emerging markets” in Southeast Asia (where it had interest and leverage); maintained military security in the Middle East but paid little attention to encouraging “Arab democracy”

⁵¹ Clinton’s reversal with regard to China again had to do with that nation’s MFN status. See Bacevich, 93-94.

⁵² Madeleine Albright, Remarks at Howard University, April 22, 1998. http://www.fas.org/news/usa/1998/04/98041503_tpo.html. Accessed April 16, 2012.

(interest but no leverage); and paid almost no attention to Africa, even during the Rwandan genocide (AE, 102-112).⁵³

Since 1991, as Gates has become more of a public intellectual than a literary critic, his positions have converged much more obviously with American neoliberalism. In a *Time* cover story written just after Clinton's election in 1992, Gates praised Clinton for eschewing a Lyndon Johnson-like vision of a Great Society in favor of a more pragmatic approach. Gates wrote that Clinton's centrism was not "the centrism of caution: it reflects, rather, a heartfelt negotiation between creeds that are bitterly in conflict but do not have to be so."⁵⁴ But as Adolph Reed has shown, the sum total of Gates' positions since the early 90's add up to a consistent desire to not rock the boat, rather than a clearly defined middle position between two extremes. For example, in a 1992 *New Republic* article, he criticized James Baldwin for becoming overly politicized in the late 60's, while a year later in the same publication he criticized critical race theorists for not paying enough attention to political economy and poverty. As Reed points out, each of these criticisms has merit on its own, but taken together with Gates' other work, they end up counseling quietism rather than the well-defined position that Gates claims to be taking (WPT, 155-157). Gates all but announced that he supported American foreign policy when he revived *Transition* as the official magazine of Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research in 1991. In 1967 it was revealed that *Transition*, which had been founded in

⁵³ Benjamin Schwarz also argues persuasively that U.S. foreign policy has been shaped by its economic interests during the Cold War and beyond in "The Arcana of Empire and the Dilemma of American National Security," *Salmagundi* 101-102, (Winter/Spring, 1994), 182-211.

⁵⁴ Henry Louis Gates, "A Pretty Good Society," *Time*, Nov. 16, 1992, Vol. 140, Issue 20, 84.

Uganda in 1961 as a forum for East African writers and intellectuals, had been secretly funded by the CIA since 1962, a year after its founding.

READING GATES WITH HORTENSE SPILLERS

I have compared Gates' criticism to a kind of anti-foundational critical practice that he claims for himself but fails to deliver. In "The Master's Pieces," a 1990 essay collected in Loose Canons, Gates evaluates anti-foundational criticism from the perspective of marginalized populations. His particular focus is Derrida's critique of the subject. Gates is fine with critiques of the Western male subject. Criticizing this subject means arguing, as literary scholars had become accustomed to doing even when Gates was writing in 1990, that subjectivity is not white and male. The same is not true of marginalized subjects. "To deny us the process of exploring and reclaiming our subjectivity before we critique it," he writes, "is the critical version of the grandfather clause, the double privileging of categories that happen to be preconstituted."⁵⁵ Deconstruction may be fine for Geoffrey Hartman, in other words, but only because he has inherited stable categories to deconstruct.

In this essay, Gates would seem to be admitting to the sort of essentialism that I have "uncovered" in his work so far. But I think there is more to say about race in his work. Consider the following passage in his essay, "Tell Me, Sir,...What Is 'Black' Literature?" (1990):

One must *learn* to be "black" in this society, precisely because "blackness" is a socially produced category. Accordingly, many black authors read and revise one

⁵⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35-36. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated LC.

another, address similar themes, and repeat the cultural and linguistic codes of a common symbolic geography. For these reasons, we can think of them as forming literary traditions. (LC, 101)

What transition is Gates making when he writes “Accordingly”? The first sentence is plain; Gates claims that race is performative many times in his work. In this essay, he has been talking about the state of African American criticism. It is not possible, he suggests, for critics of African American literature to claim a marginal position as easily as it once was. Enough attention has been paid to the language of black texts such that “black” now signals a range of complicated literary forms and meanings rather than a politically marginalized population. After this, he reasserts the thesis of the first part of The Signifying Monkey: that a black literary tradition exists because African and African American writers read and revise each other’s works. I’ve already suggested that Gates does not prove this point well in The Signifying Monkey, but my point here is that this reassertion does not logically follow from the point that precedes it. Gates’ “accordingly” does not suggest that he is a bad logician; it suggests that he wants it both ways. He wants race to be performative, but he also wants it to be concrete, stable, and knowable.

This conclusion is consistent with some of Gates’ other writings, such as the well-known passage from the preface to his memoir Colored People (1994): “So I’m divided. I want to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time—but to do so in order to come out the other side, to experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color. Bach *and* James Brown. Sushi *and* fried

catfish.”⁵⁶ In this passage, Gates memorably and meaningfully captured the pressures he felt as an African American, proud of his family and history, but resistant to the idea that he had to be defined entirely by that history. The passage was understandably a touchstone for reviewers, and a simple Google search indicates that it still functions as a meaningful expression of the difficulty of “belonging” to identity-groups whose demands are frequently in conflict.⁵⁷

Hortense Spillers expresses a similar conflict in her essay “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed” (1988). The bulk of “Changing the Letter” is an analysis of the way that slavery appears in two novels: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) and Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada (1976). For Spillers, as for James Baldwin, there is a “theological terror” at the heart of Stowe’s novel.⁵⁸ The novel’s specific theology requires that women remain free of sexual desire, so Stowe places the novel’s only instance of female desire in the mouth of a child (Little Eva). When encouraging her father to buy Uncle Tom, Eva says “I want him” (191). Eva dies in Stowe’s novel, but for Spillers, her death will not “release the dynamics of a violent reprisal” (192). Eva will not be Stowe’s Iphigenia because Stowe’s culture “has dictated an *obedient*

⁵⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Colored People: A Memoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xv. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CP.

⁵⁷ Richard Eder, “The New Openness: Colored People: A Memoir, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1994. http://articles.latimes.com/1994-05-08/books/bk-55007_1_henry-louis-gates-jr. Accessed February 20, 2012. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. “Who Wanted to Picnic with White Folks?” *New York Times*, June 19, 1994. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/04/specials/gates-colored.html>. Accessed February 20, 2012. Robert Boynton, “[Review of Henry Louis Gates’ Colored People: A Memoir],” July 17, 1994. http://www.robertboynton.com/articleDisplay.php?article_id=17. Accessed February 20, 2012.

⁵⁸ Hortense Spillers, Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed in Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 184. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CL.

maternity" (192). Thus, Little Eva is where female sexuality goes to die, in service of the novel's theological framework. For Spillers, the novel mirrors the structures of slavery when it subordinates its characters to this system.

In Flight to Canada, Spillers focuses on a passage that occurs about halfway through the novel, when one of the main characters, Raven Quickskill, seeks refuge from slave hunters in the "Slave Hole Café." To quote a portion of the passage: "The café is furnished with tables, chairs, sofas, from different periods. There are quite a few captain's chairs, deacon's benches. There are posters and paintings and framed programs: *Our American Cousin*, a play by Tom Tyler; a photo of Lincoln boarding a train on the way back to Washington from a trip to Emancipation" (195-196). For Spillers, the passage creates a "democracy of sign-vehicles," the listed items are taken out of their original context and given the same potential for meaning as saw dust and movie posters (196). This exemplifies Reed's narrative technique, which challenges Stowe's construction of slavery by taking elements that are part of Stowe's terror-ridden narrative and rearranging them into something new. For Spillers, Reed shapes Flight to Canada into a series of loops that create opportunities for revision not present in Stowe's text. They also deconstruct the presence of "characters" in the text, which, for Spillers, interferes with readers' abilities to "connect" with the novel. One exception to this, however, is the "character" of Uncle Robin, a slave who formerly belonged to the Arthur Swille III. Towards the end of Reed's novel, after Swille has died, all of the relatives gather to hear his will read. Everyone is shocked when Swille leaves all of his property to Uncle Robin, but we discover in the next few pages that Uncle Robin has doctored the will, something he was easily able to do as he essentially acted as secretary for his illiterate master. Concluding her essay, Spillers contrasts Robin's

altering the will with Tom learning to read and write in Stowe's novel. Whereas George Shelby patiently teaches Tom to write "correctly," i.e., according to an existing set of rules, Robin recognizes reading and writing as something malleable, and by making specific linguistic changes is able to change his material reality. Spillers ends her essay, then, by referencing Ellison and suggesting that for Reed, "the code of meaning [...] relies on a riddle: if you change the joke, you slip the yoke" (202).

Spillers sums up her reading of Stowe and Reed early in her essay: "What are in Stowe the yokes and the crucifixion of discourse undergo transformation in Reed into the jokes and the liberation of discourse" (182). Her reading brilliantly bears this comparison out, but she is not content with this formulation. It's "too easy," she writes (182).

I must admit that for me, an individual reader/researcher/teacher/writer, not at all entirely disparate from my identity as one of those latter-day survivors of history's nightmare, I am rather predictably selfish in my own desires—I want to eat the cake *and* have it. I want a *discursive* "slavery," in part, in order to "explain" what appears to be very rich and recurrent manifestations of neo-enslavement in the very symptoms of discursive production and sociopolitical features that govern our current fictions in the United States. At the same time, I suspect that I occasionally resent the spread-eagle tyranny of discursivity across the terrain of what we used to call, with no self-consciousness, "experience." But I further suspect that this crucial dilemma is rather common among Afro-American scholars, who are pledged to the critical work of the *inventory* and its relationship to a community's survival. (182-183)

After recognizing these conflicting desires, she sets up her readings of Stowe and Reed in the following way:

After *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one needs a drink. Reed provides it. If these 'sets of choices,' translatable into the efficacies and 'benign' neglects of public policy, are *virtually* a matter of words, then I see no reason *not* to choose an "out" and the best available one. In short, can Stowe be laughed to death, and is Reed the man for the job? (183)

Insofar as the forms of life associated with Reed and Stowe's novels are discursive, Spillers wants them to be playful and open to revision, the way Flight to Canada is. Her reference to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "benign neglect" suggests that this choice entails limited or no government action designed to foster racial equality. Government action is simply beside the point in Flight to Canada's world. But her statement about the "sets of choices" provided by Stowe and Reed is a conditional statement: "If these 'sets of choices' are a matter of words..." Spillers implies, in other words, that they may not be a matter of words, or at least that they may not *only* be a matter of words.

In the first passage I quoted above, Spillers makes it clear that she does not even *want* slavery to be "merely" a matter of words. A few pages before this admission, Spillers introduces her notion of slavery as both a discursive and material entity. She defines a "discursive field" with a quote from Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge.⁵⁹ As a material practice, she writes that slavery was "a natural historical sequence and [...] a scene of pulverization and murder" (179). So slavery is discursive, yes, and Reed's fiction is valuable

⁵⁹ A discursive field is "a group of objects that can be talked about (or what is forbidden to talk about), a field of possible enunciations (whether in lyrical or legal language), a group of concepts (which can no doubt be presented in the elementary form of notions and themes), a set of choices (which may appear in the coherence of behavior or in systems of prescription)" (179).

in light of its discursivity; but slavery was also murder, and as a black woman, Spillers sometimes feels that focusing too much on language lets slavery off the hook. The logic of the conditional statement with which Spillers introduces her readings of Stowe and Gates suggests that if faced with Uncle Tom's Cabin and Flight to Canada, and at a point where she felt the need to address slavery as a material, murderous reality, she would opt for Uncle Tom's Cabin. This is a potentially puzzling conclusion given the rest of Spillers' reading. Why, after all, opt for a novel that reinscribes the logic of slavery? James Baldwin's reading of the novel helps clarify Spiller's choice.

For Baldwin, the "spirit that breathes in [Uncle Tom's Cabin], hot, self-righteous, fearful, is not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcize evil by burning witches; and is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob."⁶⁰ Baldwin is not condemning medieval villagers or Klan-members when he writes this. "This is a warfare waged daily in the heart," he writes (18). In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin writes chillingly of the rage he carries in his heart, and describes an evening when his racism-fueled rage brought him to the point of being willing to commit murder. This is not exactly the choice that Spillers would make in opting for Uncle Tom's Cabin over Flight to Canada, but she would be opting to fight rather than deflect, and eventually to use non-literary methods of response. This choice coincides with the "efficacies" of public policy, e.g., affirmative action programs, but Spillers leaves this option largely unspoken. The rest of her essay dismantles the *discursive* slavery that Stowe constructs in her novel. But the option hangs over "Changing the Letter," reminding readers of what the essay is not doing, and of the limits of intellectual labor.

⁶⁰ James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 18. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated NS.

“Changing the Letter” responds to Gates’ work in “The Blackness of Blackness” fairly directly. Superficially, it speaks to Gates’ work simply because it reads an Ishmael Reed novel, references Ellison’s criticism, and quotes Tzvetan Todorov. More importantly, it addresses the question of how to mobilize Reed’s indeterminacy. Like Gates, Spillers uses it to connect Reed’s work with Ellison’s, but the particularity of Reed’s indeterminacy stands out in Spillers’ criticism more strongly than in Gates’. As a quality of literary texts, Spillers also renders indeterminacy much more tentatively than Gates, who is eager to use it to ground a tradition. In “Formalism Comes to Harlem” (1982), Spillers asks herself the question that motivated so much of Gates’ work: what does it mean to consider a literary text by a black writer as a text, rather than a report on experience? For Spillers, it means considering the “plenitude” of the author’s experience in a more concentrated form, not ignoring experience altogether.⁶¹ To summarize her point, she quotes Geoffrey Hartman, from Beyond Formalism (1970): “To redeem the word from the superstition of the word is to humanize it, to make it participate once more in a living concert of voices, and to raise exegesis to its former state by confronting art with experience as searchingly as if art were scripture” (FH, 85-86).

Institutionally, Spillers’ work has “translated” into Issues for Critical Investigation, an initiative she directs at Vanderbilt University. One of ICI’s goals is to “Augment cross-generational dialogue between tenured and non-tenured professors in the fields,” which it achieves through its biennial book competition (open to untenured professors) and symposium, designed to study the African diaspora and celebrate the participants in the

⁶¹ Hortense Spillers, “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” in Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated FH.

book competition.⁶² ICI's focus is narrow, then, particularly in comparison to Gates' massive Du Bois Institute, which holds four major lecture series, publishes multiple journals, and hosts events on Martha's Vineyard.

There are clear differences, then, between Gates and Spillers as "sets of choices." But if we take Gates' conflict between race-as-essence and race-as-performance seriously, the difference is one of emphasis. There is more to say about *Transition*, for example, than that the CIA funded it. In an interview in 1967, Rajat Neogy, *Transition's* founder, claimed to have been devastated when he found out about CIA funding. His first reaction, he said, was "shock, later turning into a two-month-long depression."⁶³ But he also defended the journal. He had never received any pressure about what to publish and had published several essays critical of American Cold War policy. He also suggested that to some degree, the journal's values were unavailable for exploitation by the American government:

There is another point about this "exploitation": if open-mindedness, a lack of ideological bias, and a willingness to discuss different points of view are "exploitable," then magazines like *Transition* could be, by their very objectives, victims of this kind of exploitation.

And why *American* interests? Because, quite frankly, we do belong to the Western tradition of liberal inquiry. This tradition is tempered and qualified by the African experience. (RN, 314)

⁶² *Issues in Critical Investigation* Website, "Goals of the Project": <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ICI/goals.php>. Accessed April 20, 2012.

⁶³ Rajat Neogy, "Rajat Neogy on the CIA, An Interview with Tony Hall," *Transition*, No. 75/76 (1997), 312. The interview was first published in the *Sunday Nation*, East Africa's largest weekly, on June 11, 1967. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated RN.

Following Neogy's line of thinking, it doesn't matter if CIA interests and the values upheld by *Transition* overlap occasionally: the association need not define the journal's contents once and for all. Scholars also differ on this question. Frances Stonor Saunders' Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War (1999) presents the connection as largely definitive, but uncovers only one instance of direct intervention on behalf of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (refusing to publish Dwight Macdonald's "America! America!"). With regard to the relationship between the CIA and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she comes to a very different conclusion: that "[t]here is no *prima facie* evidence for any formal agreement between the CIA and the Museum of Modern Art. The fact is, it simply wasn't necessary."⁶⁴ More recently, Hugh Wilford has argued for a more complex relationship, detailing a number of cases in which intellectuals knowingly took CIA money and then produced independent work, and also a number of cases in which the values of the British Left and the CIA overlapped.⁶⁵

A good case can be made, I think, that Gates' revived *Transition* has this sort of complex relationship with American democracy. The first issue after the journal was revived is a good example, as it includes essays by Carlos Fuentes and Jamaica Kincaid right next to each other. Fuentes' essay, "The End of Ideologies?" argues that the end of the Cold War should be met by self-criticism rather than self-congratulation. Kincaid's essay, "On Seeing England for the First Time," takes Fuentes' call for reflection a step further, and depicts the psychological damage inflicted by Western (in this case British) imperial

⁶⁴ Frances Stonor Saunders, Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War (London: Granta Books, 1999), 264. Her account of the CCF's refusal to publish Macdonald's essay appears on pages 315-324.

⁶⁵ Hugh Wilford, The CIA, the British Left, and the Cold War: Calling the Tune? (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003).

practice. In the essay, Kincaid describes her inability to appreciate England as anything other than a colonial power that forced her, along with the rest of Antigua, to conform to British ways of life. Readers who take Kincaid's essay seriously (now as then) must acknowledge that global "openness" is neutral, and that global communication allows for the expression of "unproductive" anger as easily as it does the peaceful sharing of information.

Gates has also proven willing to use his position as director of the Du Bois Institute to give voice to critics whose ideas fundamentally conflict with his own. In 2007, Gates invited Kenneth Warren to give the W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures, despite the fact that Warren's talk and subsequent book, What Was African American Literature? (2011), challenges many of the basic assumptions in Gates' work—not only his literary criticism but also his efforts to build the department of African and African American Studies at Harvard. Towards the end of an online chat between Warren and Gates following the publication of Warren's book, Warren raises the question of "tradition" that I discussed earlier in this chapter. After Gates had referred to literary traditions objectively several times in the discussion, Warren wrote, "If I had more time Skip I'd go a few rounds with you about 'tradition' which is an abstraction that is produced in the present to project current concerns into the past."⁶⁶ Warren's claim is compatible with Geoffrey Hartman's attitude toward tradition, but not compatible with Gates'. Warren's belief also questions the very existence of African American Studies departments, as it undermines the notion that there is a discernable object of study. Gates failed to engage Warren on this point

⁶⁶ "Live Chat [between Henry Louis Gates and Kenneth Warren]: The End of African American Literature?" *The Chronicle Review*, Feb. 24, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Live-Chat-The-End-of/126492/>. Accessed March 23, 2012. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated EA.

during their chat, seemingly insisting that they were engaged in a common effort. One can see this as Gates glossing over important differences in African American writers, much as he did with Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed. But Gates still gave Warren a significant platform to express his challenging ideas.

FRANK LENTRICCHIA: THE POLITICS OF PLEASURE

In 1996, Frank Lentricchia announced the end of his career as a literary critic in his article “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic.” In the article, Lentricchia complained that literary criticism had become a form of Xeroxing, or mechanically applying various theories to literary works. This “prereading” left no room for pleasure in literary study. Describing the experience of reading for pleasure, he wrote, “you submit yourself to the text, you relinquish yourself because you need to be transported.”⁶⁷ Because there was no room to value this sort of experience in literary study, Lentricchia was leaving, or at least escaping into the undergraduate classroom. There, he planned to act as a rhapsode, attempting to embody literary texts in dramatic recitations, and encouraging his students to “live” the texts rather than “know” them.

Public reaction to Lentricchia’s article was largely negative. Letters to Lingua Franca criticized Lentricchia for abandoning a way of reading (literary theory) that he helped popularize. They compared him to a talk show guest who bares supposedly shameful secrets for self-interested reasons.⁶⁸ Danuta Fjellestad, a graduate student at Columbia when Lentricchia published his “Last Will and Testament,” criticized him for the pedagogic

⁶⁷ Frank Lentricchia, “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic,” Lingua Franca (September/October, 1996), 63. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated LW.

⁶⁸ See “Letters to the Editor,” Lingua Franca (November, 1996), 7, 92.

irresponsibility of his decision.⁶⁹ If graduate students lack the “competence” to read texts without “Xeroxing” them, she argued, then Lentricchia’s goal should be to teach them, not to turn his back on them. Fjellestad also suggested the possibility that Lentricchia’s move away from writing criticism was merely fashionable.

These are not the only arguments that undermine Lentricchia’s “Last Will.” The essay—along with Lentricchia’s decision to leave the profession—is Lentricchia’s bid to join the modernist poets about whom he spent his career writing. At the close of Modernist Quartet (1994), Lentricchia wrote, “The major political assumption of the modernists is that people in advanced Western societies desire, or would desire were they sufficiently intelligent about their circumstances, the originality and freedom of an authentic selfhood.”⁷⁰ But in his readings of Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, he concluded that his poets resigned themselves to the impossibility of achieving this goal. “The agreement, from Pound to DeLillo,” Lentricchia wrote, “is this: that the human equivalent of the commodity is now fully in being. We now witness the well-lubricated production of the faceless mass man, who happily unburdens himself of any inclinations toward free will and independent thought, who *wants* to lose his name and signature” (MQ, 288). Just as Stevens, Eliot, and others were unable to find a home in their world, Lentricchia was unable to find a home in his. So he quit.

In “Melodramas of Best Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors” (1981), Nina Baym points out that in constructing American literary traditions, Lionel Trilling, F.O. Matthiessen, Leslie Fiedler and others assume that women

⁶⁹ “Frank Lentricchia’s Critical Confession, or, the Traumas of Teaching Theory,” *Style* Vol. 33, No. 3 (Fall, 1999).

