

HOW MUCH DOES LITERATURE WEIGH? ON TASTE, WASTE, VALUE, AND THE
CANON

by

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“Not just in commerce but in the world of ideas too our age is putting on a veritable clearance sale. Everything can be had so dirt cheap that one begins to wonder whether in the end anyone will want to make a bid...every lecturer, crammer, student...is unwilling to stop with doubting everything.”-Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

1. Introduction: What Does it Mean to Read?

When you read do you cross, uncross, and recross your legs? Do you pull at your hair or grind your teeth? Do you rest your book on different surfaces? Do you slowly annihilate your body in any way, shape or form? In other words, when you read do you wrestle with the text in front of you? If so, congratulations! You’re a student of something called ‘literature’. But what is literature? How is its weight felt in the Western world today? Perhaps more importantly, why would anyone willingly subject themselves to a run-in with it?

To help answer these questions, let’s turn briefly to *THE* book, which contains one of the most famous depictions of wrestling in the entirety of the Western canon (a shapeshifting entity that will help us explore the aforementioned questions). In the biblical book of Genesis, Jacob, patriarch of the Israelites, wrestles with an angel from night until daybreak. The angel tries to leave, but Jacob refuses to let go until it gives him a new name: ‘Israel’, or ‘contends with God’. The place Jacob and the angel wrestled is then named Penuel, meaning ‘face of God’ or ‘facing God’. Let me answer the original question with another set of questions: when we wrestle with a text or a body of texts, do we wrestle with it to more fully understand its power, meaning and form? Do we wrestle with it because that’s the only way to come face to face with it? To earn the title of ‘contends with Literature’? Or are there other reasons?

University of Oxford’s Andrew Klevan addresses some of these questions in his essay “What is Evaluative Criticism?” As Klevan notes, the etymology of the word “criticism” refers to ancient Greek “judges or jurymen who gave verdicts (often in competitions)”. This

explanation also denotes “careful consideration”; it summons up an image of critics who are “not simply judging, but judging well...mindful that they should be for the good of the society allowing future judges to judge more soundly” (Klevan). This may seem a Russian doll of an answer and not exactly quell any existential angst, but we at least have some foundation to stand on. Departing from ancient Greece, Klevan points to our Postmodern (or, according to some thinkers, Post-postmodern) present where the exact definition of evaluative criticism, like the exact definition of most things, is a bit hazy, porous, and rough around the edges. How did we get here?

Klevan brings us to a moment bearing undeniable influence on the contemporary Western conception of criticism with a detour through German transcendental philosopher Immanuel Kant’s work. We move from judgement to two words that cast long shadows: aesthetics and value. Kant also brings us ideas of aesthetic purity which will be discussed further. In their modern forms, these concepts involve an *encounter* with the work as individual subjects within a contextual, i.e. “(historical, cultural, intellectual)”, web (Klevan). We walk over to its corner of the room, or gallery, or library, where it has made itself at home and we shake its hand, or dance with it, or look at the lint on its shirt. In other words we meet it with our whole selves. We bring our entire present being and history to it and it returns the favour.

By engaging in criticism we can also communicate a unique understanding of a work to others, opening or closing its meaning like drawers in an infinite wardrobe. We can build new pedestals for the work, knock over those previously built, and ask whether the building or knocking over of pedestals that came before us fits with our scheme of aesthetic justice. Our account addresses a work and “shows, prescriptively, how it could, or even should, be seen” (Klevan). Klevan also notes that we can point to things other people missed, thereby

“Awakening perception”. We can even clarify and enhance these details for ourselves and others. There’s something forensic about this business of criticism. There is a picking at and analyzing of depths and surfaces and a way one uncovers entire conspiracies from these pickings.

Klevan also goes on to uncover the engineer and the football coach that live inside critics. As he shows, we can reveal the machinery of a work or catalogue, or draw it, play by play, into chalk diagrams. A piece of art in Klevan’s conception is also something like a mosquito. We can speculate about *why* it exists and even if it *should* in the first place as it buzzes and whines around our head, sometimes stopping to give us an itch. Let’s take a moment to mix our metaphors and analogies just a bit more, maybe even stretching them to their limits, before we get down to business.

This series of relationships we have with art might be best illustrated if we picture a piece of literature as something like a dog at a dog show. Put yourself in the judge’s chair. Once there you can ask yourself: what *distinguishes* this dog? What are its *qualities*? How much does this dog stimulate “our faculties of perception, cognition, emotion, or imagination”, as Klevan, echoing Kant, would say? How can we compare this dog to all the rest? What is its context? Its tradition? Is it a hunting dog? A guide dog? A family pet? What do these things tell me about it? Someone—or some collective someone— bred this dog for a purpose. *What is it?* What has the breeder or the dog’s trainer set out to achieve, and more importantly what have they or the dog succeeded or failed in achieving? What choices have these people made? Have the dog made? (Can a dog make choices?) How creative were these choices? We can become aware that someone, or something, put this dog together. But what is its *style*? Does it even have one? What are the qualities, the flaws and sufficiencies of this style? Do its features feel *right*? Are they

placed and arranged *right*? Why or why not? Is my criteria adequate? Are other people evaluating this dog and others *right*?

Maybe criticism is a bit more of a serious affair than a dog show. If not, why would poet and critic Jason Guriel write an article for *The Walrus* subtitled “Why critics need to stop getting personal in their essays”? There’s urgency and gravity in the word *need*. Why would people like poet Michael Lista and poet, philosopher, essayist, and musician Jan Zwicky have written back and forth in literary academic smackdowns about what a reviewer’s ‘duty’ is? Let’s take a closer look.

In Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the eponymous prophet who has sequestered himself in a mountain cave returns to society with an urgent message. Along with announcing that God is dead, Zarathustra delivers a speech about reading and writing. He says:

Of all that is written, I love only that which one writes with one’s own blood. Write with blood, and you will discover that blood is spirit...I hate those readers who are idlers...That everyone may learn to read will in the long run corrupt not only writing but also thinking...Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, but rather learned by heart. (35)

Zarathustra’s assertion that writing well is done with one’s own blood bears the same implication for reading. This idea preserves the supposed sanctity of the word from the supposed vulgar masses and a conception of literature as elitist, esoteric, and probably also nationalistic along with it. If one is to come back from a mountain with an urgent message, one must justify the high place, the platform, the mental or spiritual space they speak from. If one is to *receive* the urgent

message, one must make themselves worthy of it. To be critical is to assume a posture. As Gaston Bachelard says in *The Poetics of Space*, a “literary critic is a reader who is necessarily severe” (10).

It’s often said that everyone’s a critic, and increasingly, as globalization and social media give anyone with the wherewithal to upload evidence of their own existence online an audience, everyone’s an artist. It’s an innate human impulse to share and create, to evaluate, denounce, praise, and ponder. What’s often argued by defenders of the faith of supposed artistic and critical integrity is that not everyone does these things *seriously*. And that’s a problem. But is it really? I insist that the field of literature instead faces a pronounced lack of levity and a problematically rigid adherence to tradition; a diversion of energy towards activities that essentially amount to gatekeeping and the protection of preexisting canons. Examining approaches to canonization and literary activity through the politics of taste, waste, value (and perhaps even joy), I believe, can offer up some solutions to disciplinary conventions that foster a sense of alienation in the labor of practitioners at all levels of experience.¹

2. What is the Canon and What Does it Stand for?

Perhaps the main site or consequence of this discourse is something called ‘the canon’. Many attempts to define the concept of the canon, like many attempts to define any concept (or kick off a wedding speech), begin with etymology. Robert Aston, an author and English teacher, writes in *The Role of the Literary Canon in the Teaching of Literature* that “the word ‘canon’ is multifaceted and has numerous definitions or usages...by using words such as ‘rule,’ ‘authority,’

¹ While borrowing language from Marxist theory here and elsewhere, this essay is not necessarily a piece of Marxist literary criticism, instead aligning itself with the emerging field of waste studies as described much further on.

‘sacred,’ and the phrase ‘worthy of study,’ these definitions all indicate control, regulation, and normalization” (43). The meaning has also changed over time. Aston writes that:

‘canon’ in Ancient Greek was ‘kanōn,’ ...‘a rule’ or standard of measurement, in addition to a ‘reed,’ a ‘rod,’ and a ‘cane,’ both the noun and the verb. It adopted theological connotations when the Roman Catholic Church ‘needed a Latin term that could distinguish the accepted or sacred writings from all others’...its more modern usage for imaginative literary works appeared for the first time in the 1700s...use of the word ‘canon’ to refer to a fixed, immutable body of literary texts in the field of...literature was not commonly used until the second half of the 20th century. (6)

Throughout the long history of the canon, the way it has been defined and measured has dictated its purpose, which has had to change alongside the cultural attitudes that shape it.²

The canon often determines the content of English classes and vice versa. As literary theorist Roland Barthes, in “*The Rustle of Language*...proclaims, ‘Literature is what is taught, period’” (Aston 9). For much of the 20th century, ideas surrounding what the canon is and what it *is for* remained relatively static, limiting the possibilities of what literature, criticism—and in turn, art—can be. Aston notes that important uses for the canon “have been advocated by...writers such as T.S. Eliot (1919/1982), Charles Altieri (1983), John Searle (1994), Irving

² While I can’t reproduce every possible reference to the canon, it can be and has been variously described as: an ongoing process, a set of conventions, a library, a museum, a mausoleum, a group of people, a series of institutions, a series of value judgements both overt and covert, a system made out of individuals, a gestalt, a ghost or spectre haunting Western civilization, a garbage dump, a conversation, a conversation about itself, a system with lots of moving parts and variables as well as interactions with other systems and thus other sets of variables, either a monstrosity or the only thing preventing monstrosities depending on who you ask, culturally foundational or influential texts, a tradition internalized and/or externalized, the idols of Western culture and its acolytes, an aggregation of personal valuations by people who are themselves influential, texts that are central instead of marginal, a list of criteria or qualities, a form of myopia; an obligation, an ought rather than an is, a set of practices more so than an entity, an act or series of acts of categorization, an idea mostly, an anthology, a response to widespread personal and cultural anxieties, a curriculum.