⁷⁰ Frank Lentricchia, Modernist Quartet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 290. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated MQ.

authors form the consensus against which male writers must react in order to develop an autonomous identity. She quotes Fiedler writing that women were responsible for writing “flagrantly bad best sellers,” and an introduction to Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland which claims that early 20th century Americans were primarily interested in consuming tales of “beset womanhood.”⁷¹ In all these cases, women were the enemy of “real” American fiction.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, an English and Media Studies Professor at Pomona College, updates Baym’s argument in The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television (2006). In her book, she analyzes the cultural work done by claims made by postmodern authors—Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo in particular—that the printed word faces an impending death at the hands of new forms of media. She concludes that these claims are made largely in the name of self-preservation. In her words, they involve “a conversion of the forms of gestures of oppressed cultures to [the writer’s] own project of maintaining his cultural (and social) centrality.”⁷² “His” is an important word in this quote, as it signals one of Fitzpatrick’s most important claims in the book: that the “anxiety of obsolescence,” i.e., worry over the end of print or the novel, is essentially a white, male occupation, and thus that arguments about the death of the novel are intricately connected to an effort on the part of white men to retain social and cultural power. She argues this point by comparing the way that contemporary writers like Pynchon, DeLillo and Toni Morrison talk about television. While DeLillo and other white males worry about television

⁷¹ Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Best Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” American Quarterly, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), 130.

⁷² Kathleen Fitzpatrick, The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 233. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated AO.

displacing novels and thus their own centrality as novelists, Morrison talks about television as part of a broader pattern of racism. From Fitzpatrick's perspective, then, Lentricchia's work would be an example of the anxiety of obsolescence: underneath his conclusion that humanistic writing and reading is now impossible lies his own desire for lost cultural authority.

Like Baym, Fitzpatrick wants to uncover submerged power dynamics that support patriarchal social organizations. I have put Baym and Fitzpatrick into conversation with Lentricchia, here, but he directly engaged in a dispute with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that had similar contours. The heart of Lentricchia's dispute with Gilbert and Gubar, I think, was the difference between their views of the purpose of literary criticism. Lentricchia believed that literary criticism should represent the pleasure of the literary experience; Gilbert and Gubar, like Baym and Fitzpatrick, were more interested in revealing and fighting patriarchy. Lentricchia accused Gilbert and Gubar of simplifying literature through feminism, and creating what he called a "Manichean sexual allegory."⁷³ Gilbert and Gubar responded by making two points: first, that Wallace Stevens (the literary figure around whom the debate was staged) *was* engaged in a more direct effort to reclaim a virile, male poetic tradition than Lentricchia claims in his reading; and second, that their feminist criticism is more complicated than Lentricchia's reading allows. Ultimately, it was not a productive exchange. With reflection, the exchange seems to represent the dark side of the Culture Wars, as it involved a debate over a sensitive identity issue (gender) that seemed to generate more heat than light.

⁷³ Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 179. Lentricchia reprinted his critique of Gilbert and Gubar in this book. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated AP.

The feminist arguments that I have glossed here are important ones, and not only for the political and social changes they have helped usher in. But in Lentricchia's readings of American poets, in particular his reading of Wallace Stevens in Ariel and the Police (1988), he doesn't need a "myth" of beset manhood—he shows its reality, or at least its reality for Wallace Stevens. My point is not to reassert the existence of "beset manhood," but to suggest its irrelevance with regard to Lentricchia's criticism. Lentricchia shows—by his theoretically-informed reading of Stevens' letters, journals, poetry, and other relevant documents—that for Wallace Stevens, the thought that poetry was essentially feminine was one that followed him throughout his career, and to which he had a constantly uneasy relation. Lentricchia does not occlude patriarchy's relation to Stevens or other modernist poets; he historicizes broad realities like patriarchy and capitalism to show how they produce individuals. This is a reason, I think, to take Lentricchia's arguments about modernist poetry seriously. His work with Don DeLillo is based on the same specific analysis, and comes to a similar conclusion, thus Lentricchia earns the right to suggest that the forces that made Pound, Eliot, Stevens and Frost feel marginalized have not dissipated in the last years of the 20th century. The claim deserves only as much attention as Lentricchia earns for it, which means that we must recognize that the continuity that Lentricchia demonstrates is based on readings of white American men. Even so, it can be a valuable contribution to literary study when worked out as rigorously as it is in Lentricchia's work.

There is also another, potentially more important value to Lentricchia's rigorous historicizing, which is that this method of reading allows him to approach the experience of pleasure that he describes in his "Last Will and Testament." In other words, by placing a

literary text in as specific a historical context as possible, one begins to reveal its particularity, and thus create the possibility of a kind of erotic encounter with it. As I will argue, this is essentially what Lentricchia does in his reading of Wallace Stevens in Ariel and the Police. There are moments in Lentricchia's reading of Stevens in which Lentricchia formally merges his criticism with Stevens' work. These are moments of pleasure, in which Lentricchia "submits himself" to the text, but he is only able to do this because he understands what he is submitting to. This understanding comes through Lentricchia's analysis, and his demonstration that Stevens' poetry was based on the feeling that his aesthetic desires could find no outlet in the modern world. By writing this impossibility out, Lentricchia was able to recreate the particularity of Stevens' poetry, eventually "relinquishing himself" to it. In the chapter that follows, I will present Lentricchia's analysis of Stevens as an enactment of pleasure, and make two further points about it. First, that this reading was enabled by the theoretical work that Lentricchia did in After the New Criticism (1980) and Criticism and Social Change (1983). And second, that Lentricchia is relatively unique in his commitment to representing particularity in his critical work. I will make the first point by comparing Lentricchia's work with Stevens before and after his engagement with theory. I will make the second by comparing Lentricchia's work with three of Stevens' other important interpreters: Helen Vendler, Joseph Riddel, and Harold Bloom.

Taking Lentricchia's work seriously as an enactment of pleasure is promising, I think, because pleasure is an aspect of human experience that the humanities are well suited to address. But Lentricchia also forces us to ask difficult questions about it. In "The Fate of Pleasure" (1963), Lionel Trilling notes a change in the way that Western authors

have approached the idea of pleasure. For Wordsworth, pleasure constituted the “naked and native dignity of man.”⁷⁴ Wordsworth was not unaware of an intense, erotic component to pleasure, but these were aspects of a more composed experience. Keats shared Wordsworth’s commitment to the importance of pleasure, but also introduced skepticism towards it. Keats, then, is important for the modern age because, as Trilling writes, “it would seem to be true that at some point in modern history the principle of pleasure came to be regarded with just such ambivalence” (434). For Trilling, this division is reflected in a division between politics and art: while politics is supposed to attend to those aspects of life that Wordsworth meant by pleasure (mild, composed ones), art expresses our dissatisfaction with this mildness and “all that is implied by affluence” (435). In fact, Trilling believes that a principle of “unpleasure,” or antagonism to comfort and affluence, has come to dominate our modern age, and that Dostoevsky heralded this moment in Notes from Underground. Trilling ends the essay with a sort of warning, as these impulses towards “unpleasure” must be expressed in some way, but will not be satisfied by “ordinary democratic progressivism” (448).

Trilling’s essay prompts us to ask whether Lentricchia should have been surprised that his experience with Stevens (and before that, Willard Motley) found no public outlet. The experience itself, Trilling suggests, belongs in a line of experiences that while real, are fundamentally anti-social. This is the reason that Trilling closes his essay by referencing Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), particularly the role that the ego, or “death instincts” play in it. In the early 60’s, Trilling was specifically worried by the political

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lionel Trilling, “The Fate of Pleasure,” in The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 428. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated FP.

implications of the nascent counter-culture. This culture was an expression of impulses toward “unpleasure,” he felt, and he worried that because of the size of the movement, it would be difficult to contain within a conventional political order. Writing in the mid-90’s, Lentricchia felt that the American status quo was here to stay. But if the impulses that Lentricchia expresses are both real and anti-social, then what happens to them? Can they be destroyed, so that their influence is no longer felt? Even if they can, should they be? Perhaps they get repressed, and express themselves in less healthy forms later?

As I will argue, two things happen in Lentricchia’s case. First, in Modernist Quartet (1994) and in his essays on Don DeLillo, he resigns himself to a marginal status. This minor status comes through in Lentricchia’s muted style, but also the content of his reading of DeLillo and the revisions he makes to his readings in Modernist Quartet. Like Stevens, however, he is not entirely comfortable with this self-marginalization, so he lashes out: at the profession in his “Last Will and Testament,” and then at literature in general in his 2003 book Crimes of Art and Terror. In this later book, Lentricchia turns on his former commitment to particularity and equates literature with terrorism based on a shared desire for transformation.

If we take Lentricchia’s attempt to enact pleasure seriously (I hope my reading of his work with Stevens suggests that we should), then I think we also have to take these responses seriously as a possible, but *only* possible, result. I will end this chapter with a reading of Philip Roth’s fiction that suggests that there are ways for pleasure and politics to be mutually supportive. In Roth’s The Human Stain (2000), Nathan Zuckerman’s friendship with Coleman Silk inspires him to write out Coleman’s life, which means attempting to create lives for Coleman and each of the major “characters” in his life. This amounts to

Zuckerman repeating, for each of these characters, the care and attention he paid to Coleman in their friendship. Pleasure, in other words, motivates a politics of particularity. Roth's work does not definitively leave Lentricchia's behind. Roth remains aware of the dangers posed by erotic pleasure throughout The Human Stain. One of the novel's central metaphors, for example, is dancing. A dance between Zuckerman and Coleman seals their friendship, but when Coleman's lover Faunia dances for him, they have to struggle to keep from idealizing it, and from turning pleasure into love, jealousy, anger, and all the rest. Roth is a fitting end to this chapter because he knows that this possibility—the one Lentricchia enacted in his "Last Will and Testament"—is only one among many; but he also knows the danger of forgetting it.

THEORY AND PARTICULARITY

In his "Last Will and Testament," Lentricchia writes that he had lived a double life for some time: publically fighting for literature to be politically relevant, privately enjoying literature as erotic transport. He cites a moment from a graduate seminar in which a student, before a lecture on Faulkner, announced, "the first thing we have to understand is that Faulkner is a racist" (66). He writes that the student was trying to intimidate him, supposedly recalling the sorts of arguments that Lentricchia himself would have made in Criticism and Social Change. And, he claims, he was intimidated.

My reading of Lentricchia's work suggests that his interests in pleasure and politics were more closely related than he would make out. Neither Criticism and Social Change nor After the New Criticism, for example, promotes a concrete enough view of politics to be considered antagonistic to Lentricchia's later focus on particularity. In After the New

Criticism, Lentricchia's central target is "formalist" criticism, or any kind of criticism that views literature as a reflection of a prior reality. But he also wants to avoid "the abyss," or as he says in the introduction, "radical relativism, or subjectivism and egoism, or an unconcern with the past" (xiv). His task, then, is to find a kind of literary theory that doesn't anchor texts to a stable tradition, but which offers some way of making meaning out of them. In After the New Criticism, he argues that the most promising models for writing this kind of criticism are Derrida and Foucault. For Lentricchia, Derrida is important mostly as a starting point. Derridean deconstruction is valuable because it exposes the fact that most Western critical positions rely on the assumption that a stable relationship between a signifier and a "real world signified" can be established. But as Lentricchia reads him, Derrida not only critiques the metaphysical tendencies of Western criticism, he also signals the advent of a new project: the uncovering of "the nonontological reincarnation of the signifier within cultural matrices" (ANC, 175-6).

This new project, according to Lentricchia, is already underway in Foucault's work. For Lentricchia, Foucault takes a step beyond Derrida because he writes with an awareness of the fact that no thinker can get outside the realm of his own thought to discover a realm of stable reality (thus he avoids the trap that thinkers who begin by assuming the Platonic split fall into), but simultaneously situates knowledge within the specific historical coordinates that produced it. Foucault, then, acknowledges the specificity of different kinds of knowledge (they are not all examples of the same will to knowledge) and unveils the mechanisms by which a person can work towards social change. We can see how Foucault's historicism might be used to express particularity in the preface to After the New Criticism, when Lentricchia writes that the polemical focus of the work is against critical theories that

understand history “as a unity and a totality while resisting forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation, and difference.”⁷⁵ This is not an explicit argument for the value of particularity, but Lentricchia at least encourages a move in that direction: from a totality to fragments, from unity to heterogeneity. The further one moves on this line, the closer one gets to particularity. On the other hand, Lentricchia criticizes Roland Barthes’ The Pleasure of the Text because blissful experience, for Barthes, cannot be translated into any kind of discourse or concept, nor “taken over by any collectivity” (ANC, 144). This erotic experience is similar to the one that Lentricchia describes in his “Last Will and Testament,” but here he writes that the impenetrability of the experience renders it “empty rhetoric” (144). It is not clear in After the New Criticism, then, that Lentricchia wants to use Foucault to express the particularity of a literary text, though Lentricchia leaves the possibility open.

The same is true of Criticism and Social Change, in which Lentricchia offered Kenneth Burke as an American critic who was familiar with Foucault’s insights before Foucault began writing. One of the episodes with which Lentricchia begins is Burke’s suggestion, at the 1935 Writer’s Congress, that the Communist Party widen the group on behalf of which it fights from “the workers” to “the people.” This is a central moment for Lentricchia because it collapses the distinction between intellectual work and political action. But Lentricchia is more enthusiastic about the fact that Burke is arguing for a language-based change to the status quo (at least the status quo at the Writer’s Congress) than he is the particular change. One of the most frequent comments that reviewers made about Criticism and Social Change is that while Lentricchia was clearly and deeply

⁷⁵ Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), xiv. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated ANC.

committed to the idea that literary work should have political importance, he was merely committed to the idea. Eric Lott, for example, wrote, “to reveal the socially and politically enmeshed nature of all intellectual activity [...] is not willy-nilly to reveal the self-evidence of the need for social change.”⁷⁶ These comments, with which I generally agree, add up to the suggestion that Lentricchia’s book is a formalism of politics: it asserts that literature should be political without filling in any of the political content. Like After the New Criticism, then, Lentricchia was not explicitly arguing that theory should be used to express particularity, but he was not concrete enough for the work to stand in contrast to this later effort, either.

LENTRICCHIA AND STEVENS (I)

In a moment, I will show that Lentricchia used his engagement with literary theory to represent the particularity of Wallace Stevens’ poetry. First, however, I want to briefly discuss Lentricchia’s prior work with Stevens, to highlight the impact that theory had on Lentricchia’s work. The framework that Lentricchia uses for his first two books, The Gaiety of Language (1968) and Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (1975), is what he will come to call “conservative fictionalism.” For Lentricchia, conservative fictionalists like Stevens and Frank Kermode in Sense of an Ending, base their view the world on the Platonic split between reality and illusion, and attempt to navigate the divide by asserting that narratives are fictions, but they are necessary fictions that allow humans to make sense of their world. In After the New Criticism, Lentricchia argues that the supposed self-consciousness of fictional structures can only ground itself on the human

⁷⁶ [Review of Criticism and Social Change], South Atlantic Review, Vol, 50, No. 1 (Jan., 1985), 88.

mind, thus “conservative fictionalism” shares unwanted ground with a much more “radical fictionalism,” or pure idealism. As I have suggested, Lentricchia’s solution, from After the New Criticism forward, will be to take a view of the reality that is fundamentally rhetorical, thus avoiding dooming literature to the wrong side of Plato’s reality-illusion split.

In The Gaiety of Language, however, Lentricchia unabashedly aligns himself with a conservative fictionalist position. He reads Yeats and Stevens against a background of Romantic poetic theory. Though he argues that poetry has a diminished cultural role relative to the Romantic period, he also believes that it still has an important cultural role to play for both poet and reader. For the poet, poetry can provide a “moment of freedom and victory over that turmoil of the inner self [...] and a release from (though hardly a denial of) the reality of twentieth-century life which shouts down his efforts as little, insipid, and unimportant” (7). The reader, by reading well, may imaginatively make the poet’s vision his own, and thus gain a similar moment of freedom and victory. Lentricchia ends his introduction by writing, “Stevens liked to say that poetry contributes to our happiness, that it helps us to live our lives. We need not ask for more” (7). Lentricchia fills out his idea of poetry “helping us live our lives” in his reading of “The Idea of Order and Key West,” which he ends by commenting on Stevens’ line “blessed rage for order.” The “rage for order,” Lentricchia writes, is satisfied by poetry. The speaker knows that poetry is “only (unfortunately) aesthetic in significance,” but it is enough to “quiet the rage” (186). The “help” that poetry gives, then, is necessary to avoid utter confusion and frenzy.

In an interview in 1986, Lentricchia looked back at The Gaiety of Language and disavowed it, claiming that it was written in “an extreme formalist mode,” and that his

subsequent books were attempts to correct this orientation.⁷⁷ Lentricchia's retrospective comments about his first book are sound, but a few comments are in order. Lentricchia frames The Gaiety of Language as a response to what he sees as the dominant modes of reading poetry at the time, which he feels are inherited from 19th-century poetic theories. He glosses these theories (a method that more than one reviewer complained resulted in distortion) under the names romantic idealism, naturalism, and symbolism, but ultimately argues that none of them fully explain Yeats and Stevens' poetry.⁷⁸ In place of these theories, he proposes a "poetics of will" (or "anti-will"), which, he writes, "defines the imagination as a finite energy that seeks to ground itself in the linguistic medium, and isolates poems as the artifacts of the private self operating in a particular place at a particular time" (189).

This last quote might give readers pause, as the reference to "a particular place" and "particular time" seems to be an invitation to historical inquiry, i.e., a move away from formalism. There are other places in Gaiety of Language where Lentricchia makes similar gestures. In his discussion of Yeats, Lentricchia writes "growing up in a period when science seemed to be cutting the heart out of poetic imagination undoubtedly helped to shape Yeats into the rebel that he was" (GL, 41). He also claims that the pressures that Yeats felt to define a mythical function for poetry were "partly of his own making, partly the making of his era" (53). In general, Lentricchia fails to follow these cues up in The

⁷⁷ Imre Salusinszky Criticism in Society (New York: Methuen, 1986), 184. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CS.

⁷⁸ For criticism of Lentricchia's treatment of poetic theory, see Joseph Riddel's long review in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Oct., 1969) and Philip Le Brun in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 82 (May, 1970).

Gaiety of Language, but even his earliest “formalist” book points the way to his later, more historically engaged criticism.

LENTRICCHIA AND STEVENS (II)

In Ariel and the Police, Lentricchia immediately historicizes Stevens’ work in two overlapping contexts, one economic and one aesthetic. Stevens’ father provided the economic context. Garrett Stevens demanded that his son make his way in the world financially, just as he had. In a letter sent while the would-be poet was still in college, the older Stevens explained that the proper role for an American man to play is one that earns money and provides for a family. He advised Stevens to cultivate a talent that “people want and therefore will pay for” (AP, 141). This equation between masculinity and earning money meant that Stevens always had to view his poetry as a kind of second-tier pursuit.

Stevens’ aesthetic context was provided by the genteel poetry popular at the turn of the 19th century. Broadly speaking, Stevens’ reaction against his genteel predecessors consisted of the attempt, in Pound’s words, to “Make it New.” Lentricchia frames this as a battle against “religious ideality,” a quality that the genteel tastemakers of Stevens’ youth found in Keats. Stevens’ attempt to make poetry corporeal *and* masculine was a battle against his father’s and the Fireside poets’ pictures of poetry. By asserting a virile, masculine poetry, Stevens was trying to show that poetry could be more than ideal; by vying for a sort of cultural centrality, he was trying to make people want it, and therefore willing to pay for it.

In the first part of Lentricchia’s reading, he focuses on Stevens’ “Sunday Morning.” Though traditional Stevens criticism sees the poem as a debate between the poem’s

narrating consciousness and the woman evoked in the poem's first lines, Lentricchia argues that the woman is actually a figure for Stevens himself. Stevens' letters and journals in his early years show him submerged in a world of commodities, yearning for what commodities promise (fulfillment) but can never deliver. In a passage from Stevens' journal, Lentricchia shows him noticing the designs on the wallpaper and rugs in his apartment: "The carpet on the floor of my room is grey set off with pink roses. In the bathroom is a rug with the figure of a peacock woven into it" (149). Only by withdrawing to his imagination was Stevens able to turn these commodities into meaningful expressions of nature. So this is what he did. In "Sunday Morning," when the speaker notes "the green freedom of a cockatoo / Upon a rug," he is evoking the same sort of frustrated desire that Stevens experiences in New York. As Lentricchia sees it, Stevens is not criticizing the shabbiness or artificiality of the woman's surroundings; he is expressing his own desire for unmediated experience that the surroundings promise.

In "Sunday Morning," Stevens imagines two ways out of the vicious circle created by commodities. The first, in section two, imagines the transcendence of agency altogether with the line "Divinity must live within herself" (155). Lentricchia reads Stevens' syntax carefully, arguing that divinity is not a "self" but "selfhood." The imagery associated with divinity is decidedly natural and even sexual ("Elations when the forest blooms; gusty / Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights" (155)), but in the end there is no actor or agent: divinity ends up as something like an "intransitive verb" (156). The second way out comes in section seven, in Stevens' "ring of men" who shall "chant in orgy on a summer morn" (157). Here, Stevens imagines community as an alternative to urban isolation, but his community is entirely male and in some sense homosexual. Lentricchia calls the vision

“absurd,” but notes that it is important absurdity because it connects with so many other visions of male fraternity in American literature, from Huck on the raft to the final section of Norman Mailer’s Why Are We in Vietnam? Nina Baym’s point about “beset malehood” is a relevant response to these visions. One question that Lentricchia doesn’t ask of the section is who speaks it? It seems unlikely that the woman would envision this scene of community. It is more likely, I think, that Stevens is inserting himself into the poem, and asserting his own alternative vision to the woman’s unhappiness.