Howe (1991/2015), and Harold Bloom (1973/1997), among others...and range from...organizing texts in an academic field to preserving cultural struggles and serving as models and inspiration for future writers” (16). This common set of justifications for the canon’s existence has even led some to try and pin down its exact contents.³ Depending on who you ask, the canon is either an apolitical object floating on its own in an ideal plane or a deeply political and situated cultural artifact. The former conception is increasingly seen as obsolete, since the canon is a “construction” that reflects “not just the need for a curriculum, but also political motives and ideas” (Eaglestone 132). Traditional conceptions of the canon, however, continue to influence how literature is taught, analyzed, and evaluated.

The canon is not just made up of texts, but is also an ongoing, active process in the spheres of criticism, education, and consumption. Literary critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith provides a list that covers most of the ways these processes manifest in her book *Contingencies of Value*. She describes them as:

the innumerable implicit acts of evaluation performed by those who...publish the work, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and imitate it; the more explicit but casual judgments made, debated, and negotiated in informal contexts by readers and by all those others in whose personal economies the work, in some way, ‘figures’; and the highly specialized institutionalized forms of evaluation exhibited in the more or less professional activities of scholars, teachers, and academic or journalistic critics...full-dress reviews and explicit rank-orderings, evaluations, and revaluations, but

³ Thus “textbooks from earlier in the twentieth century were often made up literally of lists and descriptions of great books. A more recent version of this is *The Western Canon* from 1994, by the American critic Harold Bloom. This book is a long defence of the idea of the canon, and ends with a list of the thousand books (he thinks) everyone ‘cultured’ should have read” (Eaglestone 56).

also such activities as the awarding of literary prizes, the commissioning and publishing of articles about certain works, the compiling of anthologies, the writing of introductions, the construction of department curricula, and the drawing up of class reading lists. (45)

The canon is a place and space of exchange happening constantly and beyond just the market. Its effects are felt through registers of experience ranging from the ideological to the social, and even the spiritual since critics and teachers of literature are often described as priestly figures protecting something sacred from laymen. This is noted by Herrnstein Smith and Aston, among others.

The cultural landscape of the 21st century is one coming to terms with the fragmentation and decentralization of knowledge, and the canon is not immune to this phenomenon. In the last few decades scholars have begun talking less about *the canon* and more about canon(s). Aston helpfully provides examples of some types of canon that have been identified, writing that there is:

the critical canon of academics; the personal canon, that which each individual knows; the potential canon, all literature ever conceived, most of which has been lost to history; the accessible canon, which has expanded with new innovations in technology; and the selective and official canons, ‘institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism’. While these different types of canons historically overlap and intersect with each other, it is the official canon that ultimately becomes...‘a construct, like a history text, expressing what a society reads back into the past as important to its future’. (42)

The canon (or *a* canon) is many things all at once. What *any* canon—or any judgement about any canon— can never be, however, is universal, objective, or pure. We therefore need to continually and contingently shift our conceptions of the canon’s mechanisms from prescriptive to descriptive, informative to performative, and economic to ecological, remaining vigilant about new ways of picturing the canon and their far-reaching consequences. This involves not just persisting in evaluative criticism, but also persistently evaluating evaluation itself.

3. Width, Depth, and Representation: from Prescriptive to Descriptive

Perhaps the most glaring problem of the canon is its relationship to representation. Any canon is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, centering and marginalization. Approaches to the canon thus tend to be either prescriptive or descriptive. Lawyer and author Bryan Garner suggests in linguistic terms that prescribers “seek to guide users of a language— including native speakers— on how to handle words as effectively as possible. Describers seek to discover the facts of how native speakers actually use their language” (xxxiii). This idea might be extended towards evaluative activities sounding something like *we must speak about what literature should be read* vs. *we should speak about what literature is widely read and also what literature isn’t*. Garner has suggested a truce in this war between approaches involving each sticking to their appropriate functions. For him, education “entailing normative values has always been a part of literate society. Why should it suddenly stop merely because describers see this kind of education as meddling with natural forces?” (Garner xlv). But such a compromise perhaps cannot be reached when talking about canons.

While the latter assumption has become a common one in classrooms and other spaces of literary discourse, seemingly announcing its status as a self-evident truth, it still faces staunch

opposition from certain critics and can present a wide range of problems to those operating under it. Anyone within these spaces, after all, interacts with and generates processes of canonization whether they're aware of it at the time or not. Canonization involves determining what is best in culture and all the issues of attempting to do so. Any activity which helps to form a canon “represents...an adjudication among competing claims for limited resources of time, space, energy, attention—or, of course, money—and also....a set of surmises, assumptions, or predictions regarding the personal economies of other people” (Herrnstein Smith 45). All of these resources have at many times been subjected to cycles of artificial scarcity, but perhaps the most relevant to a media-focused analysis is attention.

New technologies increasing the availability of knowledge have decisively changed the way information—and by extension, attention—is distributed. Noting this, Richard Lanham “develops an account of the economics of attention with reference to artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol”. He draws on American economist Herbert A. Simon’s assertion that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it”, concluding that “one can trace a changing of places between ‘figure’ and ‘ground’, or between ‘stuff’ and ‘fluff’” (van Krieken 4). That the making of distinctions between what content, information, or media is considered substantial or solid and what is considered ethereal and flimsy—between what should be put front and center and what should take a back seat—has deeply political consequences is at this point obvious. Since canonization is such a pervasive and prominent method of making these distinctions, questions of what the canon is, should be, or whether it should *be* at all are reaching new levels of urgency all the time. But what does efficiency really mean here? Is this changing of places a triumph or a disaster?

Writer and researcher Matthew Crawford believes that in a moment of media hyper-saturation our shortened attention spans and compromised individual and collective ability to focus has weakened our critical thinking on multiple fronts. He writes that this widespread “distractibility seems to indicate that we are agnostic on the question of what is worth paying attention to, that is, what to value” (5). While making assumptions about what is valuable can narrow the concept of value itself, to postpone the making of these assumptions can have dire consequences. Crawford writes that “we often find ourselves isolated in a fog of choices...commercial forces step into the void of cultural authority and assume a growing role in shaping our evaluative outlook on the world” (6). This is one of the many reasons evaluative criticism is often elevated to a place of such import. We, after all, “choose what to pay attention to, and in a very real sense this determines what is real for us...But it is also true that our attention is directed to a world that is shared; one’s attention is not simply one’s own” (Crawford 13). New interpersonal and cross-cultural connections forged by new media mean that we are constantly made aware of the growing range and consequences of our aesthetic, political, and social judgements. Like flies on a spider web, we can no longer move or buzz without sending tremors and signals in all directions down an intricate series of communicational threads.

During the 1960s and 70s, scholars and activists began scrutinizing the canon with the communal nature of attention in mind. It “became necessary to raise questions about the canon since who it seemed to represent (and still represents) was a privileged sliver of society” (Aston 64). People began to see canons as inseparable from the world they inhabited and as reflecting the inequities of the societies they claim to represent. In America,

‘canon criticism’...originated with educators attempting to bring ‘the 1960s social movements into our classrooms’. In the years following the 1960s, criticisms of the canon

involved not only the texts that comprised the canon and processes of canonization but the interpretive practices involved in the teaching of literature—as well as a call toward teaching the controversy of the canon so as to bring students into the conversation of canon formation. (Aston 24)

These interrogations accelerated the shifting of existing paradigms in the literary world. Voices that had previously been stifled began (at least in some sense) to be acknowledged.⁴ The work this explosive moment began, however, will maybe never be completed.

In the decades following, canons continued to act as battlegrounds for competing claims of what ‘our’ culture really is while ignoring the problematic nature of such claims. Aston writes that “explicit canon criticism” led “eventually to the ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s and the publication of works defending tradition and the canon, as well as others attacking the canon”. These works include “books like Allan Bloom’s (1987/2012) *The Closing of the American Mind*, E.D. Hirsch’s (1987) *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, and Harold Bloom’s (1995) *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*” (Aston 57, 1). Protectors of the canon regularly pose it as a kind of social glue holding civilization together and keeping the machine running. Often, they portray the canon as a vessel for liberal and humanistic values like free inquiry and enlightened political discourse while using it for

⁴ Aston writes that genres of literature “ranging from science fiction and fantasy to adolescent literature—began to be taken seriously, though such texts are often still viewed as less worthy of study. An unearthing of literature written by minority authors who were previously ignored almost entirely in U.S. literary studies led to the establishment of new courses at colleges and universities...not only were more works of literature written by female authors included in courses and anthologies but ‘feminist’ and other theories of reading literature provided new ways to study both canonical and noncanonical texts” (5).

conservative purposes like imparting inherited cultural values and maintaining an ideological status quo.⁵

The need for widely endorsed prescriptive practices to catch up with forces of globalization and newer intellectual currents underscores the urgency of a cultural model that better accommodates accelerated social and political change. Edward Said notes that “the concept of ‘identity has undergone a Copernican transformation’, being especially important to feminist and postcolonial studies.” This means that “current scholars ‘are much more attuned to the non-European, genderized, decolonized, and decentered energies and currents of our time’” (Aston 32). It is not just academics, however, expressing their dissatisfaction with the canon’s inability to address these novel conditions. Students and staff across national borders, institutions, and varying levels of education have called for more diverse curricula. Historian Katie Kelaidis suggests “that such movements may be inaugurating ‘the return of the canon wars’” (Aston 138). The stakes of undermining established cultural authority are as high as they’ve always been, but new forms of resistance are being ushered in alongside other revolutionary innovations in thought.

Any canon creates narrowness by functioning as a filter, lens, or even a keyhole through which to explore a literary context. As theorist and critic Robert Eaglestone says, “the canon...*creates the criteria by which texts are judged*” (57). But even canons can have varying

⁵ The canon has also repeatedly been characterized as threatened despite remaining firmly entrenched in informal and institutional settings. As Aston writes, proponents “of the literary canon...have claimed that it is on life support, repeatedly attacked by postmodern thought and efforts to make a more diverse canon or to abandon the concept of the canon altogether” (42). While postmodern understandings of ideas like truth, knowledge, and art tend to be more inclusive and fluid, engendering some shifts in the cultural landscape, they have by no means won any kind of decisive victory over empirical and objectivist currents. In spite of the supposed threat of postmodern domination, “the idea that certain texts are worthier of being taught than others still remains” along with institutional “obsessions with standardized education and measurable objectives...which have led to an overemphasis on reading for formalist inflected terminology in [American Schools’] English standards and hence limit the kinds of texts that can be read as well as how they can be read” (Aston 16, 57).

levels of narrowness, and some more rigorously attempt to foster diversity than others.