Lentricchia’s broader point in his reading of Stevens’ early work, however, is that he could find no way to realize his desire for cultural influence. Lentricchia notes, in two letters from 1908 and 1911, that Stevens equated artistic manhood with major, canonical status, and then notes his anxiety over the possibility that he will be received as minor. The letters show Stevens’ wish to escape the anxiety produced by the desire to be canonical, but Lentricchia also argues that this anxiety persisted throughout Stevens’ career.

To close his reading of Stevens’ early work, Lentricchia unsettles his economic and aesthetic analysis of “Sunday Morning.” There are moments, he says, where the contexts insufficiently explain the poem, for example when Stevens converts commodities into “things to be cherished like the thought of heaven,” and thus seems to fall prey to the promise that commodities make to consumers (173). The most important of these unsettling moments comes when Stevens again inserts himself into the poem. The first comes at the end of section three, with the line “next in glory to enduring love” (174). This line divides three others, in which Stevens asserts that the sky will seem friendlier when we (humans) recognize that the idea of divinity is a human creation. Why this talk of “enduring love” in a poem that is supposedly about refusing divine transcendence for

earthly experience? “Endurances,” Lentricchia writes, “are what this poem is against” (174) Why would Stevens assert that products of the human imagination are “next in glory” to enduring love?

The next unsettling moment occurs with the second appearance of “Death is the mother of beauty,” in section six. The first occurrence, Lentricchia writes, seems to bring the poem back within the boundaries of traditional Stevens criticism; that is, it asserts that beauty is earthly, or that it is a product of the human imagination. The second occurrence complicates this supposed naturalization:

Death is the mother of beauty
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (175)

Lentricchia notes that Stevens’ mother died three years before he composed “Sunday Morning,” and concludes that Stevens’ biography is “erupting” into the poem here, leading him to conceive of all of his readers (though particularly the men) as like him: cast out on their own, forced to make their way in a hostile world. The “endurance” for which Stevens yearns, here, is not transcendent, or at least it is not transcendently motivated. It is radical: “not in the usual senses of left politics but in the etymological sense, ‘radical’ because such discontent is alleviated only by a return to the origin, by a son’s desire for his mother’s breast that would, if granted, simply set aside all of his male obligations in the world of capital” (176). Stevens’ yearning, then, is at once historically specific and universal; it is simultaneously progressive and conservative. It exemplifies, in other words, the dynamic motives that Freud finds at the heart of human behavior in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920).

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud's hypothesizes that life began when inanimate matter was *disturbed* into life, and thus that the initial condition of an organism's existence is one of turbulence. The pleasure principle seeks harmony, connection, and reproduction within this turbulence; but other instincts seek to minimize the turbulence by resisting change and returning to a previous state of rest. Following this insight to its endpoint, he argues that the goal of these instincts must be a final stasis, i.e., an inanimate state or death. Lentricchia's reading of Stevens' early work shows pleasure and death instincts to be at work: pleasure because he wanted to create a society in which he would feel comfortable as a poet; death because he wanted to return to the safety of his mother's breast. For Lentricchia, this is the drama that Stevens acts out in his later work.

LENTRICCHIA AND STEVENS (III)

Lentricchia's reading of Stevens' later poetry focuses on the introductory lines of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Lentricchia feels that his work differs from other Stevens criticism because he rejects the idea that Stevens' poetry progressed from beautiful but intellectual empty early verses (in Harmonium (1923)) to later, longer poems (like "Notes") in which Stevens achieves a worldly seriousness. Lentricchia begins his reading of Stevens' late work by citing a passage from a letter written in 1938 that makes clear that even after Stevens began to reappear after a long layoff between Harmonium and Ideas of Order (1936), he still spoke "in the contradictions and with the denigrating self-consciousness that shaped his early sense of himself" (196). In the passage, Stevens downplays his current success, but also writes that future success is unlikely thanks to his family and business obligations. Yet, Stevens claims, the situation isn't all bad, because he

likes the feeling of anticipating something: he doesn't want to make "exhaustive effort" to see what he's anticipating (196). For Lentricchia, this condition of sustained desire is the condition within which all of Stevens' poetry works. The late poetry, which he claims other critics see moving out into the world, Lentricchia claims is only "delusively different" from the early work (206). Instead of presenting individual poems that flirt with entering the world but never really enter it, his long poems string together these preliminary moments—moments that would be ruined if they were realized, but need to imagine themselves being realized in order to go on. Far from being a progression beyond the early work, Stevens' late work, for Lentricchia, turns the early work into a way of life.

Stevens names the object of his desire in the final line of the opening verses of "Notes." He calls it "vivid transparence," which Lentricchia connects with the desire for an original relation expressed by Emerson and figured in the "transparent eyeball" passage. The language that Stevens uses to describe Stevens' "vivid transparence" has clear connections with the way he describes pleasure in his "Last Will and Testament" article: it is "the intransitive moment of attention when without appetite, will, without trying, while sitting quietly at rest, we are touched by an unprovoked sensation: touched and utterly satisfied. We discover: we do not impose. In that moment we are teased out of ourselves, we feel discovered" (224). Emerson urges the desire for this kind of original, face-to-face encounter by recommending that man become more like nature. But for Lentricchia, Stevens represents the desire for this relation as the desire for a new commodity—the potential experience of the "new," for Stevens, has been translated into the language of capitalism. Lentricchia quotes from a letter to Henry Church in which Stevens wrote that at 6 o'clock in the morning, the idea of a supreme fiction "crawls all over [him]," but that he

must put it aside. "After all," he wrote, "I like Rhine wine, blue grapes, good cheese, endive and lots of books, etc., etc., etc., as much as I like supreme fiction" (228). For Lentricchia, the point is not that capitalism and poetry are antagonists. Rather, they are "symbiotic complements" (228). As Lentricchia sees it, Stevens is drawn to Rhine wine and blue grapes for the same reason that he is drawn to poetry: because they promise an original experience.

Yet the opening lines of "Notes" also suggest that this kind of experience is only available for Stevens internally: "And for what, except for you, do I feel love? / Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man / Close to me, hidden in me day and night?" Lentricchia sees a touching familiarity and physicality in the first two lines (the speaker talks of "pressing" his addressee to him), more personal than one would expect from a poem in which a poet addresses his muse, which one might suspect Stevens of doing based on the positioning of the lines. But in the middle of the third line, as the speaker "hides" his addressee within him, and takes him or her out of the world, Stevens undermines the reality and physicality of the poem's opening.⁷⁹ Lentricchia deepens his sense of the way Stevens' move to the interior is embedded in a capitalist context by pairing Stevens' poetry with his interest in collecting foreign objects. Quoting letters that Stevens wrote to friends who were traveling and who might bring him back objects from foreign lands, Lentricchia notes that Stevens went out of his way to make it seem as if the objects just showed up at his door, without his arranging for them to have been sent: he preferred for money to be

⁷⁹ Lentricchia suggests that the speaker being "entered" confuses and perhaps reverses the gender differentiation of the speaker and addressee, and that this willing acceptance of gender indeterminacy represents a progression for Stevens, who reacted to the "feminization" of lyric poetry with anxiety in his early poetry, particularly "Sunday Morning."

routed through a third person and sent vague instructions for what sorts of objects he wanted. As with his address in the opening lines of “Notes,” the only way for Stevens to experience “vivid transparence” was by taking objects out of their worldly setting and making them private: moving into the world meant moving into the world of habit and convention, and in Stevens’ case into the world of mass production.

For Lentricchia, the way to experience “vivid transparence” was by sinking into a poem. So, as Lentricchia concludes his reading, he focuses on Stevens’ “The World as Meditation,” published in The Rock (1954), in which Stevens figures himself, as poet, as Ulysses’ wife Penelope. This image is a fitting conclusion to Lentricchia’s reading of Stevens because Penelope embodies a passive, female world of contemplation as opposed to her husband’s male world of action. As Lentricchia reads the poem, Penelope is the center of its consciousness, and Ulysses, rather than being admired, as he might have been in Stevens’ early poetry, is undercut with the name “the interminable wanderer” (239). Penelope imagines Ulysses’ return, and the consummation of her desire, but it never occurs in Stevens’ poem. Penelope’s world only consists of desire, which leaves it isolated but also free to shape the world according to its own needs and whims.

One of the ways that Lentricchia links Stevens’ poetry with modernism in Ariel and the Police is through George Lukacs’ condemnation of modernist work for its retreat to the interior. Twice, he mentions that Lukacs was right in his diagnosis of modernist interiority, but that in his effort to condemn it, he missed the fact that this retreat was a source of anxiety for modernist writers. Stevens, like modernists in general, wanted a social setting in which he believed that his work and his life were valuable, so his conclusion that he was unable to find this setting in his own world was a source of disappointment. Lentricchia

also sees this sense of loss in Penelope in “The World as Meditation”: her idealized world will not compensate fully (sexually or emotionally) for the fact that she has been excluded from her husband’s world. “What she has,” writes Lentricchia, “is what is left over when all ‘fetchings’ have been refused: purified lyric longing” (243).

And what a miracle of a creation “fetchings” is, even for this poet who performed them as second nature. *Fetch*: to reach by sailing, especially against the wind or tide; to go or come after and bring or take back. *Fetching*: attractive, pleasing. Thus *fetchings*: attractive or pleasing things, which bring a price, as the price a commodity will *fetch*, brought back over water, defined as commodities by the act of fetching which brought them home, valued as fetchings in the homeland of the actor who fetches: an etymology of imperialism. She wanted none of that. (243-244)

The last line of this passage is the last line of Ariel and the Police. In it, Lentricchia reformulates two of Stevens’ lines from “The World as Meditation”: “She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone. / She wanted no fetchings.”⁸⁰ Stevens’ language in these lines, particularly the phrase “wanting none,” suggests the permanently sustained desire that Lentricchia sees at the base of his poetry. Lentricchia’s recasting of the phrases keeps the paradox of “wanting none” alive, and thus restates his reading of Stevens, but the language suggests that Stevens’ poetry has seeped into Lentricchia’s criticism, or that Lentricchia has reduced himself to the point where his language and Stevens’ are indistinguishable. This performative ending not only rehearses Lentricchia’s argument, then, it also attempts to enact the pleasure that Lentricchia feels when he reads Stevens.

⁸⁰ Wallace Stevens, “The World as Meditation,” in Stevens: Collected Poetry and Verse (Library of America, 1997), 442.

OTHERS ON STEVENS: HELEN VENDLER, JOSEPH RIDDEL, HAROLD BLOOM

The distance between Lentricchia and Vendler's criticism is clear in the language they use to characterize their work. Whereas Lentricchia wants to "sacrifice himself," "sink into," or "disappear into" a text, Vendler seeks to "describe" texts. As this language suggests, Vendler is content to see her criticism as secondary; that is, that it comes after the poetry (the ontological reality in Vendler's criticism) and translates it into its own terms. For Lentricchia, this act of translation in Vendler's "descriptions" is a form of coercion; for Vendler, it is a contribution to a pluralistic critical landscape in which various kinds of critical acts are equally valuable. She asserts this commitment to pluralism in her essay "The Function of Criticism," where she distinguishes between "observational" critics (herself) and more "rhapsodic" critics (Harold Bloom), but concludes that neither is necessarily better, that "an enormous number of valid remarks can be made about any art work," and that "probably society needs both sorts of critics" (MWH, 15).

The critical move that Vendler makes in bringing Bloom's criticism within her pluralistic framework is common in her writing on Stevens, for example in the last chapter of Words Chosen Out of Desire, where she discusses the role of magnitude in Stevens' poetry. Vendler prefers the critical category of magnitude to what she sees as the standard dialectic opposition that critics apply to Stevens' work—between reality and imagination—because the dialectic usually begins in antithesis and ends with synthesis, and this synthesis seems to Vendler "oddly at variance with the taste of much of the poetry on the tongue, a taste at once more astringent and more provisional than that offered by

either antithesis or synthesis.”⁸¹ For Vendler, early Stevens contains various techniques for dealing with different orders of magnitude. The speaker in “Infanta Maria” (1921) denies that there is any difference between the magnitudes of the mind and nature; the speaker in “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1936) recognizes a difference between the orders of magnitude of the mind and nature, and asserts that the order of the mind is greater. For Vendler, Stevens’ late poetry recognizes different orders of magnitude but refuses to contest one with another. “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” (1953) does not contain a confrontation between human imagination and nature, nor a confrontation, as it might seem, between a river in Connecticut and the mythical River Styx, but an appreciation of them all, despite their different magnitudes. Vendler compares the poem to an old man who has had a brush with death and returned, and now appreciates bodies of water that he once felt needed interpretation (as in “The Idea of Order”) on their own terms—as, simply, bodies of water.

Yet this isn’t a poem that elevates “things of this world” over mythology. Rather, in the last line of the poem, Stevens brings all orders together with the line “The river that flows nowhere, like a sea” (WCD, 73). Next to “nowhere,” the speaker’s sense perceptions of “the river of rivers” and the folklore concerning the River Styx and the land of Stygia (another mythical place named in the poem) are made equally meaningless (or meaningful). With this conclusion, according to Vendler, Stevens has moved from poems that approach various orders of magnitude “in an agonistic fashion” to one that sees them all with the same, serene appreciation for all existence (78). Vendler suggests the distance

⁸¹ Helen Vendler, Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 62. Future references will be made parenthetically and abbreviated WCD.

that Stevens has moved away from the dialectics of his earlier work with her Zen-like glossing of the poem's conclusion: "Things happen as they happen; Stygia recedes or does not; the river flows or does not" (78). Likewise, Stevens figures the shift in his poetry in the transformation of "the river of rivers" into a sea: from a directional body of water to a body "everywhere present, everywhere in motion, but directionless" (77).

There is a passage in The Edge of Night that nearly directly answers Vendler's reading of "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." When Lentricchia is recalling passages that have given him pleasure in an attempt to ward off "The Devil of Theory," the third passage is from Don DeLillo's Ratner's Star. In it, the main character (Ratner) is theorizing away place difference: "Everything is a place. All places share this quality," he says.⁸² But according to Lentricchia, DeLillo "saves Ratner from himself" by inflecting his speech with phrases that suggest his Brooklyn Jewish roots, specifically the question "So what's such a difference?" (113). For Lentricchia, the passage is important for the way in which DeLillo recognizes the threat of the move that Vendler makes in her reading of "The River of Rivers," but then pulls back from it, or shows his characters' inability to buy into this level of abstraction even when they want to.

But Vendler does buy into this level of abstraction, or at she at least sees it in Stevens' late work. What Vendler misses in Stevens work, according to Lentricchia, is the "price Stevens paid" for the blanket appreciation she locates in his late poems. Lentricchia agrees that there is a state of suspension in Stevens' late poetry, but argues that this state is the result of isolation, frustration, and repression borne of Stevens' historical experience as a poet in an advanced capitalist society, as the son of a father who had made his own

⁸² Frank Lentricchia, The Edge of Night: A Confession (New York: Random House, 1994), 112. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated EON.

money and expected the same of his son, etc. For Lentricchia, these contexts reveal the particularity of Stevens' poetry and make it available for a pleasurable experience. Taking this historically specific emotional content out of the poetry makes it available to a wider variety of readers, which is one of the reasons that Vendler has become poetry's academic spokeswoman over the last forty years in publications like The New York Times Book Review and The New York Review of Books. It is also one of the reasons that she has been able to write successful textbooks like Poems, Poets, Poetry.⁸³ But it also risks ignoring the specificity of what a poem has to say and denying a poem its disruptive potential.

In Ariel and the Police, the claim that Lentricchia makes about Joseph Riddel—that he sublimates the personal aspects of the opening lines of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” by dissolving it in a generalizing humanism—refers specifically to Riddel's 1965 book The Clairvoyant Eye. The structure of The Clairvoyant Eye resembles that of The Gaiety of Language: Riddel outlines Stevens' poetic theory and then reads the poems for how they supplement or extend it. The poetic theory that Riddel finds in Stevens resembles that which Lentricchia finds in Frost in Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self, as both are influenced by phenomenology in important ways. In After the New Criticism, Lentricchia criticized phenomenological criticism for being formalist, by which he meant that it followed Plato in positing a reality-illusion split, and then categorizing literature as illusion. In Ariel, Lentricchia pursues his claim about Riddel less rigorously than his arguments against phenomenological criticism in After the New Criticism, but in

⁸³ I have used this book as both a student and teacher, and have found it an excellent resource as an introduction to poetry. More than one student has told me that they “fell in love” with Vendler's book—extremely high praise to pay a textbook, I think.

both cases, Lentricchia objects that this kind of criticism is too abstract—it moves away from considering literary acts as specifically and historically as he wants to.

In Ariel and the Police, Lentricchia tries to update Riddel's and his own early work with critical methods based on his work in After the New Criticism. But with this goal in mind, it is surprising that Lentricchia fails to mention any of Riddel's work on Stevens beginning in the early 70's, which was heavily influenced by deconstructive literary theory, in particular Riddel's contribution to the 1980 collection of essays, Wallace Stevens: An Appreciation, in which Riddel discusses the opening lines of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Riddel was one of the first American critics to incorporate Continental European philosophers like Derrida and Heidegger into his readings of American texts. Marjorie Perloff called his Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams (1974) the first full-length effort at American deconstructive criticism.⁸⁴ He published on connections between Derrida's thought and Stevens' poetry as early as 1972, when he reviewed Vendler's On Extended Wings (1969). Much like Lentricchia, Riddel objected to what he saw as Platonism in Vendler's underlying "vision of man."⁸⁵ In his 1980 essay on Stevens, Riddel explores the way in which Stevens' metaphors, particularly that of the book, stage the human inability to find a point of origin. The opening lines of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" are important to Riddel because of Stevens' reference to "the extremest book of the wisest man." Riddel reads this as a metaphor for a "master text," to

⁸⁴ See Marjorie Perloff, [review of The Inverted Bell] in The Modern Language Review, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan., 1976), pp. 156-158. Perloff's review mentions the fact that blurbs accompanying the original pressing of the book advertised it as "unprecedented" precisely because it incorporated contemporary Continental European philosophy.

⁸⁵ Joseph Riddel, "Interpreting Stevens: An Essay on Poetry and Thinking," boundary 2, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972), 95. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated IS.

which “Notes” and all of Stevens’ poetry is merely a margin comment. By citing passages from later Stevens poems that assert the primacy of poems themselves over and against any prior source, Riddel ultimately argues that in Stevens’ poetry, the master text “masters nothing,” and that the “vivid transparency” that Stevens introduces in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” can only exist within language, i.e., consist of a marriage of “word to word.”⁸⁶

It is more difficult, then, to find “generalizing humanism” in Riddel’s later work than it is in his early work. But there are still significant distinctions between Riddel and Lentricchia’s later criticism. In an essay he published in The Wallace Stevens Journal in 1983, Riddel responded to what he saw as Lentricchia’s “francophobia” by arguing that Lentricchia had fundamentally misunderstood deconstructive criticism, which, he claims “does not empty out language but disturbs the illusion of language’s ontological status—not however as a nihilism in the vulgar sense of meaninglessness but as a prelude to ‘dissemination.’”⁸⁷ For Riddel, “dissemination” stands against nihilism and meaninglessness, and thus functions like the “positive kind of knowledge” for which Lentricchia finds potential in Derrida.

Riddel introduces one possibility for positive knowledge in his reading of Stevens’ poem “Credences of Summer” at the conclusion of his 1983 essay. For Riddel, “Credences” suggests that one can experience “summer,” which he sees as a metaphor for the

⁸⁶ Joseph Riddel, “Metaphoric Staging: Stevens’ Beginning Again of the ‘End of the Book,’” in Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, edited by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 316, 317. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated MS.

⁸⁷ Joseph Riddel, “The Climate of Our Poems,” The Wallace Stevens Journal, Volume VII, Numbers 3/4 (Fall, 1983), 67. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CP.

experience of a “center,” only by conceiving of summer as a trope—one belonging to a sequence of tropes that includes spring and autumn, each of which depend on the others for their meaning. But Riddel also notes that though all of the seasons exist as tropes, they “suddenly [appear] as a thing, visible and physical” when they exist in a sequence (CP, 70). Concluding his reading, he asks if all metaphors are tropes, i.e., if they all stand in some sequence that gives them meaning. His answer: “Not necessarily. At least in one sense a trope, as part of a sequence or series, is ‘real’” (75). These recognitions *could* prompt historical investigations and show how deconstruction might be used as a “prelude”: the recognition that tropes only gain meaning within a sequence of tropes redirects questions about meaning towards the sequences rather than foreclosing them altogether. But Riddel never takes this opportunity. After having recognized the “reality” of sequences of tropes, Riddel writes that any given trope “is also no more than another dawn, whether a spring or the ‘auroras’ of autumn. The summer/poem is never beyond ‘trope or deviation’ nor purified of the ‘intricate evasions of as’” (75). In other words, he pulls back from the implications of recognizing sequences of tropes as “real” to the basic deconstructive point that these sequences are not real in a Platonic sense, a point that Riddel repeats using similar language throughout his work. In a later essay on the relationship between deconstruction and American literature, Riddel writes that in Emerson’s “Nature,” “Nature is a name for trope—a trope of trope, and hence is ‘pre-original’ as well as belated or post-original.” Describing Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, which Riddel claims dramatizes the undoing of the 19th century American belief that historical unity may be found in Europe, he writes that “Because the American has no history he goes to Rome to find one [...]. What he finds there, however, is not the origin, but only the sign of origin, the substitution, not

the sun but his son, one sign in a complex of signs.”⁸⁸ One reviewer of The Inverted Bell quoted from each of the five sections to show how frequently Riddel repeated the summarizing point that unity is impossible in Paterson.⁸⁹

These repetitions validate Lentricchia’s complaint about the repetitiveness of American deconstructive criticism and challenge Riddel’s definition of deconstruction as “prelude.” But Riddel expands considerably within his deconstructive position, such as in his collection of essays on American literature and thought, in which he attempts to write American history as a history of deconstruction. In the most ambitious of these essays, “The Hermeneutical Self—Notes toward an ‘American’ Practice,” Riddel argues that throughout American thought, “where a ‘self,’ even an ‘American self,’ seems to have its advent, it appears only as the simulacrum of an occulted theological origin, or as theology itself.”⁹⁰ But in “The Hermeneutical Self,” Riddel traces this moment of revelation through three American thinkers: Emerson, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Henry Adams, showing how each approaches this ungrounded condition in his own way. For Emerson, as for Stevens, the language of his essays turns back on itself, revealing itself as a series of tropes rather than naming an external origin. But with Adams, Riddel’s focus is less on language as language, and more on the historical circumstances of Adams’ narrative. According to Riddel, Adams performs the failure of his “self” through contrasts between his received systems of thought

⁸⁸ Joseph Riddel, “Reading America / American Readers,” MLN, Vol. 99, No. 4, French Issue (Sep., 1984), 906-907, 917.