Herrnstein Smith notes that while facing ever more intense scrutiny, “the axiological account of the phenomena of human preferences has been and remains the dominant one in Western thought” (54-55). This has led to what she calls an “asymmetrical” account of taste (61). Since taste is so intrinsically entangled with class and power, she argues, these forces have historically defined one another through a reciprocal and deeply implicating relationship.

While this state of affairs is all too often taken for granted, it is maintained by a large and complex apparatus of intellectual justifications. Using pre-existing and firmly entrenched power structures and dynamics to reinforce one’s claim to moral and aesthetic supremacy is a particularly underhanded tool from the toolkit of axiological thinking regularly employed by its proponents. Thus,

The tendency throughout formal aesthetic axiology...has been to explain...the constancies of value and convergences of taste by the inherent qualities of certain objects and/or some set of presumed human universals....the variabilities of value and divergences of taste by historical accident, cultural distortion, and the defects and deficiencies of individual subjects. (Herrnstein Smith 36)

Prescriptive ways of evaluating cultural artifacts consistently engage in paternalism backed by double standards and cherry-picking while simultaneously claiming an almost cosmic order of truth and nature. In other words, “the privileging of the self through the pathologizing of the Other remains the key move and defining objective of axiology” (Herrnstein Smith 38). The canon is not simply a tradition, but also a tradition of defending tradition at the expense of novel and diverse perspectives and voices. By thinking in descriptive terms, one can interrogate and

deconstruct the movements in other disciplines and lines of inquiry that a literary canon aligns itself with.

The canons that a society or a subset of its population chooses to embrace or reject can create conditions conducive to either aesthetic stasis or new and exciting cultural encounters. Toni Morrison writes that “Canon building is empire building. Canon defence is national defence. Canon debate...is the clash of cultures. And *all* the interests are vested” (8). What a canon can do for anyone depends greatly on the goals and values driving that canon. If the goal is to dominate a conversation or prevent it from happening in the first place, if it is defensive as opposed to exploratory, then a canon can only be a tool of violence and suppression. While axiological accounts claim to engage in a kind of scientific method of literary study, constantly incorporating new evidence into their conclusions, the opposite is often the case.

Many within the cultural sphere believe a more relativistic perspective may address some of the pitfalls of making aesthetic value judgements. Eaglestone describes that:

where the founders of English wanted people to be similar, now we appreciate and celebrate difference. Where they offered certainties and definite answers, we are aware that there are rarely clear-cut solutions and final judgements. We are much less sure about many things that they took for granted. And if our world-views are changing, so must our expectations of English. (17-18)

It remains important to justify one’s conclusions in the discipline and back them up systematically. New ways of imagining the foundations of knowledge and value themselves, meanwhile, have meant that these must be recognized as open rather than closed systems. For Herrnstein Smith, Eaglestone, and many others, no value judgement is pure or objective, and

that's okay so long as purity or objectivity aren't seen as the goals of (or available tools for) making one.

The model of reasoning which Herrnstein Smith attacks, and which has for so long lorded over Western aesthetics, has almost completely (and often willingly) ignored compelling questions raised by the fact that one is always speaking from some highly contextually determined position.⁶ Axiological logic has been argued by Herrnstein Smith to inadequately deal with “the failure of the universal principles to operate universally,” or the question “Why is ‘man,’ in spite of his underlying essential nature, so exasperatingly different from himself?” (61, 178). To methodically analyze taste and its formation is to encounter its maddening yet fruitful and liberating variation. Thinking of value judgements as anything but natural and objective, however, doesn't disqualify one from assigning aesthetic worth altogether.

As Herrnstein Smith notes, “value judgments can still be evaluated, still compared, and still seen and said to be ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than others” but “their *value*...must be understood...as something other than ‘truth-value’ or ‘validity’ in the objectivist, essentialist sense” (98). One can no longer tie one's value judgements to supposedly natural and immutable laws. Herrnstein Smith further notes that more relativistic views of value encourage and acknowledge:

the inevitability...of difference, variety, and innovation. They discourage utopianism, nostalgia, and apocalyptic reaction—the positing of ‘ideal’ conditions, the lament for ‘lost’ ones, the anxious delineation of Falls and Declines—in favor of an analysis of conditions and of accordingly responsive actions...they are ‘applied’ case by case...in

⁶ Despite accounts from influential philosophers like Kant and David Hume, Herrnstein Smith argues that “our ‘sensations’ and ‘perceptions’ of ‘forms’ or of anything else are inseparable from...exactly who we are, where we are, and all that has already happened to us, and there is therefore nothing in any aspect of our experience of anything that could ever be, in the required sense, pure” (69).

specific rather than categorical terms...in relation to historically, culturally, institutionally, and otherwise individuated goals, stakes, means, and consequences rather than to putatively transcendental ones. (180)

In an exponentially interconnected planetary system, culture is a network of constant change and exchange. To engage in the shaping and production of culture is to weigh one's position against all others, and to do so without an eye towards compromise means clinging to a form of cultural insulation fast receding from the world. Escaping the safeguarded, seemingly impregnable sphere of both axiological and purely prescriptive thinking allows the literary world the mobility and freedom to more fully immerse itself in new processes of cultural and epistemological transmission.