⁸⁹ On repetition in Riddel’s Inverted Bell, see Roy Harvey Pearce, “Paterson and/as the Deconstructive Mode” [review of The Inverted Bell], boundary 2, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 281-287.

⁹⁰ Joseph Riddel, “The Hermeneutical Self—Notes toward an ‘American’ Practice,” in boundary 2, Vol. 12/13, Vol. 12, no. 3 – Vol. 13, no. 1, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism (Spring-Autumn, 1984), 79. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated HS.

(such as the humanities curriculum at Harvard) and the world these systems supposedly describe. The Education of Henry Adams, according to Riddel, is a series of scenes in which the student (Adams) learns that he cannot learn, or that nothing he has been taught will allow him to successfully translate his experience into understanding. Instead, he renews himself in scene after scene of confusion and disjunction, with these states eventually becoming the only grounds for “self” available to Adams.

These readings of Emerson, Peirce, and Adams don’t share Lentricchia’s goal of representing a text’s particularity. But the fact that Riddel distinguishes as sharply as he does between Emerson and Adams, and particularly the fact that he sees Adams producing moments of disjunction without relying on the idea of language as trope, also suggests that Riddel and Lentricchia’s late projects were converging, even if only gradually. Lentricchia still may have complained that Riddel was overly formalistic, but the complaint would have meant more had it accounted for the later work than it does when it only refers to The Clairvoyant Eye.

Turning to Harold Bloom, it is important to note that Bloom’s vision of the critic as engaged in a battle for dominance does not imply that Bloom’s criticism is more coercive than other critics’, just that he denies the possibility that a non-coercive relationship is possible, and then embraces the necessity of coercion. For Lentricchia, writing on Bloom’s work in After the New Criticism, this embrace amounts to both a strength and weakness. The strength is that Bloom’s theory of misreading (a “true” reading being impossible) does away with the Platonic split between reality and illusion that Lentricchia claims is at the bottom of the formalism he opposes in After the New Criticism. As such, Bloom’s work “escapes the formalism of the single aesthetic enclosure and almost escapes the more

residual formalism of the enclosed *cogito*, that free and imperial subject that has moved various criticism of consciousness” (ANC, 342). This opens up the possibility that Bloom’s work can reveal the “contradiction, fragmentation, and difference” that Lentricchia hopes to reveal in his own work. And in fact, Bloom’s criticism *does* depend on pointing out disjunctions in literary texts, but for Bloom the contexts are relentlessly literary, never social or political. Many other critics and even schools of criticism, such as Gilbert and Gubar in Madwoman in the Attic, have used Bloom’s work as a basis for politically oriented literary criticism. But Bloom himself remains committed to writing purely literary literary criticism, thus he gladly fails to historicize Stevens as deeply as Lentricchia.

For Lentricchia, the downside to Bloom’s embrace of misreading is that he performs it with such gusto that it leads to egocentrism and draws attention away from Bloom’s ideas, which Lentricchia believes deserve serious consideration. Bloom’s response to this would be to say that he doesn’t seek the “cool, unemotional consideration” that Lentricchia claims he does (342). All Bloom expects from other critics is that they will attempt to displace him with a “stronger reading,” just as he has done to them. This is essentially the way that Bloom responds to Lentricchia in Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism (1982), when he argues that Lentricchia’s “device” of finishing After the New Criticism with an analysis of Bloom proves that Lentricchia is every bit the pragmatist that Bloom is. In other words, Lentricchia had misread Bloom, as he had no choice but to do, and in so doing proved Bloom’s point that all critics attempt to establish themselves by misreading their precursors.⁹¹

⁹¹ Harold Bloom, Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 38-43.

Lentricchia named “genuine community” as the goal of his critical work in the first chapter of Criticism and Social Change, a book that wasn’t offered directly in response to Bloom but forms a response nonetheless. On the book’s second page, Lentricchia writes that his position that one can work towards social change as a literary critic “will eventually need a lot less pragmatism, but before it needs less, it will need more” (CSC, 2). It’s worth remarking the disjunction between Lentricchia’s claim that this phrase describes a “position” and the fact that the description he offers is clearly of a process. This process, and the fact that it has an endpoint beyond pragmatism, distinguishes Lentricchia’s critical goals from Bloom’s; to be specific, it suggests that Lentricchia and Bloom broadly agree on the value of pragmatism and its anti-systemic energies, but that Lentricchia only values this energy strategically, rather than as an end in itself. In Agon, Bloom wants to “remind” Lentricchia that his predecessors are James and Frost rather than Foucault and Derrida. The seriousness with which Lentricchia takes both James and Frost demonstrates that Lentricchia knows that he exists in a pragmatic American tradition, and Lentricchia directly agreed with Bloom’s claim in an interview in 1986.⁹² The question this comparison with Bloom raises for Lentricchia is whether one can acknowledge one’s participation in this tradition and use it to build a world in which poetry and criticism are nurtured and supported by community. Despite Lentricchia’s intense efforts towards this end, his conclusion is ultimately not a positive one.

⁹² “Interview with Frank Lentricchia,” in Criticism in Society, Imre Salusinszky (New York: Methuen, 1987), 196.

After Ariel: Lentricchia as Lover

The roughly ninety pages that Lentricchia wrote on Wallace Stevens in Ariel and the Police are the highpoint of his literary criticism. They formally express the erotic pleasure that Lentricchia felt when reading Stevens, and simultaneously argue for the irrelevance of this sort of writing. The ultimately impossible task that Lentricchia set for himself was to take this intimate encounter and spread it: to inspire or encourage others to feel the same by encounters with his criticism. Lentricchia largely failed in this effort, or more importantly felt that he had failed, thus his books after Ariel and the Police—Modernist Quartet and Crimes of Art and Terror (2003, written with Jody McAuliffe), and in some part his essays on Don DeLillo—can largely be explained as a reaction to feeling that his offering in Ariel had been refused. To put it simply, these are the writings of a spurned lover.

In Modernist Quartet, this comes across primarily in Lentricchia's resigned, seemingly disappointed style. To the dramatic, performative conclusion of his reading of Stevens in Ariel and the Police, Lentricchia adds a coda that asserts the sobriety of Stevens' late poetry. The book's epilogue, which asserts an end to the modernist project (and Lentricchia's own critical project), concludes by noting that "the missing term in modernist thinking—Eliot stands by himself on this point—is community: something larger, something more valuable than isolate selfhood" (291). According to Lentricchia, this community is nowhere to be found in the secular, liberal West, thus in the absence of religious commitment like Eliot's, the only choice for modernist writers, and by extension the only choice for Lentricchia himself, is "radical disconnection" (291). The final words of Modernist Quartet, evaluating the modernist's choice for this desperate, lonely condition, suggest merely that it "seems right" (291). As in Lentricchia's reading of DeLillo's White

Noise, there are moments in Modernist Quartet when emotion breaks through the surface calm of the prose, suggesting a submerged capacity for emotion and empathy. But more importantly, this style speaks for all of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Frost in the book. As such, it moves away from Lentricchia's goal of encountering the poets as "utterly unique phenomena," and shows Lentricchia's belief in the end of particularity.

In Crimes of Art and Terror, Lentricchia's response to rejection turns from resignation to anger and violence. Lentricchia and his co-author Jody McAuliffe explore the idea that there is a dangerous proximity between the motives for works of art that follow in the Romantic tradition and acts of political terrorism; that is, both seek to transgress and destroy the boundaries of Western society. There is a fundamentally important question about the relationship between literary transgression and politics at the heart of this premise, but in order to draw the strong connections that Lentricchia and McAuliffe want to in Crimes, they read too many of their texts abstractly; in other words, inimically to the entire thrust of Lentricchia's work beginning with After the New Criticism. In their lead essay, "Groundzeroland," they use the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's response to the 9/11 attacks (he called them "the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos") to connect art to terror.⁹³ But to do so, they draw on formal language that would have disgusted Lentricchia twenty years earlier. Art and terrorism are "subsets" of transgression, they write (12). They also describe the connection as "isomorphic" (11). In the 80's, Lentricchia would surely have asked (not without impatience) how much this isomorphism means, especially when Lentricchia and McAuliffe admit that artists and terrorists have fundamentally different intentions, and that the "characters" in the 9/11

⁹³ Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, Crimes of Art and Terror (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated CAT.

terrorists' "performance art" had "no choice in turning down the role, with no knowledge that they'd been cast to die" (14). The violence and anger in Lentricchia's reading show up in the fact that he's willing to gloss over these differences—to do, essentially, what he claims Stockhausen and the 9/11 terrorists did.

Lentricchia and McCauliffe gloss over political realities again in their chapter "Rough Trade," on Frederick Douglass and Jean Genet. The title refers to the only political action that Lentricchia and McCauliffe see available for Douglass, Genet, and all those who attempt to write their way out of oppressive circumstances: they can only escape by "trading" their position for that of an oppressor. Thus Frederick Douglass' life exemplifies the Foucauldian nightmare that Lentricchia asserts at the end of his chapter on Foucault in Ariel and the Police: "The way out is the way up: leave the ranks of the exploited; join the ranks of the exploiters" (AP, 86). This argument is based on their reading of the trial scene that occurs in Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave just after Douglass escapes slavery and arrives in New Bedford. Douglass, in the context of admiring the black residents' desire to protect each other from whites who would reclaim them for slavery, relates a story that he has heard concerning a dispute between a black man and a fugitive slave, in which the former threatened to inform the latter's master of his whereabouts. At the meeting to discuss the dispute, the meeting's leader recommended that the community resolve the dilemma by taking the traitor outside and killing him. Some "timid" attendees intervene in the proceedings, stopping what would have been a scene of retributive violence (121). For Lentricchia and McCauliffe, the scene indicates the threat that Douglass, like every escaped slave, faces: that as free men they will use their freedom to reenact the horrible subjugation they experienced, only this time as masters.

The first problem with this argument is that the scene demonstrates exactly the opposite of what Lentricchia and McAuliffe want it to. The leader's suggestion that they take the would-be traitor outside and kill him is evidence that a violent urge *exists* as part of this protective desire, but in resisting the urge to gain violent retribution, the meeting attendees take a step beyond (transgress) the cycle of violence inscribed in a slave-holding society. Reading more of Douglass's texts only furthers the notion that he achieves the kind of constructive political act that Lentricchia and McAuliffe suggest is impossible. Against their suggestion that the only option for the exploited is to become an exploiter, Douglass, in "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" defends the U.S. Constitution as an anti-slavery document. "Interpreted as it *ought* to be interpreted," he writes, "the Constitution is a *glorious liberty document*."⁹⁴ This stand on behalf of the Constitution takes the decision in the meeting in New Bedford one step further: whereas the members of New Bedford's black community simply avoided a cycle of violence, Douglass is here proposing the Constitution as a document that has created and can sustain a political body on non-master/servant terms.

Thinking along Lentricchia and McAuliffe's lines, one response to this reading would be to question the depth of Douglass's commitment to the U.S., and ask whether or not it forced him to overlook or even condone abuses (racial and otherwise) that were being committed in the name of the nation. Another would be to point out the way that Douglass was treated as an orator for the anti-slavery cause: that he was told to keep a bit of the "plantation manner" in his speech, and to just give the facts about slavery while letting

⁹⁴ Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2003), 168.

more experienced abolitionists “take care of the philosophy.”⁹⁵ But all of these points are subject to the same objection: they formalize the historical reality of Douglass’ escape from freedom. As he describes in his Narrative, and as is obvious from histories of American slavery, slaves were dehumanized in several physical and psychological ways. The fact that Douglass never reached a state of pure freedom doesn’t mean he never escaped these conditions. Implying that it does, as Lentricchia and McAuliffe do in Crimes of Art and Terror, means ignoring the historical realities of Douglass’ life. Crimes of Art and Terror, then, makes the mistake that Lentricchia accused formalist critics of making in After the New Criticism: it assumes a metaphysical truth and fits its readings into this pattern.

To be fair, I need to mention that the development I’ve charted in Lentricchia—from intimate, particular encounters with texts to abstract, coercive ones—didn’t happen suddenly. Along with the work he did with Foucault in After the New Criticism, Lentricchia also wrote two important essays on Foucault in the 80’s, which he published in consecutive issues of *Raritan* in 1982, and revised for inclusion in Ariel and the Police. I mentioned above that in After the New Criticism, Lentricchia sees threats to the possibility of using Foucault’s work as a model for constructing “positive knowledge,” but concludes that Foucault’s own critical practice works against the threat, and thus that Foucault can be used as a model for criticism that incorporates fragmentation and difference into “positive knowledge.” The *Raritan* essays take the antihumanist impulses that Lentricchia had acknowledged in After the New Criticism and deepen them. And this trend only intensifies in the revisions that Lentricchia made to the essays before publishing them in Ariel and the Police in 1988. Just to note the most obvious difference, in the 1982 essays, Lentricchia

⁹⁵ Lisa Brawley, “Frederick Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom and the Fugitive Tourist Industry,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), 107.

argues that there must be some decision-maker or controlling force outside a disciplinary system to shape the “managers, supervisors, directors, chairmen, and deans,” i.e., disciplinary figures within various institutions.⁹⁶ But Foucault repeatedly declines to theorize this force. This last point comes near the end of Lentricchia’s second essay, and precedes a surprisingly “untheoretical” objection:

Though the perfect realization of a panoptical vision would certainly produce the individual as pure object of information, never a subject in communication, Foucault has not yet produced convincing evidence that Bentham’s demonic ideal is our only social reality. Or let us at least note (since the question of evidence is always a problem) that with the slightest of efforts at attention, there is much to be found to the contrary. Resistance is alive and as well (or ill) as it ever was (PLR2, 67).

It would be interesting to know what Lentricchia had in mind when he implied that there are other “social realities” than Bentham/Foucault’s. The task that would follow, of course, would be pitting whatever alternative realities Lentricchia finds against Foucault’s disciplinary society, to see how “alternative” Lentricchia’s options really are. In 1982, however, Lentricchia was confident enough in the fact that resistance was alive that he simply mentions it in passing. In 1988, when he published Ariel and the Police, the last two sentences were edited out. At the end of the Reagan years, the opportunities for intimate encounters were all but closed out. All that was left was for Lentricchia to fulfill Freud and Trilling’s prophecies and “die [...] in [his] own fashion,” which he did when he lashed out at the profession in his “Last Will and Testament.”

⁹⁶ Frank Lentricchia, “Reading Foucault (2) (Punishment, Labor, Resistance),” *Raritan*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), 67. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated PLR2.

PHILIP ROTH: THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP

For literary critics, Lentricchia's story is important as a story about literary theory.

Lentricchia's career was motivated through the mid-80's by the idea that theory would help create a social setting that would support the experience that Lentricchia had when he "submitted himself" to a text. When this way of reading failed to yield the political payoff that Lentricchia thought it would, he reacted violently, lashing out at the profession, and eventually at literature itself. This is one possible outcome of pleasure, and one of the outcomes that literary theory enables.

I want to end this chapter with a more positive account of the relationship between pleasure and politics, though not one that leaves Lentricchia behind. Philip Roth's fiction speaks with Lentricchia's criticism well because it has a turning point not unlike Lentricchia's encounter with theory. Portnoy's Complaint (1967) ends with Portnoy imagining being put on trial for his sexual behavior with an ex-girlfriend. He feels guilty (they brought a prostitute to their hotel room while on vacation), but does not know if the guilt is creation or a legitimate response to his actions. In The Prague Orgy (1985), Nathan Zuckerman is being deported from Czechoslovakia after unsuccessfully trying to retrieve some unpublished stories by an unknown Jewish writer. Zuckerman assumes that the man who has confiscated the stories is a common mid-level bureaucrat, but he turns out to be the Minister of Culture. The Minister lectures Zuckerman on what it's like to live in a small country, dominated by a powerful neighbor. They don't have the luxury, he says, of principle; they can't indulge in imaginative fantasy the way "alienated, degenerate,

egomaniacal artistes” can.⁹⁷ In trying to retrieve these stories, then, is Zuckerman imposing an American vision of artistic freedom on a country that can’t afford it? Is his altruism really imperialism in disguise?

Lentricchia debated this question of “projecting” meanings onto events throughout his career. In The Edge of Night, after Lentricchia recounts his experience watching a married couple and their daughter come into a restaurant, he asks, “Am I reporting, or making this up?” (96)⁹⁸ The question is particularly relevant, here, as Lentricchia has concluded that the man in the restaurant has made the same decision that Wallace Stevens did late in his career. But the issue is ultimately irrelevant. In the opening section of Ariel and the Police, Lentricchia introduces his narrative of anti-Imperialism in a way that makes this clear. After suggesting that he will read William James, Stevens, and Michael Herr into a tradition of anti-Imperialism, Lentricchia specifies that he does not mean this in a vulgar materialist way; that is, he does not mean that the U.S. presence in the Phillipines or Vietnam “gave rise to” or caused the writing. He also rejects a “vulgar formalist” account of literary causation (though he claims they are more useful, since they emphasize literature’s difference from other cultural practices), because while literary texts can influence later texts in various ways, he does not believe that literature exists in an autonomous realm. Lentricchia’s critical practice moves away from the simple account of causation operating in both of these “vulgar” forms of criticism, and instead bases its claim to truth only on the persuasive powers of the story that Lentricchia tells. The unity that Lentricchia describes in

⁹⁷ Philip Roth, The Prague Orgy in Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue, 1979-1985 (The Library of America, 2007), 504.

⁹⁸ I present the scene on pages ____ of the Introduction.

Ariel and the Police is not even being “described” in the sense that it is not objective, i.e., not a Platonic reality. It is being invented as Lentricchia elaborates it.

This is the question to ask about the story that Lentricchia tells in Angelo’s, as well as his interpretation of Stevens: not whether it is true in some objective sense, but what it does as a construction. What kinds of questions and insights does it make available? Lentricchia makes this point repeatedly in his work. In Criticism and Social Change, he specifies that Marxism is not true because it represents history, but because “it has put many intellectuals into active and rich commerce with their society” (14). In his response to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Lentricchia responds specifically to their claim that he is a “partisan reader” by agreeing. “More than once I say that I’m telling a ‘story,’” he writes, “one of personal moment but (this is my wager) personal to others too” (411).

Ultimately, this is also the way that Roth views conflicts between characters in his fiction. For Roth, the turning point comes in The Counterlife (1986). In this novel, characters’ lives are once again shown to be series of conflicting narratives, but the novel becomes part of the conflict rather than diagnosing it. The novel is composed of five chapters, written by Nathan Zuckerman and based on Nathan’s brother Henry confiding in him that he is thinking getting a risky surgery to combat impotence so that he can continue having an extramarital affair. What if he has the surgery and dies? What if he has the surgery and lives but suffers from depression? What would I (Nathan) do in a similar situation? These constant reversals highlight the imaginative nature of the novel, but Roth also subjects the scenarios to the characters’ gazes. On finding a draft of The Counterlife, Nathan’s brother is enraged by what he sees as the inaccuracy of the portrait, and by his brother’s lack of decency in writing about his personal matters. Nathan imagines his

mistress (Maria) finding the novel in his apartment, and immediately falling out of love with him as she reads it. The characters' reactions to Zuckerman's work suggest that novelists are somehow being unfair or coercive when they take "real life" and turn it into art, but Roth's point is that there is no difference between the two. In the fifth chapter, Zuckerman imagines the consequences of running away with Maria. Predictably, their relationship dissolves after a misunderstanding—this time over the job of a novelist. She writes him a letter explaining that she is leaving him because she will not tolerate being cannibalized into his fiction. He responds that his life as novelist is just a more extreme version of everyone's life. "It may be as you say that this is no life, but use your enchanting, enrapturing brains," he writes, "this life is as close to life as you, and I, and our child can ever hope to come."⁹⁹

In broad terms, the progression I have traced through Roth and Lentricchia's work has to do with foundations. For Lentricchia, the anti-foundational approach he discovered in Foucault and Derrida held out the promise of creating a kind of politics of pleasure. Roth never had this initial moment of hope, which is perhaps why he never experienced the same kind of disillusionment. To use a phrase from Roth's later American Pastoral (1997), his characters are looking for ways to understand "the business of other people": relationships, family, friendships, etc.¹⁰⁰ The shift that I've located in The Counterlife involves accepting a lack of foundations as a basic condition for "the business of other people," rather than struggling against it as Portnoy had. For Roth, this acceptance licenses the novels that come in the late 80's and the 90's, up to and including his best single novel, The Human Stain (2000). In The Human Stain, Classics professor Coleman Silk is brought

⁹⁹ Philip Roth, The Counterlife (New York: Vintage, 1986), 324.

¹⁰⁰ Philip Roth, American Pastoral (New York: Vintage, 1997), 35.

up on disciplinary charges when he asks, five weeks into a semester, if two students who have never shown up are merely “spooks.” The students turn out to be black, and assume that Coleman was referring to their race, rather than, as he says, their “possibly ectoplasmic character.”¹⁰¹ There is a trial in the novel—Coleman’s trial at his college—but unlike the one that ends Portnoy’s Complaint, this trial appears only in passing and occurs partway through the book. In The Human Stain, the dominant metaphor is not a trial but a dance, i.e., a cooperative act performed in time to music. During one of their visits early in the novel, Coleman and Nathan dance the fox trot to Frank Sinatra singing “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered.” Nathan’s delight is clear: “There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about on the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive, accidentally and clownishly and for no reason alive—the kind of delight you take as a child when you first learn to play a tune with a comb and toilet paper” (HS, 26). The dance also becomes a significant moment in Nathan’s life. The novel is the last of Roth’s “American Trilogy,” which began with American Pastoral in 1997. In American Pastoral, Zuckerman moves out of the city to a cabin in a remote part of Massachusetts. But in The Human Stain, Nathan’s friendship with Coleman, sealed by their dance, convinces him to re-enter the world; in other words, it reminds him being engaged in the business of other people doesn’t just create frustration, it can also create happiness.

Late in the book, Zuckerman explains what motivated him to write the novel: he discovered that Coleman had grown up African-American, but had spent his life passing as white. The “germ” of the novel comes after Coleman’s death, when Zuckerman tries to

¹⁰¹ Philip Roth, The Human Stain (New York: Vintage, 2000), 6. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated HS.

imagine what it would have been like when Coleman (*if* Coleman) told this secret to his lover, Faunia Farley:

'I admit that may not be at all correct,' I said to my utterly transformed friend, 'I admit that none of it may be. But here goes anyway: when you were trying to find out if she'd been a hooker...when you were trying to uncover *her* secret...' Out there at his grave, where everything he ever was would appear to have been canceled out by the weight and mass of all that dirt if by nothing else, I waited and I waited for him to speak until at last I heard him asking Faunia what was the worst job she'd ever had. Then I waited again, waited some more, until little by little I picked up the sassy vibrations of that straight-out talk that was hers. And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death. (HS, 338)

This is Roth's fullest account, I think, of the kind of work warranted by the anti-foundational transition he made in The Counterlife. This work is patient. It starts small, simply by realizing the sounds of characters' voices. It recognizes that it is imposing meaning on the brute reality of the physical world and that it may be wrong every step of the way. But if a writer waits long enough and pays close enough attention, he can pick out a voice that belongs to one person and one person only. And if he can pick out her voice, then maybe he can pick out her appearance, and then maybe he can describe the way she moves, etc. This is how Roth constructs his characters in The Human Stain: from scratch, trying to turn novel writing into a dance with his characters, rather than a trial for them. Not only Coleman, but his lover Faunia Farley, her ex-husband Les Farley, and even Coleman's antagonist at the college, Delphine Roux, receive dozens of pages explaining

their histories, showing the complications that have brought them to intersect with each other's lives in the way they do. None of the characters are (or can be) flawlessly rendered, but even while we recognize Roth's inevitable limitations in his ability to imagine other people's lives, The Human Stain provides one of American literature's best accounts of the ethical and aesthetic possibilities of the novel.

In his latest fiction, Lentricchia has shown signs of a willingness to move in this direction; or at least a recognition that such a move is possible. A central theme of The Italian Actress (2010) involves the connection between art and the desire to escape time. One of the novel's overlapping plots involves a relationship between Jack del Piero, a 50-year-old American filmmaker who was once highly respected for his avant-garde videography, and Claudia Cardinale, the 68-year-old star of Fellini's 8½. In the present time of the novel, Jack and Claudia have been living together for two years, without making love. Claudia rightly suspects that Jack has not wanted to make love to her because he is unable to reconcile her present physical state with images of her he has in her head. (Jack had been a deep enough admirer of her work in his teenage years to have purchased a sixteen-millimeter copy of 8½ and the May 1961 issue of *Esquire*, which features a set of famous photographs of her.) Jack gets recruited by a young couple to film one of them committing suicide by autoerotic asphyxiation; and then film the decomposition of the body over six months. The scene leading up to Jack agreeing to this project involves him being led through a church in Rimini, Italy, where he sees images of Sigismondo Malatesta. The images, as one member of the couple tells him, "will survive all destructions—as we happy

three shall survive.”¹⁰² Deep in a relationship in which the passing of time is a major source of confusion, Del Piero agrees.

His work on the project eventually brings his relationship with Claudia Cardinale to a head. She, someone who is not seduced by images the same way he is, cannot look past the fact that a human life was sacrificed for Jack’s project. Motivated by anger at his participation, she makes him confront his feelings for her, and eventually sends him back to the U.S., where he returns to a teaching post at a college in Connecticut. In the novel’s penultimate paragraph, Lentricchia describes his life as follows:

I live now in the house he [Fred, the former chair of his department at the college] willed me, where I summon my familiar ghosts. Mother. Father. Fred. The man who called himself Sigismondo. All the Claudias. Word has it that students and faculty in the Program have enthusiastically nominated me for a teaching award. I’d be proud to win one. And I’ve begun, strangely, to invite colleagues over for dinner—seems as though I’ve lost my scorn, as she’d hoped. The dinners are a hit. I find them only semi-bearable, but do not intend to cease extending invitations. (IA, 107-108)

We might recall, reading these lines, that when he was being recruited to film the suicide in Rimini, one member of the couple wrote that Jack’s proclivities “incline to the mediocrities of a normal life” (38). This “normal life” seems to be what he has returned to at novel’s end: teaching classes, hosting diner parties, etc. These are the settings—complete with their confusions, frustrations, and even boredoms—to which Zuckerman rededicates himself in The Human Stain. This dedication is the ethical content of his friendship with Coleman. Jack Del Piero, it appears, also works well in these settings. In other words, he operates well

¹⁰² Frank Lentricchia, The Italian Actress (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 50. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated IA.

under earthly constraints. This is not what Lentricchia's novel focuses on; it focuses on the desire to escape these restraints and the dangers that come with that desire. But The Italian Actress suggests that Lentricchia knows that other choices are available.

EDWARD SAID: WRITING AND UTOPIA

“What’s relevant is what they’re doing towards you.”¹⁰³ This is what Edward Said tells Daniel Barenboim in a conversation in the opening minutes of Paul Smaczny’s documentary film Knowledge is the Beginning (2005), about the West-Eastern Divan, an orchestra and workshop which Barenboim and Said formed in 1999. Said is talking with Barenboim about the diverse backgrounds of the musicians in the orchestra. They come from different economic, national, religious, and cultural situations, says Said, but when they play music, the differences become irrelevant.

It is important to understand what Said means when he utters this sentence. He does not *only* mean that music transcends difference, though he does mean something like this. Later in the film, Barenboim and various students mention that they have been changed by their experience in the orchestra, in part because it exposes them to new points of view and allows them to see more of the world. Students also mention that music allows them to come together in ways that would be impossible in their home environments. But about halfway through Knowledge is the Beginning, another student adds that the students are not detached from reality when they rehearse with the orchestra. They must come to the workshop ready to deal with whatever differences exist in their lives back home. Nobody is forced to discuss politics, but nobody pretends they do not exist, either. Said

¹⁰³ Edward Said, in Knowledge is the Beginning, directed by Paul Smaczny (2006: Warner Classics).

speaks similarly in an interview with Charlie Rose when describing a performance that Barenboim gave at Bir Zeit University. He notes that there was “a contradiction” between the Palestinian audience and Barenboim, who is Jewish. This contradiction, he states, was maintained during the performance (Barenboim did not become Palestinian), yet Barenboim was able to communicate with the audience, and to create a “new state” in the process.¹⁰⁴ This “new state” (Said also calls it “utopian”) and the differences between performer and audience existed simultaneously, rather than the former replacing the latter.

Said plays an interesting role in Smaczny’s film. The film focuses on the music, so Said understandably takes a back seat. I was particularly touched by one scene in which Said sat and turned pages for Barenboim and Yo-Yo Ma as they gave a concert for the students: it seemed to express a sort of humility I have not seen from Said elsewhere. But there is at least a glimpse into another role that Said played in the workshop, which was originally conceived not as a musical repertory but, to quote from their website, a place that will “enable intercultural dialogue and [...] promote the experience of collaborating on a matter of common interest.”¹⁰⁵ At the original meeting in Weimar in 1999, for example, Barenboim led intense rehearsals, but the students also visited the site of the Buchenwald concentration camp and held discussions, led mostly by Said, concerning contemporary art and politics. Watching Said talk about the need to recognize the fact that Israeli and Palestinian lives are inextricably interwoven, one gets the sense that he and Barenboim were meant to play similar roles at the workshop: Barenboim conducting the orchestra, Said conducting the discussions. Ideally, discussions of the visit to Buchenwald and

¹⁰⁴ Edward Said, “A Discussion with Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim,” on Charlie Rose, March 9, 2001. <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/3218>. Accessed July 9, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ West-Eastern Divan Orchestra website. <http://www.west-eastern-divan.org/the-orchestra/the-orchestra/>. Accessed July 9, 2012.

contemporary politics would go something like orchestra rehearsals, with different students becoming equal in their relationship to Said. This would mean that Said would need to “conduct” discussions with the same balance of mastery and humility that Barenboim used in conducting musicians.

This scene provides some insight into the way Said viewed his role as a teacher, I think. He often wrote about the American university as a place that approached a kind of utopia, even if it never achieved it. On more than one occasion, Said explained this claim by saying that he had never taught anything about the Middle East in the university. His point seems to be that the university allowed him to teach literature without directly relating it to the urgent needs of “real world politics,” but this point is somewhat confusing given Said’s commitment to “worldliness.”¹⁰⁶ As Jonathan Arac suggests in a recent essay, “worldliness,” for Said, entailed drawing connections between aspects of life that are usually separated. Part of the reason that Orientalism has been so influential, argues Arac, is that it fulfilled this “worldly” requirement by linking scholarship and politics in a way that made Western scholars uncomfortable. In his essay, Arac connects Said’s terms “worldly” and “secular” because both “oppose any way of seeing or saying things that isolates, venerates, or idealizes.”¹⁰⁷ “Utopian” does the same thing, for Said. As he writes in the closing sentence of Musical Elaborations, music offers us “a mode of thinking through or thinking with the integral variety of human cultural practices, generously, non-

¹⁰⁶ For examples of Said talking about utopia and the American university, see the preface to the 25th anniversary edition of Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1994), xvi-xvii; and “On Defiance and Taking Positions” in Reflections on Exile (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 500-501. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated O and OD.

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Arac, “Edward W. Said: The Worldliness of World Literature,” in The Routledge Companion to World Literature, ed. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (New York: Routledge, 2012), 121.

coercively, and, yes, in a utopian cast, if by utopian we mean worldly, possible, attainable, knowable.”¹⁰⁸ I think it makes more sense to see Said’s claim that the university was utopian in light of this interest in drawing connections, and in light of what he achieved at the West Eastern Divan: like rehearsal spaces, classrooms offer opportunities for students to create connections that are otherwise unavailable.

It also provides an interesting insight into his critical work, as it invites us to see his books as a series of attempts to create utopias, i.e., places where objects that have otherwise been in conflict are broken down and recombined on a more equal footing. Many of Said’s books can be described in this way. In Beginnings (1975), Said used Vico as a model for criticism that discussed works from the 19th century novel to 20th century criticism, spanning both eras and genres and showing what the works have in common, as well as where they diverge. In Culture and Imperialism (1993), Said created a dialogue about imperialism between Western cultural works and Eastern ones. In After the Last Sky (1986), Said attempted to write Palestinian identity into existence as a dialogue between written text and Jean Mohr’s photographs of Palestinian people. It is interesting, in this light, to note Said’s comments on the way he composed the images in After the Last Sky: not according to a narrative, but according to what he felt was a “musical motif.”¹⁰⁹

Having drawn this connection, we need to note an important distinction between writers and performers. In a conversation in Parallels and Paradoxes (2002), Said suggests

¹⁰⁸ Edward Said, Musical Elaborations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 105.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Said, “The Panic of the Visual [Conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell]” in Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power, edited by Paul Bové (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 36.

that there is no equivalent of the performer in literature.¹¹⁰ His point is that novels and paintings can be revisited, whereas a musical performance can not be repeated: it exists in one moment only, and differs even when played by the same musicians the next day. Said makes this point to argue that musical performances are more powerful than other aesthetic experiences, and Knowledge is the Beginning bears this comparison out. If one knows the indefatigable energy that Said brought to his literary and political work, then the discussion he is shown leading (about Israeli demographics) will appear as part of a broader, more dynamic fight against injustice. Without this background knowledge, Said's discussion slows the film down. His discussion lacks the energy and excitement of Barenboim's conducting. These talks seem like dry, academic discussions (the students look disengaged) next to the passion of the music.

This comparison between the power of music and words links Said with modernists like Pound and Eliot, and before them with Walter Pater and his claim that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."¹¹¹ In Beginnings, Said quotes Eliot writing, "beyond the namable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action [...] there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; feelings of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim, Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 28. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated PP.

¹¹¹ Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (the 1893 Text) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 106. For Pater's influence on Modernists like Pound and Eliot, see Harold Bloom, "Introduction" to The Selected Writings of Walter Pater (New York: New American Library, 1974).

¹¹² Edward Said, Beginnings (New York: Columbia University Press Morningside Edition, 1985), 74. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated B.

Said provides the quote to fill out his discussion of the writer's motivation to write, but the quote comes from Eliot's "Poetry and Drama," an essay in which Eliot recommends verse drama as the best means by which humans can approach the indefinite feelings he speaks of in the passage above. The greatest prose dramatists have approached these feelings, Eliot admits, but verse drama best enables us to "touch the borders of those feelings which only music can express."¹¹³ Eliot is essentially describing a fallen state. He wrote the essay in 1951, well after he had converted to the Anglican Church and begun writing plays like "The Cocktail Party," which recommends humble sacrifice as the only way to deal honorably with an impure existence.

Said shared Eliot's belief that there was a necessary "secondariness" to writing but not Eliot's sense of dismay. Witness the final page of Humanism and Democratic Criticism (2004), where Said names the intellectual's home as "an exigent, resistant, intransigent art into which, alas, one can neither retreat nor search for solutions," and then concludes, "only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway."¹¹⁴ This passage expresses a sense of determination rather than sadness or nostalgia. For Said, the central question about criticism was not whether it could ascend to the realm of indefinite feelings that Eliot describes, but what kind of world it created within its own secular realm. Is it expansive? Does it encourage curiosity about other cultures and literatures? Is it fundamentally democratic, so that it can encounter new ideas and texts without imposing itself on them? These questions, I will suggest in this chapter, guided Said's critical work.

¹¹³ T.S. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama" in The Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 145-146.

¹¹⁴ Edward Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism (London: Palgrave, 2004), 144. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated HDC.

In Said's early work, particularly his second book Beginnings (1975), he argued that a Vichian model of criticism could help push contemporary criticism in the direction of an expansive, non-coercive democracy. Vico's central principle was the idea that humans are only capable of knowing through the process of creation (his "verum-factum principle"), which he offered against Descartes' insistence on using reason to reach "clear and distinct ideas." Vico's principle provided Said with a suitable foundation for expansive, non-coercive intellectual work; but the critical landscape to which Said responded differed from Vico's. Beginnings was partly a response to literary theory, but more than this, it was a response to Cold War liberalism, particularly as represented by Frank Kermode's Sense of an Ending (1967). As I will argue below, Kermode and Said agreed that humans need to create meaningful fictions, but they did so with different emphases. For Kermode, some sense of order was necessary as a bulwark against a recurrence of the Holocaust. Because he associated a pure lack of order with Stalin and Hitler, Kermode had a deep-seated belief in the necessity of forms of order. Said was more interested in disrupting current forms of order, i.e., those that refused to acknowledge the existence of the Palestinians, those that intervened in Vietnam, etc. He was not willing to reject liberal humanism's fundamental commitments altogether, but he was interested in deeply revising them, or creating new possibilities within them. In this context, Vico is important for Said because he offers a method of "self making" (to use Said's language from a 1986 interview) that is constantly open to revision or beginning again.¹¹⁵ In the first part of this chapter, I want to show the way that Said enacts these Vichian "secular selves" in Beginnings. My focus will be on the

¹¹⁵ "Interview with Edward Said [conducted by Imre Saluszinsky]," Criticism in Society (New York: Methuen, 1987), 135. Said used the phrase "self making" in response to a question about why Vico meant so much to him.

book's three central chapters, in which Said discusses the classical novel, what he calls "the postnovelistic text," and literary criticism.¹¹⁶ I will argue that in each chapter, Said shows ways in which the relevant genre falls short of reaching an origin, yet uses this failure as the basis for a new beginning. This dynamism, I hope to suggest, is the main aspect of Beginnings that distinguishes it from Kermode's liberal project in The Sense of an Ending.

Beginnings is Said's most literary and theoretical book, with the exception of his first, Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (1966). He had been writing political essays since the late 60's, and his early literary criticism also displays an interest in the overlap between literature and politics, but Orientalism (1978) was his first large scale attempt to bring them together.¹¹⁷ In the introduction to Orientalism, he establishes the political motive for the book when he writes, "because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of action" (O, 3). In the book, then, Said wants to combine his literary and political writing to show the ways in which monuments of Western culture have participated in dominating the East, or keeping people in "the Orient" from being "free subjects of action." This makes Orientalism a largely negative book; that is, it outlines a pattern of domination without offering alternatives.

Culture and Imperialism (1993) offers the alternatives that Orientalism lacks. In the later book, Said made two important advances beyond Orientalism. First, he presented a deeper and more complex picture of the relationship between Western cultural products and Imperialism, and in doing so provided resources for resistance. Whereas he had folded

¹¹⁶ Edward Said, Beginnings (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 18. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated B.

¹¹⁷ In his first book, Said had written, "The trouble with unrestrained and militant egoism as Conrad saw it was that it becomes an imperialism of ideas, which easily converts itself into the imperialism of nations." See Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 140

cultural works into a broader pattern of Orientalism in his earlier book, his readings of Austen, Verdi, Camus, and others in Culture and Imperialism establish dynamic interactions between historical and aesthetic realities without reducing one to the other. In the following chapter, I will argue the success of Said's readings by comparing them with Fredric Jameson's. Though Jameson and Said overlap in significant ways, Said is ultimately more connected to political realities than Jameson, and thus better able to do justice to literary works as both aesthetic and historical objects.

The second advance that Said made in Culture and Imperialism was acknowledging colonial resistance. Said mentions this as an important step on the second page of his introduction. "Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native," he writes, "there was *always* some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance won out."¹¹⁸ Thus, he pairs readings of Conrad, Austen, and others from the West, with George Lamming, Tayeb Salih, and Ranajit Guha (among others) from formerly colonized regions. As I will discuss below, the readings that Said offers as examples of resistance are insightful and important, but also create something of an imbalance in the book. While the Western readings involve digging beneath the surface of novels that seemingly have little to do with imperialism, such as Mansfield Park and The Stranger, the readings of resistance literature are shorter and more thematically oriented. As I will argue, this seems like a lost opportunity. The most effective pairing with these readings from the West, it seems to me, would be a series of readings that shows that just as imperialism is embedded in the collective imagination of the colonizers, so resistance is embedded in the imagination of the

¹¹⁸ Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (New York: Vintage, 1993), xii. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated CI.

colonized. This would mean looking for resistance in unlikely places, such as fiction that seems to want nothing to join the mainstream. I will close my chapter, then, with a reading of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction. Mukherjee has a reputation of being a conservative writer, but as I will argue, her fiction has resources for opposition in it.¹¹⁹ I hope that my reading can help advance Said's work towards a utopian state that it will, of course, never reach.

SAID'S VICHIAN BEGINNINGS

In his 1985 preface to Beginnings, Said writes that the "kernel-essay" of the book was written in 1967-68 (B, xi). This kernel is the essay "Beginnings," which Said published in *Salmagundi* in 1968, and which reappears with only slight editing as the second chapter of the book. Frank Kermode's The Sense of an Ending (1967) makes two small but important appearances in the 1968 essay. In the first, Said writes that he wants to "shift Frank Kermode's emphasis in The Sense of an Ending by stressing the primordial need for certainty at the beginning over the usually later sense of an ending" (B, 49). This comes after Said notes an important similarity between his and Kermode's books: that both are centrally concerned with the fact that human attempts to bring order to the world are necessarily fictional; that is, when a composer starts a symphony or when a philosopher begins to develop an idea, these beginning ideas are merely projections of individual will, not grounded in some anterior authority. The second reference comes at the end of the essay/chapter. Said writes that both his and Kermode's books are studies in error, or in accounting for the deep uncertainty that accompanies human attempts to make sense of

¹¹⁹ In referencing Mukherjee's conservative reputation I am mainly referencing Aijaz Ahmad's essay "*Orientalism* and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," in In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992), 208. I will discuss Ahmad's criticism in depth below.

their world. While Kermode's "justifiable bias is the connection between literature and the modes of fictional thought in a general sense," Said sees other, adjacent benefits to studying beginnings (B, 75). "Such a study would," he writes, "show us when and how a novelist felt what he was doing was *only* writing a novel and not an essay, how and when a critic attributed to his criticism the power to predict its own invalidation, and when a historian saw the past projecting itself in his work" (76).