But does dropping the idea of a more single and authoritative universal truth lead us to a disastrous state of post-truth? Timothy Snyder wrote in a New York Times article following the storming of America's capitol by Trump supporters that in the political world,

Post-truth is pre-fascism...When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place. Without agreement about some basic facts, citizens cannot form the civil society that would allow them to defend themselves. If we lose the institutions that produce facts that are pertinent to us, then we tend to wallow in attractive abstractions and fictions...Post-truth wears away the rule of law and invites a regime of myth.

Snyder's article addresses a situation where science, journalism, history, and current events are subjected to the variable nature of taste, but even in aesthetics—a realm where taste is everything—there remain similar problems of contingency. Contingent theories require contingent action; they are often inefficient whereas axiological ideas that can be harmful are lightning fast and decisive. If more relativistic aesthetic models are to survive in the marketplace of ideas, a market as free—in other words as prone to manipulation and lopsided transactions—as any, they must show themselves to be as hardy and profitable as others.⁷

Much of Herrnstein Smith's work speaks to Snyder's concern—which she deems “The Egalitarian Fallacy”—and the accompanying dilemmas (57). Deconstructive acts of criticism, she writes, are often labelled “quietistic” and it is said “that the positions that such questionings entail prevent one from opposing bad things and promoting good ones”. If this is true, “all judgements are equally valid, all objects equally good, all practices equally justifiable,” and it can be said that “‘anything goes’...reality is totally subjective, that there are no constraints on belief or behavior” (Herrnstein Smith 150-152). Such objections, Herrnstein Smith continues, are usually accompanied by lists of:

intellectual, social, and political *calamities*...to which relativism ‘opens the gate’:

- i) the loss of the authority of truth, facts, logic, universal principles, and natural rights;
- g) the disappearance of genuine science, moral reasoning, and rational discourse;
- i) the breakdown of law and morality, the takeover of democratic institutions by totalitarianism, the eruption of social chaos and anarchy, the return to the jungle;

⁷ This may, as we'll explore later on, require changing the definition of profitability altogether.

- h) the collapse of aesthetic standards;
- j) the Gulag, the Nazi death camps. (151)

Wherever there is a call for allowing difference—especially of aesthetic criteria—to propagate, there is grumbling from talking heads ignoring that these differences and the ability of people to live under a society’s normative rules and opinions yet *act otherwise* have also always existed. After all, “it is evident that the jackals, the Gulag, and the death camps have not been kept from the polis in spite of what has been, up to now, the theoretical dominance and widespread affirmation of objectivist thought” (Herrnstein Smith 154). Such objections thus tend to reveal themselves as mere fear-mongering fueled by cultural anxieties about the seeming displacement and contamination of ostensibly objective aesthetic (and by extension moral) criteria. The threat of upsetting these hierarchies so often posed as universal, the delicacy of their hold on truth, simply reveals how localized and particular they really are.

The widening of the field of cultural study does mean, however, that practitioners must deal with a creeping scope. Any body of work can be a kind of hoard, and as any hoard grows it becomes harder to organize and manage its contents. This is especially the case with texts, since as literary historian and theorist Franco Moretti elucidates with reference to Hegel, “The history of the world is the slaughterhouse of the world...and of literature. The majority of books disappear forever” (207). As author and professor of literature Pierre Bayard also notes, non-reading is “our primary way of relating to books,” since “the act of picking up and opening a book masks the countergesture that occurs at the same time: the involuntary act of not picking up and not opening all the other books in the universe” (13, 14). These dilemmas signal the need for things like canons: systems that guide and direct our attention. At the same time, these dilemmas

signal that a canon is incomplete despite attempts to describe it as something fixed or untouchable.

Respecting this incompleteness must be the duty of anyone within the discipline of English as much as trying to address (and, in too many cases, neatly do away with) the gaps it produces. As Severin Fowles argues,

packed between the multitudes of self-evident things, are crowds of non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps – absences...that also stand before us as entity-like presences with which we must contend...granting absence its presence...casts a particularly intense light on the politics of attending to what is missing and why. (25-26)

In studying any canon, one has a responsibility to just as closely study and describe its limitations. As Bayard says, we must “free ourselves of the oppressive image of cultural literacy without gaps...for we can strive toward this image for a lifetime without ever managing to coincide with it” (78). This is precisely what culture and its study usually are: an *image* of completeness. Letting go of the illusions ingrained in these studies is a necessary step in freeing up energy for the work that remains to be done, made more difficult by the rapidly expanding digitization and archiving of information.

Just as certain texts have become disproportionately influential to the discipline, so too have particular ways of analyzing them. The tunnel vision of the New Critics’ formalism supposedly eliminates the need for new methods that address new cultural, social, and historical contexts. While useful to teachers and critics, the utilitarian bent of this stance discourages innovation in technique. In the second half of the 20th century it was more widely acknowledged that “texts and what counts as literature can only be understood in some greater context, which

can change” (Aston 56). Rather than *only* change the texts being pointed to as exemplary or reifying their place in culture, scholars began instead focusing on creating what Robert Scholes calls a “canon of methods”. According to Scholes, the word text “also has roots in the Latin infinitive ‘texere’—to weave—and so is a concept of inclusion rather than exclusion” (Aston 30, 31). Here again the almost alchemical nature of literary discourse is demonstrated. Just attuning oneself to an uncommon dimension of the language surrounding textuality transforms the concept itself from one that bristles and shuts new possibilities out to one that absorbs and assimilates unfamiliar objects.