These brief references are enough to demonstrate that Said was not writing to reject Kermode's work. This is a simple point, perhaps, but it is worth making because it speaks against the tendency to read Said as dismissing texts and critics that came before him on the grounds that they are overly traditional or not politically correct. Something like this happens in a recent book on Said, H. Aram Veese's Edward Said: the Charisma of Criticism (2010). Veese writes that Sense of an Ending was an "obvious starting point" for Said's book, and contrasts the wide range of texts that Said discusses in Beginnings with Kermode's supposedly narrower focus.¹²⁰ Veese caricatures Kermode and his text as reactionary. Kermode wrote with "traditionalist, and therefore religious, preconditions." He believed that "every new challenge to the critical system would be absorbed or expunged." His "fatalism, his resigned sighs over the inevitable triumph of the institution, suggested the dreaded and disdained passivity Said opposed" (96). I hope the quotes I have already provided suggest that this account is greatly exaggerated. There are differences between Said and Kermode's work, and Kermode's is certainly the more conservative of the two. But these are far from grounds for characterizing the relationship between them as one of

¹²⁰ H. Aram Veese, Edward Said: The Charisma of Criticism (New York: Routledge, 2010), 96. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated CC.

simple and direct opposition. Doing so not only misreads Said on this particular point; it also misses a fundamental point of Said's contrapuntal criticism.

Said's relationship with Kermode goes even deeper than his 1968 Salmagundi essay, as Said had reviewed The Sense of an Ending in 1967. Said began by giving it high praise. He was particularly complimentary of Kermode's "fascinating and brilliant" readings of literary texts, but he also questions Kermode's theoretical method.¹²¹ Said's main point is that Kermode's emphasis on endings seems arbitrary. There is no reason, Said argues, to focus on endings as a universal human need when there is just as much reason to believe that this investment in endings grows out of previous investments (in middles or beginnings, for example). At the very least, he argues, if one wants to say that a "sense of an ending" is necessary, one must also admit the necessity of "transformation," as well as of the mind's spatial desires—for "the pathos of distance and the fullness of time," for example. Thus, Said concludes that The Sense of an Ending is not "radical" enough: it fails to interrogate endings, or ask what might come before or exist alongside them.¹²² It simply asserts their universal existence and moves forward from there.

The 1967 review confirms that Said was not writing in direct opposition to Kermode. Said does not have a problem with Kermode's central point that humans live by creating fictions, he simply thinks that Kermode's decision to focus on the fact that these fictions must have endings is an unnecessary limitation. In making this point, Said approaches a shift that he would later identify in connection with Jean Starobinski's book on Saussure. In Beginnings, Said notes that in Starobinski's book on Saussure's study of Latin verse, Starobinski located "word-themes" that all Latin poets employed as

¹²¹ Edward Said, "Endgames," *Book Week*, April 30, 1967, 13.

¹²² Said, "Endgames," 13.

organizational principles in their works. Starobinski, according to Said, raises a question concerning whether Saussure was “finding” or “constructing” these word-themes. But “having raised this question,” Said writes, “Starobinski goes on usefully to observe that the more valuable thing is to determine the relevance of Saussure’s discoveries” (54). This is the question that Said suggests but fails to ask of Kermode’s Sense of an Ending. As Said notes, there is no theoretical reason to focus on endings rather than beginnings or transitions. So how is the focus relevant?

In The Sense of an Ending, Kermode frames his focus on endings as a reaction to World War II, and particularly the Holocaust. For Kermode, the “logic” that led to the Holocaust was one that approached pure irrationalism: the ideology associated with art that seeks irrationalism is fascism, he writes, and “its practical consequence is the Final Solution.”¹²³ Kermode’s response to this threat was to insist on the persistence of forms of order in fiction. For example, he denies that the artists commonly taken as spokesmen for the age of permanent crisis, such as William Burroughs and Samuel Beckett, actually achieve the rupture their admirers sometimes claim they do. He sees Beckett advancing towards the point “where nothing whatever is communicated,” but he argues that as they stand, Beckett’s works still rely on forms of order for their point (SE, 116). In the fifth lecture Kermode makes a similar argument about Sartre’s Nausea (1938). Whereas much modern art fails because it seeks irrationalism, Kermode writes that Nausea has its “necessary share of contrivance” (SE, 140). Kermode insists that Nausea’s form is still troubling, and argues that Sartre believes that formal representation “must be such that it

¹²³ Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 103. Future references will be made in the text, abbreviated SE.

induces the proper sense of horror at the utter indifference, the utter shapelessness, and the utter inhumanity of what must be humanized” (SE, 145). But his reading of Nausea closely resembles his reading of Beckett in its broad patterns: Sartre and Beckett work with different materials, and they have different relationships to the form they bring to these materials, but ultimately both answer the human need for form.

Said focused more squarely on the potential for change, in part because he was responding to a different set of political circumstances than Kermode. Towards the end of Beginnings, he names “specialization, an ideological professionalism, and a hierarchical system of values that [...] keeps beginning speculations that deal heedlessly with the artificial barriers between ‘original’ and ‘critical’ works at the very bottom” as targets of his criticism (B, 379). He also writes that these institutions are best analyzed by Chomsky’s “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” and Foucault’s L’Ordre du Discours (translated in English as Discourse on Language). There is a gap between the academically focused problems that Said identifies and the more political ones that Foucault and Chomsky discuss. Chomsky, for example, is focused primarily on the way in which the claim to objectivity in “liberal scholarship” (mostly the social sciences) supports American foreign policy. To cite one example, Chomsky presents Morton H. Halperin’s argument that American goals in Vietnam are more likely to be achieved through concrete appeals to economic and psychological wellbeing rather than abstract appeals to principles such as loyalty. For Chomsky, Halperin exemplifies objective scholarship because he never considers the broader, more complex question of whether the United States has the moral right to choose how to “shape” the Vietnamese people in the first place. Beginnings only references the Vietnam War in passing, but in naming Chomsky, Said’s links the narrow

vision that restricts academic work with the one that supports and conducts the Vietnam War.

Beginning in the late 60s, Said was also writing explicitly political essays, focused mainly on the Middle East. In these essays, as in many that he wrote throughout his career, Said worked to show the ways in which the West used Chomsky's "objective discourse" to develop and manage their dominance over the East. The earliest example of this is "The Arab Portrayed," which he published in an anthology (The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective) in 1970. In the essay, Said argues that Western guilt over World War II ends up reducing both Israelis and Arabs: Israelis become the beneficiaries and Arabs are either overlooked or portrayed as terrorists. In another of Said's early political essays, "The Palestinian Experience," he suggests a Palestinian response to the West's simplifications. He argues the importance of developing a coherent sense of Palestinian identity for the repatriation of lands. To be more specific, he wants to publicly acknowledge that Palestinians have "begun to act upon" their lack of communal identity.¹²⁴ This acknowledgement is made in the hopes of encouraging more Palestinian "beginnings," so to speak. Said is clear that this identity must take shape "from the ground up." The only way that an institutionalized Palestine will be able to avoid the mistake of other institutionalized identities is by developing in concert with the lives of Palestinians. Because of this complexity, Said is also unable to assert the mechanisms by which it should form, much less enact it. It is clear that Said *does* want Palestinians efforts to coalesce into a coherent sense of identity. In other words, he is not interested in resistance alone. Said frequently noted that for Frantz Fanon, resisting an oppressive colonial power needed to

¹²⁴ Edward Said, "The Palestinian Experience," in Reflections on the Middle East Crisis, ed. Herbert Mason (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1970), 147.

include the development of a coherent “discourse of liberation,” which meant more than saying “no.”¹²⁵ Said’s early efforts on behalf of Palestinian identity shared in this recognition, and thus acknowledged Kermode’s claim for the necessity of a sense of form, or closure. But his emphasis fell on the disruptive spirit necessary for change.

This emphasis is evident throughout Beginnings. One of Said’s goals in the book is to show how each of the genres of writing he examines—the classical novel, the “postnovelistic text,” and contemporary criticism—can be usefully understood in terms of “beginnings.” But what stands out more than this continuity, particularly in the book’s three central chapters, is the way that Said repeatedly begins a subject, exhausts it, and then begins anew. In the third chapter, for example, Said traces the exhaustion of the idea that the classical novel’s fundamental role is to express a kind of truth about the world. He locates two endpoints of this tradition: Conrad’s Nostromo (1904) and Mann’s Dr. Faustus (1947). Both represent a turning inward, or an “intensification of [the novelist’s] *scriptive* fate” (137). They realize, in other words, that they can only express truths about themselves as instances of writing, rather than about the external world. This ends the desire that motivated the classical novel, but in writing out this ending at the conclusion to chapter 3, Said begins on his discussion of what he calls “the postnovelistic text,” which includes Renan’s Vie de Jésus and Hopkins’ poetry, among others. These texts no longer maintain the duality between “authority” and “molestation” that motivated the novel. In other words, they don’t keep the idea of textual interactions with the world alive; they assume that their writing merely runs parallel to the world. But this produces new anxieties and concerns for authors. For Said, the primary concern is that of substituting a

¹²⁵ See “Foucault and the Imagination of Power” in Reflections on Exile (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 242-244.

literary career for a biological life. Even if authors give up the idea that their work will *add* truth to the world, they are still beset with the anxiety of attempting to leave a record of their own lives in the form of their writing careers. What happens if an author's work never reaches print? What if he proves unable to keep producing himself in language? Said ends his chapter with a lengthy discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins that shows the poet moving through three phases: in his early poetry he sees himself as divinely inspired; in his middle works he assumes responsibility for both the inspiration and expression of his poems; in his late work he gives way to the feelings of sterility that he feels have kept him from authoring a career, i.e., a life. Again, this notion of sterility, or the impossibility of individual authority, begins a new discussion for Said: his discussion of modern French criticism in chapter five.

In Beginnings' first chapter, Said comments that the book goes in roughly chronological order. This is true, but there are also so many exceptions to the chronology—chapter three ends with a novel published in 1947; chapter four with a poem written in 1889—that it is difficult to see the book as a presentation of linear history. Instead, the book's ability to regenerate on its own momentum shows it to be "postnovelistic." This suggests that Said was beset with some of the same worries that he imparted to "postnovelistic" authors concerning whether they would be able to leave records of their lives in the form of texts. Said gives voice to worries of this kind in his memoir, writing that he has "no concept of leisure or relaxation and, more particularly, no sense of cumulative achievement."¹²⁶ It also raises a question that Said will answer in chapters five and six of

¹²⁶ Edward Said, Out of Place (New York: Vintage, 1999), 12.

Beginnings; namely, how does a writer deal with the threat of powerlessness that arises when writing becomes the only reality?

The fifth chapter is worth looking at in more detail, as it is a heavily revised version of an earlier essay, and because it takes Beginnings roughly up to the present. The chapter focuses mainly on Foucault, and is a revised and expanded version of a similar essay published in the anthology Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism (1972). This early version of Said's essay is more negative than the revised version that appears in Beginnings, largely owing to the fact that Said had not read, or did not include, Foucault's Discourse on Language in the earlier essay. He focuses on The Order of Things and A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, and argues that both show Foucault to be "perpetually hampered by language." "Foucault's job of getting to the bottom," Said writes, "yields only the repeated and much modulated assertion that man is a temporary interruption, a figure of thought, of the already begun."¹²⁷ As much in his rhetoric as his argument, Said emphasizes the paralysis that he sees in Foucault's work. He writes that like "all the structuralists," "Foucault is obsessed with the inescapable fact of ontological discontinuity" (AC, 346). Foucault's prose, Said argues, reflects "the eccentricity of [his] bleak and antihumanistic [...] view of man" (349). Said is willing to admit that Foucault's paralysis is somewhat undermined by the sense of achievement that a reader has when he reads Foucault's work, but he wonders, then, why Foucault, like all those he labels structuralists (Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida, for example), repeat their "gloomy insistence upon loss, upon man's unhappy—and seemingly eternal—insertion in a

¹²⁷ Edward Said, "*Abcedarium Culturae: Structuralism, Absence, Writing*," in Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism, ed. By John K. Simon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 343. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated AC.

language game that he can barely understand” (350). Concluding his essay, he compares structuralism and poetry as ways of thinking about humanity once we move beyond an Origin: while structuralism’s obsession with its own paralysis keeps it from recognizing its potential, poetry “seems better able to stand the air and to fill it with an unashamed pride of possession” (385).

This early essay is representative of Said’s stance on Foucault throughout his career, which was deeply appreciative but also distant. In later essays on Foucault, Said argues that Foucault came to believe in “an unremitting and unstoppable expansion of power favoring the administrators, managers, and technocrats of what he calls disciplinary society.”¹²⁸ Foucault’s late works, in other words, cancel the possibility of “beginning” once and for all. In his essay “Edward Said’s Literary Humanism,” Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan offers an anecdote that illustrates Said’s misgivings about Foucault’s radical stance. Radhakrishnan was first exposed to the televised debate between Chomsky and Foucault (concerning the nature of the human) as a student in Said’s 1982 summer course in critical theory at Northwestern. Radhakrishnan recalls that Foucault and Chomsky were in complete agreement concerning what political struggle is and should be all about, but that they varied greatly when it came to defining the human: Chomsky willing to assert the existence of the human, as well as concepts such as justice and freedom, as a priori categories; Foucault refusing to let these categories stand without radically historicizing them. According to Radhakrishnan, “Said, as he was presenting this text to us, made it very clear

¹²⁸ Edward Said, “Foucault and the Imagination of Power,” in Reflection on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 240-241.

whose side he was on. Quite predictably, despite his very real appreciation for Foucault, he was decidedly pro-Chomsky.”¹²⁹

Said’s investment in the human, or in the possibility of beginnings, groups him with Kermode and his need for fictional order: both are deeply committed to preserving the idea that humans shape the world, and thus that individual human actions can contribute to shaping the world in the future. But when we turn to the positive role that Foucault played for Said, we once again see Said taking a more progressive stance within that shared space. In Beginnings, Said’s reading of Foucault is much more positive. He notes “the positiveness of Foucault’s attitude from the beginning toward the loss of the subject as much as his explicitly methodological philosophy that determines the invigoration he communicates” (B, 293). This comment stands side by side with critical language from the original essay, for example that Foucault is “obsessed” with discontinuity. As a result, the chapter can seem pieced together at times. But Said clarifies his relationship with Foucault towards the end of Beginnings when he acknowledges, following Deleuze, that theory does not contain, it multiplies; and then goes on to assert that theory does not multiply indiscriminately, or without end. “Theory assumes the evident irregularity and discontinuity of knowledge,” he writes, “but goes on to elucidate or to produce the order of dispersion in which knowledge takes place” (378). Said frequently described his own criticism as having this sort of “negative-positive” dialectic. His discussion of “opposition” in “Secular Criticism,” “counterpoint” in “Reflections on Exile,” and “resistance” in Humanism and Democratic Criticism all contain a “deconstruction as a prelude to reconstruction” dynamic. Here, he writes that this dynamic allows Deleuze and Foucault to “rejoin the adversary

¹²⁹ R. Radhakrishnan, “Edward Said’s Literary Humanism,” *Cultural Critique*, 67, Fall 2007, p. 26.

epistemological current” found in Vico, Marx, and a host of others (378). In his later writings, Said would suggest that this moment of potential in Foucault was inspired by the events of May, 1968 in Paris.¹³⁰

Foucault’s influence on Beginnings is also apparent in the key terms that overlap in Said and Foucault’s work. In The Discourse on Language, Foucault lists four principles by which he feels intellectual work must abide if it wants to expose and undo the institutions that constrain discourse: reversal, discontinuity, specificity, and exteriority. Said makes these terms his own in Beginnings. He argues, for example, that contemporary literary scholars lack the training in languages and history that an older generation of philologists like Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer had. Whereas it was once possible to see oneself as part of a well-defined dynastic tradition, “the problem we face today [...] is a problem of irregularity, of *discontinuity* [my emphasis]” (8). At the beginning of his second chapter, Said writes that Swift was capable of seeing language and politics as “reversible processes,” i.e., Swift refused to accept that the contemporary institutions of language and politics were transcendent and unchanging (30). Said also emphasizes exteriority in his opening chapter, when he locates intention in the realm of writing, rather than within an author. These terms were important to Said throughout his career, and none of them fit comfortably with Kermode’s project in Sense of an Ending.

Said ends the Beginnings version of “Abecedarium Culturae” with a more transitional statement than the one that appeared in Modern French Criticism. He had previously compared structuralism and poetry’s abilities to deal with a world of beginnings and found the former wanting. Here, he again invokes structuralism’s paralysis, but adds,

¹³⁰ See “Foucault and the Imagination of Power.”

“as we saw in chapter 4, between the presence in Western Europe of the classical novel and the crisis of discontinuity represented by Foucault and the structuralists there intervenes an intentional process, a logic of writing, and of making texts, which *took place*. In its richness this process meant very much more than precedence: it involved rethought forms of continuity, permanence, appropriation, vision, and revision” (343). The structuralist vision, in other words, is not the only possible outcome of the abandonment of the classical novel’s desire to add to the world around it. Foucault, as well as several critics and novelists, show possibilities for positive, humanistic writing within the world of texts. To put it in terms of Stevens’ “Snowman”: Said’s structuralists are the listeners beholding “the nothing that is,” but as we will learn in the last chapter, Vico shows us the possibilities and responsibilities that come with beholding “nothing that is not there.”¹³¹ In the final chapter, then, Said not only uses Vico to sum up his own work, but to begin one final time, this time moving beyond the boundaries of his own book. He finishes by listing a number of intellectual projects that his work in Beginnings seems to have suggested, and then writes, “these are studies to which I hope our moral will shall be equal—if in part *this* beginning has fulfilled its purpose” (381).

The Vichian structure in Beginnings was a key feature for reviewers, most of whom were sympathetic to the book. Many pointed out that Said doesn’t theorize his own ability to begin, which is based on a commitment to the value of human will. In keeping with Vico,

¹³¹ In an interview in 1986, Said commented that he has never made much of Stevens, and explains that his critical work has focused more on “proclamatory” genres like the novel than lyric poetry. Still, Said invites this reference to Stevens as he includes him at one or two important moments in “A Meditation on Beginnings” (49, 78). This is another way to distinguish Said and Kermode, then, as Stevens’ poetics fundamentally shaped A Sense of an Ending. For Said on lyric poetry and Stevens, see the interview with Said in Criticism and Society (143). For the importance of Stevens to A Sense of an Ending, see Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 28-60.

Said doesn't feel that he needs to. The value of Said's commitment to beginning must be proven like the value of Vico's "verum-factum principle": by writing it out. The most negative review came from Jonathan Culler, who refused to accept the validity of this Vichian shift. "[Said] never succeeds in demonstrating that individual voices, intentions, acts of will, ought to be or can coherently be treated as crucial sources of authority," writes Culler, adding: "What is required is not a 'sense' of the individual's authority but an argument."¹³² Sympathetic reviewers like Hayden White and J. Hillis Miller, both of whom published reviews in an issue of *Diacritics* devoted to Said's book, emphasized the wide-ranging and penetrating analyses that Said's method enabled him to produce over the theoretical difficulties that it produced. This is not to say these difficulties did not exist, or were not important. Miller, for example, points out that Said's reliance on Vico essentially historicizes the tension between origins and beginnings, and suggests that Said's book is evidence of a continuity within Western history, rather than something radically new. Unlike Culler, "theorizing" the new was less important to Miller than Said's enactment of it, thus his positive review.

The innovation that Miller, White, and others rightly saw in Said's text places Beginnings within the "adversary epistemological current" that Said names, which includes Vico, Foucault, Chomsky, and others. But in the mid-70s, Said asserted a sort of "mapping" relationship between aesthetic and political works, such as the one he asserted in his first book, Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (1966), where he writes, "The trouble with unrestrained and militant egoism as Conrad saw it was that it becomes an

¹³² Jonathan Culler, [Review of Beginnings: Intention and Method], *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Jul., 1978), 584.

imperialism of ideas, which easily converts itself into the imperialism of nations.”¹³³ This is roughly the same relationship between criticism and politics that Kermode saw: he writes, for example, that fascism is the “ideological expression” of irrationalism in art. In his essay “Beginnings Again,” Michael Wood suggests that Said’s early work is important for illuminating his later writing, but also argues that Said’s thinking about the relationship between ideas and politics changed over the years. “Said’s later argument [...] was not that ‘an imperialism of ideas easily converts itself into the imperialism of nations,’” he writes, “but that the imperialism of nations makes profound and effective (and often unobserved) use of the imperialism of ideas.”¹³⁴ I would tweak Wood’s formulation of Said’s later position to make it clear that the relationship between political and aesthetic imperialism was a two-way street. But Wood is certainly right in his characterization of the way that Said’s thinking about this issue changed during his career. In fact, even up through the early 80’s, Said felt that his political and literary critical lives were separate, and that they needed to be brought together. Addressing the issue in two different interviews—one in 1976, after Beginnings came out; the other in 1986, when he had already begun to work on the material that would become Culture and Imperialism (1991)—Said states that his commitment to both literature and politics had led him to feel that he was leading a divided or “schizophrenic” life *until recently*.¹³⁵ It seems that through the mid-80s, he constantly felt that he was in the process of overcoming this division. This effort at bringing the political and literary together will be the focus of my next section.

¹³³ Edward Said, Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography, 140.

¹³⁴ Michael Wood, “Beginnings Again,” in Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation, ed. Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 61.

¹³⁵ See the interview with Said in Diacritics (Vol, 6, No. 3, Autumn, 1976), 36. And in Criticism in Society (New York: Methuen, 1987), 133.

MAKING IT POLITICAL

William Spanos has commented that Said's "Reflections on American 'Left' Literary Criticism" (1978) "marked the beginning of the end for deconstruction's hegemony in America."¹³⁶ In his essay, Said wonders why literary critics talk about their work as if it had radical political consequences. "A visitor from another world," he writes, "would surely be perplexed were he to overhear a so-called old critic calling the new critics dangerous. What, this visitor would ask, are they dangers to? The state? The mind? Authority?"¹³⁷ Said's point is that contemporary criticism has become hermetic: it reproduces itself without paying attention to connections between criticism and the world, i.e., the conditions in which it exists in the first place. In place of this kind of isolated work, Said recommends "affiliative criticism," which he says must be "generated out of genuine historical research (and I mean that critics are to feel themselves making discoveries, making unknown things known) and [...] ultimately fixed for its goals upon understanding, analyzing, and contending with the management of power and authority within the culture" (RAL, 175).

I want to pause for a moment to pay close attention to the way that Said describes "affiliative criticism" in the quote above. Note the repetition in "making discoveries, making unknown things known." What's the difference between the two phrases? Also: "the management of power and authority." There are subtle differences between power and

¹³⁶ William Spanos, The Legacy of Edward W. Said (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 200.

¹³⁷ Edward Said, "Reflections on American 'Left' Literary Criticism," in The World, the Text, and the Critic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 160. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated RAL.

authority, but would the sentence be much different if one had been left out? I ask these questions not to accuse Said of being wordy, but because I think the passage is characteristic of nearly all the descriptions that Said provides of politically responsible literary criticism throughout his career: the descriptions themselves are expansive and at times even unwieldy. Earlier in the essay on American “left” criticism, for example, he offers the following description of Gramsci’s work:

what I have in mind is the kind of analytic pluralism proposed by Gramsci for dealing with historical-cultural blocks, for seeing culture and art as belonging not to some free-floating ether or to some rigidly governed domain or iron determinism, but to some large intellectual endeavor—systems and currents of thought—connected in complex ways to doing things, to accomplishing certain things, to force, to social class and economic production, to diffusing ideas, values, and world pictures. (RAL, 169-170)

Note again that Said repeats himself with slight variations (“to doing things, to accomplishing certain things”), and also begins lists that seem like they could extend well beyond the sentence—to infinity, in fact. Readers will find passages like this easily in Said’s work. Said describes his criticism this way because this is the way the criticism was supposed to work: it should be as expansive, dynamic, and unsettling as possible. Said’s descriptions might be unwieldy, in other words, but that’s only because they mirror knowledge itself.

What, then, is the relationship between this kind of expansive knowledge and politics? What is the value of Said’s “affiliative criticism” vis-à-vis criticism that makes grand political claims but remains apart from quotidian reality? Said provides his best

answer in Culture and Imperialism. He does not simply say that Vichian criticism will inspire a more complex, more sympathetic set of political policies, but again, the emphasis here should be on “simply.” Said finds a model for politically integrated criticism in Gramsci’s essay on the “Southern Question,” particularly his writing on Piero Gobetti in the essay’s final pages. For Gramsci, Gobetti represents a useful position, as he is a radical anti-fascist liberal, which means that he is responsive to the proletariat despite the fact that he is not a communist. Gramsci notes that other communists criticized him for not fighting against Gobetti’s ideas, but argues that Gobetti is actually an ally. Gramsci is a communist, and recognizes the value of intellectuals taking up radical proletarian positions. But intellectuals, he says, are a very slow moving group, and cannot be expected to adopt radical positions en masse. It makes no sense, in other words, to criticize Gobetti for not being a hardline communist, because hardliners are an exception. Within the mass of intellectuals, however, there are still opportunities for single intellectuals to create breaks and orient themselves towards the industrial proletariat, and in so doing create the foundation for a larger mass movement in that direction. Gobetti, for Gramsci, was one of these intellectuals.

In Gramsci’s text, a question lingers concerning the role of the proletariat in the coming merger of North and South. The “traditional terrain” on which the Southern Question had been debated, for Gramsci, was determined by Giustino Fortunato and Benedetto Croce, intellectuals determined to keep problems of the South contained, or make sure they didn’t become revolutionary. Gramsci writes that *L’Ordine Nuovo* and the Turin communists have broken from Croce and Fortunata’s influence, and have declared the urban proletariat as “the modern protagonist of Italian history, and hence also of the

Southern question.”¹³⁸ But he also writes that the Turin communists have “succeeded in modifying [...] their mental outlook” through contact with left intellectuals like Gobetti. In other words, the Turin communists are willing to consider the possibility that Italian unity will occur under conditions specific to the nation’s history, rather than according to a Marxist script. Given this “modification,” it is somewhat confusing when, towards the end of the passage, Gramsci writes as though the prime actor on the stage of Italian history is still the urban proletariat: “the proletariat will destroy the Southern agrarian bloc insofar as it succeeds [...] in organizing increasingly significant masses of poor peasants into autonomous and independent formations” (185). We can ask, then, what sort of “alliance” the workers and peasants would form? At some points, it seems as though the shape of the alliance will be mostly dictated by the proletariat; at others, it seems as though Gramsci wants the union to be reciprocal.

Said, however, clearly reads Gramsci as being in favor of reciprocity. More than this, he seems to read him as holding Gobetti up as a model for how intellectuals can participate in politics more generally. Said writes, “[Gobetti’s] political and social significance for Gramsci’s analysis of the southern question [...] is that he accentuates the need for a social formation to develop, elaborate, build upon the break instituted by his work, and by his insistence that intellectual effort itself furnishes the link between disparate, apparently autonomous regions of human history” (50). Gramsci does write about the need for a mass movement to develop out of the break created by Gobetti, but in response to criticisms that he was being too lenient with him. As I suggested above, it is unclear whether Gramsci felt

¹³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” in An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935, edited by David Forgacs (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 184.

that the specific movement inspired by Gobetti's break was important on its own, or simply instrumental in the broader picture of a worker's revolution. What is clear is that for Said, Gramsci's pages on Piero Gobetti play a foundational role. The idea that an intellectual can form a break with traditional ways of thinking, and then that social formations can develop out of that break illustrates a connection between intellectual and political work. Like Gramsci, Said is careful to avoid stating that the intellectual must *lead* the people to new political formation. He writes merely that intellectuals "are necessary to the process" of cultural formations (50). Still, the value of a more complex, more expansive kind of criticism is precisely that it will eventually produce similar kinds of governments and societies.

Looked at from this angle, Said's interest in combining politics and aesthetics becomes almost incidental; that is, politics and aesthetics become important as examples of "apparently autonomous regions of human history." Any criticism that combines "apparently autonomous regions"—I introduced this sort of criticism as utopian in the introduction to this chapter—would have as good a claim as Said's to making an important historical intervention. But there are two points to make about this claim. First, the particular shape that the work takes matters. Earlier, I suggested that After the Last Sky (which was modeled on John Berger and Jean Mohr's Another Way of Telling (1982)), combines images and text in a new way, or makes them equal participants in a conversation rather than subordinating the text to the images. If After the Last Sky is a conversation between equal partners, then what is Culture and Imperialism or Orientalism? What kind of world does Said's work inspire? Second, criticism's connection with "the real world" still matters. As Said states in the opening pages of Orientalism, "the

Orient” doesn’t have any stable geographical reference, but there are people living in the places that the phrase designates, and global power relations inescapably affect these people’s lives. For Said, understanding ideas about “the Orient” or any geographical place means understanding the power relations that shape it. The real point to make about Said’s brand of political criticism, then, is that it models the kind of world it wants to create, but it also stays connected to the real world all the time.

JAMESON AND SAID; TERMINOLOGY AND EFFORT

I will demonstrate that Said’s literary criticism “stays connected to the real world” by comparing his work with Fredric Jameson’s. Said and Jameson’s criticism can be put into conversation fairly easily, as they are near exact contemporaries, they have a fairly wide overlap in terms of the writers and genres on which they focus, and both write politically and theoretically informed work. One of Jameson’s earliest essays, “Metacommentary” (1971), outlines the critical methodology he has used throughout his career, and shows a significant degree of overlap with Said’s basic methods. In “Metacommentary,” Jameson likens his method to Freud’s, writing that metacommentary must pay attention to “the distinction between symptom and repressed idea, between manifest and latent content, between the disguise and the message disguised.”¹³⁹ Aesthetic works organize components of our concrete social lives such as “words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, [and] activities” into shapes, but these components, or “raw materials,” are never initially formless. Rather, “all stylization, all abstraction in the form, ultimately expresses some profound inner logic in its content, and is ultimately dependent for its existence on the

¹³⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Metacommentary,” *PMLA*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Jan., 1971), 15. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated M.

structures of the raw materials themselves” (M, 16). Said frequently argued for a similar kind of critical approach, for example in Humanism and Democratic Criticism, where he argues that textual interpretation requires treating texts as discrete objects, but then “moving [...], by dint of expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which [texts] exist, to their historical situations and the way in which certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some currents, some historical and social formulations of their context” (HDC, 61).

Said and Jameson never engaged in an extended dialogue, but they did respond to each other’s work throughout their careers. In The Political Unconscious (1981), Jameson agrees with Said that Nostromo concludes with a turn towards autoreferentiality, but Jameson argues that this turn is connected to the arrival of capitalism in Sulaco. This arrival, Jameson writes, is the “concrete historical content” of the dialectic that Said reveals in Beginnings.¹⁴⁰ This is a fair comment, as Said does not concentrate on history in Beginnings, and Jameson’s reading of Conrad in The Political Unconscious convincingly connects the novel’s form to capitalism. But Said’s reactions to The Political Unconscious might make us wonder how “concrete” Jameson’s work really is. Judging from his published remarks, Said initially liked Jameson’s The Political Unconscious but grew more critical with time. In “Travelling Theory,” originally published in *Raritan* in 1982, Said cites Jameson’s book as an “antidote” to theory’s tendency to close itself off to the world around it (WTC, 242). In “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” also published in 1982, Said provides a longer reading, concluding more negatively that Jameson, like Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton, are in “cloistral seclusion from the inhospitable

¹⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 279. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated PU.

world of real politics.”¹⁴¹ Said reaffirms this last judgment in “History, Literature, and Geography” (1995) when he writes that The Political Unconscious consists of “beautiful ideal structures, more medieval and scholastic than they are accurate soundings in the turbulence of our time.”¹⁴²

We can see the accuracy of Said’s comments if we look at Jameson’s work with imperialism, specifically his essay “Modernism and Imperialism,” published along with essays by Said and Terry Eagleton in 1990. Jameson’s essay has much in common with Said’s work in Culture and Imperialism. For both, their interest is not in how novels “depict” colonial possessions, but the way imperialism exists at a deep, structural level of writers’ imaginations. This means that they focus on literature that has seemingly little to do with imperialism: Forster (Howard’s End) and Woolf for Jameson, Austen, Camus, and others for Said. In a sense, both Jameson and Said are interested in investigating imperialism through Jameson’s method of “metacommentary.”

The way that imperialism insinuates itself into modernist literature is also broadly similar for both critics. Both assume that their modernist writers are trying to convey a sense of their lived reality. Said puts it well when he quotes Conrad talking about how difficult it is to “convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence” (CI, 23). But both Forster and Conrad run into trouble because the epoch they are trying to depict is an imperial one. Jameson includes an enlightening discussion on the role of infinity in Howard’s End (1910): he sees the ever-expansive desires of the British Empire as a context that forever frustrates attempts to represent it. But both argue that imperialism frustrates

¹⁴¹ Edward Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” in Reflection on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 136.

¹⁴² Edward Said, “History, Literature, and Geography” in Reflection on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 471.

a *total* representation of the modern world because it occludes the “persons of the colonized” from the colonizer’s view.¹⁴³ Jameson argues that the need to include an “unrepresentable totality” creates what we know as “modernist style.” Said reads both Austen and Conrad as inevitably part of their imperial moments, which means that they enact imperial scripts in their fiction. But they are also set apart from other authors because of their self-awareness. In Heart of Darkness (1899), for example, Conrad situates Marlowe’s narration on board a ship, using the world outside the ship to symbolize what Conrad intuitively knew existed (the lives of the colonized people) but was unable to include in his fiction because his imagination was circumscribed by imperialism.

Distinctions between Jameson and Said begin to appear when we consider the responses they feel modernism makes available to imperialism. For Jameson, this response is closely associated with his concept of a “sensorium,” a word he uses sparingly but in important moments. In “Modernism and Imperialism,” after Jameson analyzes “modernist aestheticism” as the result of an imperial environment, he writes, “if ‘infinity’ (and ‘imperialism’) is bad or negative in Forster, its perception, as a bodily and poetic process, is no longer that, but rather a positive achievement and an enlargement of our sensorium: so that the beauty of the new figure seems oddly unrelated to the social and historical judgment which is its content” (MI, 58). This sounds like the familiar point that an *account* of something ugly or undesirable may be beautiful, i.e., aesthetics and politics may be divorced from each other. In this short essay, Jameson offers this formulation as a compensation for imperialism, which is inadequate even by Jameson’s own standards. In

¹⁴³ Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism” in Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 58. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated MI.

the closing pages of The Political Unconscious, he rejects this sort of compensation, labeling it “liberal”—because the beauty and the ugliness can unproblematically exist side by side—and writing that it is “not possible for any world-view [...] that takes politics seriously” (289).

He offers a more rigorous formulation in The Political Unconscious when he discusses Conrad’s “aestheticizing strategy” (PU, 230). For Jameson, this is a strategy by which Conrad *reworks* the world that he includes in his fiction. Jameson provides an example from Conrad’s Typhoon (1902), where a ship is described as “floundering towards [a storm] like an exhausted creature driven to its death” (PU, 230). The ship has an allegorical meaning, which Jameson interprets as “the civilized world on its way to doom” (231). But the language of the passage is so visually intense that the act of perception overwhelms the allegorical meaning. This subversion substitutes a “sensorium” for a more traditional representational space. The sensorium, in turn, “suggests senses and forms of libidinal gratification as unimaginable to us as the possession of additional senses, or the presence of nonearthly colors in the spectrum” (231).¹⁴⁴ In Nostromo, Conrad creates an auditory rather than a visual sensorium, but the effect of subversion is the same. In both cases, aesthetics engages with and refashions the ideology of the text, rather than merely co-existing with it.

¹⁴⁴ It is worth noting here that Jameson’s formulation of Conrad’s achievement resembles a strand of Orientalism that Said picks out in his earlier book. In Orientalism, Said had noted that thinkers since Schlegel have looked forward to Europe being regenerated by Asia. After an example of Conrad’s intense perceptual language, Jameson writes “Such passages virtually fashion a new space and a new perspective, a new sense of depth, out of sheer color, in that perhaps less like Western Impressionism than certain of its Slavic equivalents, in particular the work of the Ukrainian painter Kiundzhi” (PU, 231). Ukraine is a European country, but Jameson’s specifying that Kiundzhi is “Slavic” marks the painter as Eastern, and signifies the innovation of Conrad’s achievement in the passage.

Jameson argues that these aesthetic developments can have political effects through the critic's language. Earlier in The Political Unconscious, he explains that he wants to establish a connection between Conrad's aesthetic style and daily political life by "inventing a description" that adequately fits both. This description, he writes, "allows us to think these two distinct realities together in a meaningful way" (PU, 226). In The Political Unconscious, Jameson creates this connection when he explains that because it is based on a feeling of solidarity, class consciousness has the same sort of revolutionary potential that literary representation does—not merely working class consciousness, but all class consciousness. Even the ruling classes, when they band together, show the potential to unite with others to end class warfare, and to enter "the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopia or classless society" (291). In other words, the potential for a radically new kind of human experience exists in aesthetic production just as it does in a historical reality, i.e., class consciousness.

Given the role that Jameson assigns to his own language, I sense a problem in the way he describes the political potential of an intense perceptual experience. There is something hedonistic about the language that Jameson uses to describe the effect of reading Conrad's language, particularly in the phrase "libidinal gratification." The resources that Conrad presents here seem to draw readers into their individual sensual experiences. This sense of solipsism is strengthened when we recall the picture of Utopia that Jameson provides in Late Marxism (1990). Moving beyond the need to secure survival in a competitive environment, Jameson writes, leads us into a Utopia where human beings can grow wild like plants. This Utopia, Jameson writes, may look something like the opening scenes of Robert Altman's film Popeye (1981), full of "the neurotics, compulsives,

obsessives, paranoids, and schizophrenics whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and fauna of 'human nature' itself."¹⁴⁵ This scene in Altman's film, I think, is a possible depiction of a world consisting of people drunk on perception: dilapidated houses, half-sunken ships, and individuals following their eccentricities without much awareness of people around them. Even if it is just a figure, the scene seems at odds with Jameson's stated commitment to collectivity.

More importantly, there are problems with the importance that Jameson attaches to the capacity of "description" (which he also calls an "analytic terminology" or "code," and which we might call "theory") to connect distinct realities (PU, 225). The first is that Jameson's work sometimes turns inward and focuses more on its own argumentation than on political realities. "Modernism and Imperialism," for example, reads like a geometric proof at times. Jameson "proves" his reading of Forster by comparing it with a reading of Ulysses (1922). Joyce's novel introduces an important new idea to Jameson's essay; namely, that authors who write from "hybrid" positions like Ireland might be able to use modernist tools to create a new sort of reality, neither purely coercive nor purely dominant. This is an important suggestion that again has an interesting overlap with Said's work on exile, but Jameson frames his reading of Joyce as *proof of his reading of Forster*. He emphasizes this at the conclusion of his reading where, after arguing that Joyce has "turned the imperial relationship inside out," he returns to his own argument (MI, 64). He concludes: "The traces of imperialism can therefore be detected in Western modernism, and are indeed constitutive of it; but we must not look for them in the obvious places, in content or in representation. Save in the special case of Irish literature, and of Joyce, they will be

¹⁴⁵ Fredric Jameson, Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic (London: Verso, 1990), 102.

detected spatially, as formal symptoms, within the structure of First World modernist texts themselves” (MI, 64). In keeping with Jameson’s argument about the importance of thinking Imperialism and modernist form together, this turn inward may be the whole point. But it also seems demotivating. Surely an essay that ends by asserting the possibility of challenging imperialism would be more prone to inspire further action than one that ends by reasserting its own thesis.

Jameson also runs the risk of distorting reality by focusing too much on theory. This issue has been at the heart of the discussion about Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” essay, published in 1986. The essay has been discussed at length in the 25 years or so since its publication, so I will not summarize it here, but the most well-known response to Jameson’s essay—Aijaz Ahmad’s “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’”—accused Jameson of distortion through theory. Ahmad’s criticisms are generally convincing. He points out that Jameson’s conceptual category of “Third World” is impossibly broad, as it flattens out important differences between the cultures and traditions he discusses. Ahmad also wonders why Jameson is so intent on pointing out the radical difference between the First and Third Worlds when one might just as easily focus on the overlap. Jameson responded to Ahmad, claiming that his argument in the “Third-World Literature” essay was meant to dramatize the loss of a commitment to narrative allegory in the American academy. This makes sense, but fails to explain the extremity of Jameson’s language or theoretical ambitions. A “cognitive

aesthetics of third-world literature” is not necessary to point out an absence in the American academy.¹⁴⁶

There is also a broader issue that Ahmad fails to consider, which is that Jameson had partially defused his objections in advance. Before his argument that the libidinal investment in Lu Xun’s fiction should be read in political terms, Jameson offers the following qualification: “It is, I hope, unnecessary to add that what follows is speculative and very much subject to correction by specialists: it is offered as a methodological example rather than a ‘theory’ of Chinese culture” (TWL, 72). This claim could only be made by someone more interested in theory than political realities. It also sharpens the contrast between Jameson and Said. The issue of doing justice to political realities was one that Said dealt with frequently. It came up most famously in his debate with Bernard Lewis concerning Orientalism, when Lewis criticized Said for poor translations and a lack of scholarly knowledge about the cultures he discussed. Said’s response was not to insist on the validity of his theory despite Lewis’ objections, but to defend his specific translations and conclusions. In his introduction to Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis, he notes that Auerbach was similarly concerned with defending his specific claims and conclusions. For Said, as for Auerbach, their broad claims were based entirely on the detailed research and scholarship that went into their work: if enough of the details could be successfully challenged, the broad claims would fall. It is to their credit that both Auerbach and Said were largely able to defend their broad theories throughout their careers.

¹⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), 88. Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated TWL.

My last comment on Jameson's theoretical approach to imperialism is that it seems practically counterproductive. Readers agree on the fact that Jameson's essay had good intentions. Ahmad writes this. Gayatri Spivak calls the essay "well-meaning" despite being critical of it.¹⁴⁷ In his response to Ahmad, Jameson reasserts that he feels the essay had a positive effect because of its emphasis on teaching and reading third world literature, among other things. In fact, Jameson has been one of the most wide-ranging of American scholars, both in terms of the genres and cultural traditions he brings into his work. But as I have suggested, this breadth is limited by Jameson's emphasis on theory at the expense of political realities. In response to Ahmad, Jameson writes that he senses a general reluctance to embrace the totalizing aims of theory; that theory is by its very nature "repressive and an exercise of power."¹⁴⁸ This is right, I think, but needs more. If theory by its nature runs the risk of being repressive, then theorizing about the "Third World" from the "First World" seems certain to elicit resistance rather than productive engagement. Jameson acknowledges this danger, but is unable to avoid it.

For Said, writers from the center of the Empire do not resist imperialism directly. They can't, as imperialism is too deeply ingrained in their collective consciousness. What great writers like Conrad can do however, is see that the beliefs and habits that make it impossible for them to imagine a non-imperial world are contingent. In other words, things could be different, even if Conrad, Austen, and all the rest are unable to make them so. What Said sees in the fiction, then, is inspiration. In Freud and the Non-European (2003) he gets more specific:

¹⁴⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Death of a Discipline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 66.

¹⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, "A Brief Response," *Social Text*, No. 17 (Autumn, 1987), 27.