Shifting definitions of textuality demanded a shift away from lists of texts and towards studying what a text is and what it means to read, a realization that Robert Eaglestone calls “perhaps the most important innovation in the study of literature in the last twenty or thirty years” (24). This changes the range of texts seen as appropriate for discussion, but also one’s relationship to interpretation itself, because allowing “context to become part of the equation means remembering that a book is...a moving object, and that its mobility is in part a function of the set of power relations woven around it” (Bayard 87). No longer are isolated, stagnant, self-contained objects the only thing for practitioners of English to occupy themselves with. Rather culture itself is seen as a complex series of relationships that can be analyzed.⁸ Attempts to define what counts as culture are still inevitably made, but are less concentrated and hierarchized. These new structures, however, don’t “eliminate problems of text selection, as certain texts would still be studied and thereby canonized over others” (Aston 6). As human

⁸ This is slowly becoming the goal of English classes already, since “secondary teachers teaching pre-twentieth-century texts often show films or TV adaptations to their students...cultural studies analyses all aspects of culture, from artworks (novels, poetry, plays, but also comics, films, TV programmes, music and so on) to other sorts of ‘cultural production’ (the design of houses, fashion) to social habits (going to nightclubs, being part of certain groups)” (Eaglestone 143-144).

subjects we will always be limited by *some* perspective, always aiming at a picture of culture that is a moving target.

Yet it is precisely this acknowledgement of chasing after something elusive that can reconcile literary activity with 21st century human conditions. Since “culture is above all a matter of orientation,” Bayard calls for “a genuine theory of reading—one that dispenses with our image of it as a simple, seamless process and, instead, embraces all its fault lines, deficiencies, and approximations” (16, 10). With this in mind, literature can still be celebrated and enjoyed as a space of truth and beauty while conceding that these ideals will always be subject to fractures and vagaries. Moretti concludes that:

what we really need is a little pact with the devil...Distant reading: where distance...is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if...the text itself disappears...Less is more....We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this 'poverty' that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. (Conjectures)

When the text itself disappears it would seem that literary studies is left hollow at the core, but this is not the case. Studying relationships between texts from a distance can be far more fruitful than burying one's self—among other things—between the pages of a select few works. By carefully crafting the principles of literary study rather than trying to choose what are (in a very literal sense) considered to be its objects, critics and students alike can come much closer to meeting a work on its own terms.

But what does it look like to engage in this kind of inquiry on a practical level? These new theories can no more exist in an ideal plane than those they hope to replace. Perry and Stallworth suggest that “‘Clustering’ texts makes it possible for the teacher to use many different types of reading to engage and challenge students” (17). This grouping “can include written texts, multimedia texts, images, and videos” (Aston 95). Another of the most commonly practised ways of clustering varying texts and textualities currently being utilized in educational settings is approaching literature through the lens of multiculturalism. Whereas canons were previously seen as national projects, they are now more often seen as trying to cultivate an international sensibility.

This is because “there never was one, single national identity and...we now inhabit a *hybrid* society” (Eaglestone 127). In many cases, navigating this set of relationships has meant simply including more diverse texts and authors in reading lists. Eaglestone notes that in the U.S and England,

curriculum...now includes books by writers like Maya Angelou (b. 1928), Alice Walker (b. 1944), Anita Desai (b. 1937) and Chinua Achebe (b. 1930); writers from outside the conventional canon, and outside ‘England’, who have broadened horizons slightly...widely studied contemporary writers, like Zadie Smith (b. 1975), Michael Ondaatje (b. 1943), Andrea Levy (b. 1956), Khaled Hosseini (b. 1965), have continued to help widen the curriculum. (126)

Multicultural approaches, however, can act as a kind of band-aid solution whereby the borders of the canon are extended but still relatively exclusionary. The discipline in these cases is only

opened up through acts of tokenization.⁹ New canons can be seen merely as ‘counter-canons’, defined negatively by their relationship to pre-existing ones.

To categorize is always to deal with the consequences of categorization, and counter canons are still positioned as Other if they cannot define themselves as independent entities. Aston writes that canon criticisms of the 60s and 70s along with multicultural approaches which flourished in the 1990s have “produced problems of their own, including reinforcing stereotypes and superficial conceptions of identity by lumping diverse authors and texts under a single label”. Having “ignored transnational forces in the construction of literary meaning,” they “instead re-inscribe identity categories as fixed and existing within national borders” (6). This of course fails to truly enhance the status of neglected literatures and in fact allows for the business of constricting what counts as literature to carry on as usual.¹⁰

Perhaps we can only replace one canon with another. Aston contends that even more progressive canons like decolonial, Marxist, or feminist ones are still wed to certain ideological confines. Because of this, any “list of literary works is a sort of canon...Like the borders on a map...the borders of literary canons are permeable and, importantly, imaginary; when unnecessary walls are built blindly around them, knowledge is stunted by dogmatism” (Aston 130). Realizing that canons are malleable constructions subject to revision, meanwhile, allows them to address a wider range of needs. As American Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese remarks, “No selected body of texts can embody the specific values of each individual. But it can

⁹ Gestures of inclusion in literary studies have often been criticized as superficial acts of appeasement. In the world of anthologies, which often acts as a microcosm of the world of canonization, there have been accusations of an approach characterized as “the ‘add women and stir’ one, which could be expanded to add any marginalized group and stir” (Aston 126).