The fact that later writers keep returning to Conrad means that his work, by virtue of its uncompromising Eurocentric vision, is precisely what gives it its antinomian force, the intensity and power wrapped inside its sentence, which demand an equal and opposite response to meet them head on in a confirmation, a refutation, or an elaboration of what they present.¹⁴⁹

Here, it is not just Conrad's powerful recognition of contingency that inspires a response, but the power of his language. Like Jameson, Said concentrates on modernist language, but the resistance comes from elsewhere. The language calls for an equal and opposite force that creates resistance. In other words, cultural resistance to imperialism works roughly according to Newton's Third Law of Motion. Said valued Conrad not only because he could see the way imperialism works, but because he could see it so broadly. This breadth in turn calls forth equally broad responses, such as those that Said discusses in the third chapter of Culture and Imperialism, from C.L.R. James, George Antonius, Ranajit Guha, and others.

The impulse behind Said bringing these two groups of writers together, I think, was the same as the impulse that drove Said and Barenboim to found the West Eastern Divan: they wanted to take people in conflict and bring them together in a sort of temporary Utopian collective. For Said, these connections are all created by human effort. Recall that when Said was describing Piero Gobetti's relation to his project, he wrote that for Gobetti, "intellectual effort itself furnishes the link between disparate, apparently autonomous regions of human history." This tells us more about Said than Gobetti or Gramsci, I think, but it provides a simple but fundamental point of contrast with Jameson: Jameson connects different types of reality through an "analytic terminology," Said does so through the more

¹⁴⁹ Edward Said, Freud and the Non-European (London: Verso, 2003), 26.

humanistic category of “intellectual effort.” According to Said, this is the same quality that holds together Auerbach’s Mimesis. Auerbach “offers no system, no short cut to what he puts before us as a history of the representation of reality of Western literature,” Said writes (HDC, 117). The only thing that holds Mimesis together is Erich Auerbach’s intellect, buttressed by “learning, dedication, and moral purpose” (117). Said uses “effort” in a different way in the 2003 introduction to Orientalism, when he writes that the Orient and Occident are ontologically unstable, but are “made up of human effort” (O, xvii). Here, Said places his and Auerbach’s work as critics in line with human endeavors in general. Said’s broadest wish for his criticism is that it, too, will be met by an equal force on behalf of its readers, thereby renewing our commitment to learning and moral purpose. For many readers and critics that have taken inspiration from Said, myself included, his criticism has done exactly that.

But there are some asymmetries in the grouping that Said creates in Culture and Imperialism. One unavoidable asymmetry is temporal. Jameson and Said agree that during the modernist period, tensions within imperialism existed not between colonizers and colonized, but between the colonizers themselves, e.g., Britain and France. The response to imperialism *from the periphery* would have to wait until post-World War II. At this point fiction from the imperial center also changes, though as Said makes clear with his reading of Camus, it by no means becomes anti-imperial altogether. Another, more important imbalance concerns the amount of attention that Said pays to literature from the imperial centers and periphery. At times, even when he moves into the chapter on resistance literature, he seems unable to stop providing readings that demonstrate the West’s imperial imagination. A page into the “Resistance and Opposition” chapter, Said provides a

reading of Gide's L'Immoraliste (1902) that suggests that like most Western writers, Gide includes the people of Africa in his work merely as passive objects, ready to be used by the Western characters as an exploration of suppressed instincts. A few pages later, he provides a long reading of Forster's A Passage to India (1924). All together, there are more pages on Forster in the chapter than there are on Lamming, Ngugi, and Salih combined. On top of this, Said's discussion of the latter writers is an uncharacteristic thematic sketch, grouped under the heading "Themes of Resistance Culture."

I also see a general disjunction in the degree to which Said's chosen authors foreground imperialism in their work. Said's readings of Western authors require that he carefully work through the text, elaborating the ways in which imperialism insinuates itself into them at fundamental, formal levels. With the authors and intellectuals he reads from former colonies, resistance is a primary theme of their work. He does not need to dig beneath the surface of Frantz Fanon's writing to find resistance the same way he needs to dig beneath Austen or, going back to Orientalism, any of the French Orientalists, to find imperial motives. There is an obvious explanation for this, which Said recognizes when he quotes Adorno, writing, "The language of the subjected, on the other hand, domination alone has stamped, so robbing them further of the justice promised by the un mutilated, autonomous word to all those free enough to pronounce it without rancor" (CI, 258). Said qualifies this quote, making it clear that he does not believe that all writers from imperialized zones must sound the same, or only repeat the same message over and over. But this at least suggests why a response to imperialism *within imperialized zones* would be different, or seem less modulated, than literature that believes it can hover above political realities. In the mid to late 1980s, when Said began collecting the materials that would

eventually appear in Culture and Imperialism, there was nowhere near the awareness or availability of post-colonial authors that there is today. In this setting, simply bringing these writers to Western attention was an important step. At this point, we also need to acknowledge that Said rushed to get the book into print after he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1991.

This adds up to an unfortunate lost opportunity, I think. The brilliance of Said's work combining politics and aesthetics comes from its insistence that the two realms are never separate. One of the reasons that the Mansfield Park reading is so well known is that before Said, Austen's work had not been connected to imperialism so clearly.¹⁵⁰ His reading makes us wonder how many other texts with merely passing references to imperialism actually draw support from it on a more subterranean level. This awareness of the degree to which we are saturated with politics, and imperialism in particular, is one of the broadest reasons that Said is an important author beyond the confines of English departments or universities. But if imperialism works through this method of saturation, then it seems to me that resistance should work the same way; that is, that it should exist not only in the conscious, highly developed way that we see in intellectuals like Fanon and James, but also at a more common level, in places where we would typically not think to look for it, such as popular fiction or fiction that seems to confirm rather than challenge social norms. One of these places, I would suggest, is Bharati Mukherjee's novels and stories.

¹⁵⁰ This is not to say that Sir Thomas' Antiguan holdings had never been discussed in critical literature. Avrom Fleishman's A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis (1967), for example, discusses Sir Thomas' holdings at length, but uses them as an example of the way in which Austen integrated social and political circumstances into her novels. He does not read Mansfield Park into a history of imperialism, as Said does.

Mukherjee's name comes up in Aijaz Ahmad's response to Said in In Theory, specifically when Ahmad is rejecting Said's concept of "adversarial internationalization," i.e., the idea that intellectuals who come from the global periphery to the metropolis frequently oppose the dominant structure in some significant way. "The vast majority of immigrants and visitors who go from 'the peripheries to the 'Western centre' in the United States," Ahmad writes, "either take no part in politics and scholarly endeavor or turn out to be right-wing people, well represented in the field of literature by Bharati Mukherjee."¹⁵¹ When asked about this claim in an interview in 1997, Mukherjee responded that Ahmad was ill informed, and asserted her liberal political credentials.¹⁵² This biographical response is understandable given Ahmad's claim ("right wing people"), but there is also a broader discussion to be had about her fiction. While many critics also see a kind of pro-American nationalism at work in her novels and stories, I see more conflicted texts that create a sort of resistance in spite of themselves. Thus, I want to finish this chapter by proving a reading of one of Mukherjee's central novels, Jasmine (1989), and suggesting that her work could fit into a revised and expanded third chapter of Culture and Imperialism, one that would extend the Vichian self-making that Said demonstrates in the second chapter to a new realm within the global periphery.

Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine, and Chaos

Dipesh Chakrabarty's Provincializing Europe (1999) focuses on the question of how Western historians should represent groups of people (colonized populations, for example)

¹⁵¹ Ahmad, In Theory, 207-208.

¹⁵² See, for example, "Holders of the World: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee [with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie]" in Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee, edited by Bradley C. Edwards (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 89.

that they had previously considered unable to represent themselves. One particular question he considers is how Western historians, writing from within a secular intellectual tradition, can write about groups of people for whom divine beliefs function as a daily reality. Chakrabarty begins by recalling Ranajit Guha's critique of Eric Hobsbawm's category of the "prepolitical." Peasants (Chakrabarty uses the word to denote a whole range of "non-modern" beliefs and practices, as well as the historical figures), for Hobsbawm, represented those who had not yet "come to terms with the secular-institutional logic of the political."¹⁵³ Hobsbawm's "not yet" indicated the inevitability of the "modern" historicist viewpoint from which he regarded the peasant. Guha argued that the peasant's belief in the divine was also a form of modern politics, and in so doing sought to expand the conceptions of modernity and politics. Chakrabarty asks about the consequences of Guha's critique. Once Western historians accept that gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings are as modern as historicism—in other words, as real in terms of being ways that people make sense of the world, and in which they ask questions of power and justice—how do they go about writing about them from within a Western epistemological framework?

Chakrabarty responds that the Western historian who accepts the significance of this question must engage in a constant negotiation. She may study religious belief as a representative of another time and place, and make it understandable by reading it into contemporary secular thought. But she may also ask whether this sort of belief helps us understand aspects of modern existence, or how this approach to understanding persists in

¹⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated PE.

her own time. In the later chapters of his book, Chakrabarty performs this kind of double vision with a number of Bengali cultural practices. In Rabindranath Tagore's writing, he sees both a realist depiction of the poverty and ignorance in rural villages, as well as a desire to romanticize them as emblems of "the Bengali heart" (PE, 153). In the Bengali practice of *adda*, which he defines as "the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations," he sees all of the signs of a conflicted modernity, such as uncertainty concerning class status and the role of women (PE, 181). He also notes that Bengali writing is full of nostalgic references to the practice and its value in Bengali culture. In his attempts to present these features of Bengali life as both historical and nonrational, Chakrabarty enacts his suggestions concerning how to write heterogeneous history. In other words, he shows us what we can learn *of* Bengali culture, as well as what we may learn *from* it.

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction asks questions similar to those in Chakrabarty's work, but from a different direction. Rather than how Western scholars may look to India, she asks how Indians look to the West. In Jasmine in particular, she portrays this encounter as a constant struggle, in particular the protagonist's struggle to shift from a mystical to a secular worldview. Mukherjee establishes this as the novel's central drama on the first page, when the narrator recalls an experience she had when she was seven years old: an astrologer foretells her future and she denies the prophecy. The astrologer is unconcerned with the young Jasmine's resistance, replying, "Suit yourself [...], what is to happen will happen."¹⁵⁴ He hits her and she falls, still furious with the astrologer for being so certain of

¹⁵⁴ Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989). Future references will be made parenthetically, abbreviated J.

her future. Despite his certainty, she insists that she will be able to control her life; that she won't merely be "a speck in the solar system" (3-4).

The particular struggle Mukherjee depicts is one that seeks to move *beyond* the mystical worldview of the village. This has led some critics to argue that the novel actually depicts the achievement of this transcendence, and to criticize it for being unrealistic or for unreflectively praising the U.S.¹⁵⁵ But Jasmine is a more complicated novel than this. As the novel continues, it becomes clear that Jasmine's "transition" is more a display of will than a reality. More than midway through the novel, when Jasmine has begun living with Taylor and Wylie Hayes (a Columbia physics professor and book editor), Mukherjee writes that Jasmine was experiencing so many new things that "the squatting fields of Hasnapur [the Indian village in which Jasmine was raised] receded fast" (174). This would seem to be an example of Jasmine shedding her past lives, but many pages earlier, before the action in the novel has left India, Mukherjee jumps forward and includes a 3-page conversation between Jasmine and Taylor in which Taylor is trying to comprehend Jasmine's belief in reincarnation. "If the universe is one room known only to God," claims Jasmine, "then God alone knows how to furnish it, how to populate it" (61). Taylor tries to convince Jasmine

¹⁵⁵ See the essay "Born Again American," in Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives (1993), for example. In the essay, Professor Gurleen Grewal echoes Ahmad's argument about Said, writing that Mukherjee's novel is out of touch with the reality of most Indian immigrants. The core of the novel, for Professor Grewal, is Jasmine's transition from an "ignorant, traditional, domestic" Third World Woman, to a liberated Western subject, in control of her own life. Professor Grewal argues that the sort of rapid change that Jasmine experiences during the novel is unlikely or even impossible for most people (and particularly women in the global periphery). Because Mukherjee depicts Jasmine as highly socially mobile, she repeats a particularly naïve version of the American Dream, one which asserts that everyone is free to be what he or she chooses. Gurleen Grewal, "Born Again American," in Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives, ed. Emmanuel Nelson (New York: Garland, 1993), 187.

that she is “more modern than that,” but it's clear from this conversation that she has not left her traditional beliefs behind, no matter how much she may want to (59).

Examples of this struggle between old and new recur throughout the novel. Jasmine's first husband insists that she become a modern woman, claiming at one point that the Jyoti (Jasmine's given name) that lived in the village is dead. Jasmine seems eager to agree with her husband, and readings of the novel that emphasize her *distance* from the village take this agreement at face value. But several pages before this, Jasmine indicates that traditional beliefs still affect her when she admits that she feels eclipsed by other girls she knew because they already had families. When Jasmine finds out that Taylor and Wylie have adopted their daughter, she thinks, “Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage” (170). Explaining her reluctance to eat later in the novel, Jasmine thinks, “A good Hasnapur [her village] wife doesn't eat just because she's hungry” (216). Individually, these may seem like insignificant moments, but their constant presence in the novel suggests that Jasmine's supposed rebirth is more like an ongoing conflict.

This idea draws support from the novel's conclusion, which is fundamentally contradictory. The astrologer—another remnant of Jasmine's life in India—follows Jasmine as she moves through her different lives. At one point, when Jasmine is at a fair in Iowa, he returns to “[cackle] his predictions over the cheery noises of the fairgrounds: foolish and wicked girl, did I not tell you you'd end up among aliens?” (203). He reappears for a final time on the penultimate page. Having decided to run away to California with Taylor, Jasmine feels empowered. Mukherjee writes, “Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove” (240). Jasmine then immediately experiences a moment of helplessness, and breaks down and cries on Taylor's

shoulder. "Then there is nothing I can do," she thinks (241). In other words, over the course of a few sentences, Jasmine has gone from a powerful assertion of her individual agency, to a complete abdication of it.

Many critics interpret moments like this as proof that Mukherjee's novel represents the condition of the immigrant: stuck between two worlds, at home in neither. For Said, this exilic position is one of freedom: being in between cultures not only means that one avoids a kind of provincialism, it also provides a unique vantage point for understanding each culture. Again, Mukherjee provides plenty of language in Jasmine to support this positive reading of exile, such as when she has Jasmine celebrate her ability to "[shuttle] between identities" (77). Blurbs that accompany Mukherjee's fiction celebrate this condition as an important new addition to American literature. One comment on the back cover of The Middleman and Other Stories (1988), for example, reads "What amazes me is her genius for kidnapping our culture, then returning it to us with a ruby in its ear, cardamon on its breath, gold threads of syncretism woven through its imagination."¹⁵⁶ These responses to her work are more or less in line with Mukherjee's own arguments in her essay "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!"¹⁵⁷

But these arguments are often not rigorous enough. First of all, they risk falling into a kind of Orientalism that Said demonstrated in European Romanticism, for example in Schlegel's claim that "Asia will regenerate Europe." This way of viewing hybridity runs the risk of using Asia for Europe's benefit. In terms of Chakrabarty's work, it asks what the West can learn *from* Asia without paying enough attention to what we learn *of* it. Second,

¹⁵⁶ Bharati Mukherjee, The Middleman and Other Stories (New York: Grove Press, 1988), Back Cover.

¹⁵⁷ New York Times Book Review, August 28, 1988.

the kind of dislocations that Jasmine experiences in the novel are complicated psychological processes with significant risks. Jacqueline Rose makes this point in her response to Said's "Freud and the Non-European" talk, which he originally gave in 2001. Said's goal in the lecture is to contrast the picture of monotheism that Freud establishes in Moses and Monotheism with the sort that Israel embraces at the current moment. Whereas Freud's picture of Moses—and thus religion he founded—is deliberately impure and decentered, Judaism for Israel has clearly defined lines. "[Moses'] non-Jewish, non-European history has now been erased," writes Said, "no longer to be found in so far as an official Jewish identity is concerned."¹⁵⁸ Rose agrees that Freud had a difficult and unresolved relationship with his own Jewishness. She also ties Said's thesis to a fault line that she sees in Zionism more broadly: between a belief that it is Zionism's mission to complete the Enlightenment project (with the nation of Israel) and a belief that Zionism must protect Jews' distinctiveness. She dissents when she argues that Freud was more subject to these tensions than Said seems to think he is. "We should see Freud as less purely the diagnostician of—more squarely *inside*—the dilemma of identity which he describes," she writes.¹⁵⁹ Broadening her point, she wonders whether Said's vision of an unreconciled complexity at the heart of identity—a vision that forms the horizon for much of Said's political and literary writing—might be unrealistic. Along with the possibilities of a cosmopolitan openness, historical fissures can also lead identities to "batten down, to go exactly the other way: towards dogma, the dangers of coercive and coercing forms of faith" (76). She reminds listeners that Moses and Monotheism, Said's central text in his

¹⁵⁸ Edward Said, Freud and the Non-European, 45.

¹⁵⁹ Jacqueline Rose, "Response to Edward Said," in Edward Said, Freud and the Non-European (London: Verso, 2003), 74. Future references will be made parenthetically in the text, abbreviated R.

discussion, is one of Freud's most violent texts, and notes, "the most historically attested response to trauma is to repeat it" (77). These suggestions suggest the risks that come with Chakrabarty's heterogeneous history when it moves beyond the university.

Bharati Mukherjee is not unaware of these dangers. Jasmine's language recognizes the violence associated with changing identities. Early in the book, Jasmine thinks that her past experience must be forgotten, "or else it will kill" (33). The process of remaking one's identity is also expressed in violent terms: "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). In an important scene in the middle of the novel, Jasmine murders a man who had raped her, after slicing her own tongue open. Surface level readings of the novel take Jasmine at her word: this violence is necessary for the "rebirth" that Jasmine experiences in the U.S. But the constant presence of Jasmine's past leads to the conclusion that the violence may be an expression of confusion. It may be Mukherjee registering the strength of the feelings caused by an unstable state, and the fact that they have, at times, no productive means of expression. At the end of the novel, Jasmine has not arrived at any stable sense of identity. Along with the contradiction I pointed out earlier with regards to Jasmine's agency, Mukherjee also recalls the image of her protagonist as a tornado, first introduced 40 pages earlier by the woman (Karin) from whom Jasmine essentially stole her lover in Iowa (Bud Ripplemayer). Karin's claim that Jasmine is "leaving a path of destruction" seems like a more accurate summation of her experience than readings that see her building a stable identity. Her family in India is disappointed in her for challenging tradition; she leaves Taylor despite the fact that he wants her to stay; she refuses to runaway with Darrel Lutz a night before he commits suicide; as the novel ends she is leaving Bud for the West coast. On the last page, Jasmine offers the thoroughly

indeterminate conclusion, “Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud” (241). There is more than enough evidence in the novel to conclude that time may decide affirmatively. In other words, it may reveal her experience in the U.S. to be an outward expression of her internal chaos rather than the achievement of a positive feeling of freedom.

On the other hand, it may not. Jasmine’s epigraph is a quote from James Gleick’s Chaos (1987), a book that introduced Chaos Theory to a wide audience: “The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined.” This quote has a broad connection to the way Mukherjee describes the immigrant experience. Jasmine has been many selves and lived through many languages; Bud Rippelmayer, Iowa born and raised, has a history of “straight lines and smooth planes” (214). But I see a deeper connection between Chaos Theory and Jasmine’s epistemology. As Gleick explains it in his book, Chaos Theory introduced a new way of looking at the world. Throughout the 20th century, particle physicists had been working on smaller and smaller scales, attempting to find laws that governed motion. But these laws were only applicable on small scales, in highly controlled (and expensive) experiments. Chaos Theory provides a way of understanding how particles will move on a human scale (in weather patterns, for example), but in the process, it forfeits the idea that a system will be predictable over a long period of time. “The simplest systems are now seen to create extraordinarily difficult problems of predictability [...]” writes Gleick, “Yet order arises spontaneously in those systems—chaos and order together.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ James Gleick, Chaos: Making a New Science (New York: Viking, 1987), 7-8.

For Mukherjee, the central opposing forces in her fiction are not chaos and order as much as mysticism and rationality. She has presented this conflict in various ways throughout her career. In her early nonfiction work, Days and Nights in Calcutta (1977), she explains it as follows:

For the West, the educated Hindu's belief in telepathy and psychokinetic energy may seem intellectually dishonest. But I am convinced that such beliefs have more to do with radically different ways of telling a story than with underdeveloped logic. Hindus entrust much less of the universe to logical explanation—and dismissal—than do Europeans. Belief in magic, miracles, and myth still causes very little conflict, even among successful scientists and businessmen.¹⁶¹

In Jasmine, the conflict clearly comes up in Jasmine's discussion with Taylor concerning an individual's "purpose" on Earth. It may be that a human's only purpose is to crunch a pebble under his foot when he steps off a bus, but this is a plan that can only be known to the mind of God. No human will be able to discern it, just as no human will be able to forecast long range weather patterns with absolute accuracy, no matter how sensitive the measuring devices.

Jasmine is clearly not satisfied with this abdication of one's ability to achieve knowledge, just as Chaos Theory doesn't assert the ultimate impossibility of understanding nonlinear systems. She struggles against it; struggles, that is, to assert her own agency against her specific, mystical history. But this struggle remains unresolved. Ultimately, we must conclude about Jasmine what Jacqueline Rose urged concerning Moses and Monotheism: that its author is still subject to the dilemma of identity it describes. The point

¹⁶¹ Bharati Mukherjee, Days and Nights in Calcutta (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1977), 175.

I want to make about Jasmine, then, resembles the argument Said made about Heart of Darkness and Mansfield Park: that the novel establishes initial conditions that it is unable to bring to a final resolution. For British Modernists, this impossibility was created by their inability to see the people who existed beyond Europe's frontiers; for Mukherjee, it comes from the collision between traditional Indian culture and the West. Like Conrad and Austen's novels, Jasmine demands a response. Also like those earlier novels, the depth with which it expresses its own historical moment—its problems, limits, and possibilities—creates the opportunity for a conversation that moves beyond the habits and ideologies that divide people, particularly people from the global centers and periphery.

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