¹⁰ Moretti goes so far as to assert that “probably...there will always be a point where the study of world literature must yield to the specialist of the national literature, in a sort of cosmic and inevitable division of labour. Inevitable not just for practical reasons, but for theoretical ones” (Conjectures).

embody our collective sense of who we are as a people—of what our history (however unjust) has been and what we hope it will be” (21). While making a canon can be an act of domination and violence, remaking a canon collaboratively and with polyvocality in mind can be an act of liberation.

It is always necessary to carry out such decisions with conviction, but it is much less necessary to do so with narrow authority and stubborn chauvinism. Rather than aspiring to live in the best of all worlds where only the positively best of all texts are read, seeing the criticism and study of texts as descriptive acts in an uncertain, subjective, and deeply flawed world can be profoundly freeing. When we cannot with any real certainty say that our past judgements have been the best, we can at least with certainty say that our future judgements can strive to be better.

3. Haunting History: From Informative to Performative

An obstinate refusal to relinquish a position of absolute cultural authority has been the norm for much of the English discipline’s history. This is in part because it was long treated as an information science more akin to the categorizing and cataloguing work of a librarian, philologist, or archivist than, say, an actor or lawmaker who makes things real by putting them into words. Only in recent decades have English practitioners begun to more profoundly question the discipline’s purpose and desired outcomes, revealing operations of canonization commonly unseen and unexamined. These previously hidden aspects might be called “performative”, or what gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler calls a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Purdue).¹¹ As we will see, the distinction between simply naming

¹¹ A widely used example of this is the declaration "I pronounce you man and wife" at a wedding (Purdue).

what supposedly *is* and enacting or producing conditions *by* naming or promulgating them, is a vital one—especially in this context.

It is maybe impossible to discuss the informative bent of literary studies without the New Critics rearing their heads again. John Crowe Ransom and other New Critics hoped to simplify literary criticism, asserting that it “must become more scientific” and making “the teaching of literature appear to have analytic techniques like other seemingly ‘scientific’ disciplines...as well as...Logical Positivism with its attempt to find incontrovertible—objective—truths through hairsplitting analyses of sentences”. Approaches which gave credence to things like “personal reactions” and “biographical analysis” were discredited, and “anything outside the text” was barred from the proper practice of textual analysis (Aston 25). What this handful of critics wrote about literary studies, its proper objects and techniques, continues to be what these things *are* in the minds of many students and teachers since the New Critics’ work was so influential on the evaluative landscape of the last century.

Without historical background, texts cannot be situated within or outside of certain traditions or lineages, yet focusing too much on history (or on one version of it) can lead to a stalemate where practitioners only look backwards. The study of history always has an eye towards preservation, but is all too often assumed to preserve only traditional or conventional knowledge and artifacts. With this in mind, Robert Scholes “poses two questions when considering the function of literary texts in English courses: ‘One question is how we can put students in touch with a usable cultural past. The other is how we can help students attain an active relationship with their cultural present’” (Aston 30). The history of literature itself, much like the history of taste, is a burden upon the forward progression of the discipline and yet something one cannot move forward without.

As with many of the problems encountered thus far, the canon has often acted as a convenient way to circumvent troubling ambiguities in this context. For critics during the first half of the 20th century, “The answer was that if the *greatest* literature is taught, the fragmentation, discontinuity, and lack of meaning of modern history can be overcome” (Graff 170). This, however, means that one prominent history is simply plastered over diverging ones. Once again, the search for perfection or high ground can only mar the ability of scholars to acknowledge their shortcomings. As professor of comparative literature Didier Maleuvre concludes, “tradition is as destructive as preservation, and yet without this destruction nothing could possibly be handed over” (272). Every maneuver in the game of cultural preservation, it seems, is fraught, and every victory pyrrhic. To assign aesthetic and historical value usually masks the cost of doing so: the little crimes and grand atrocities committed along the way.¹²

Seeing previous acts of historical inquiry as compromised doesn’t break history itself, if such a thing can even be done. It is simply a way to factor the possibility—or rather the inevitability—of failure into the equation.¹³ It is generally frowned upon to revise history. We can, however, revise the stories we tell about it. We can give up the counterproductive idea that the chain of events which has determined the value of works thus far has been a lifeless series of

¹² Official canons, after all, are full of unsavoury relics of the past. Herrnstein Smith writes that “when the value of a work is seen as unquestionable...incidents or sentiments of brutality, bigotry, and racial, sexual, or national chauvinism—will be repressed or rationalized, and there will be a tendency among humanistic scholars and academic critics to ‘save the text’ by transferring the locus of its interest to more formal or structural features and/or by allegorizing its potentially alienating ideology to some more general (‘universal’) level where it becomes more tolerable and also more readily interpretable in terms of contemporary ideologies. Thus we make texts timeless by suppressing their temporality” (50).

¹³ Moretti believes the image of literary history as a “tree” of diverging choices is indispensable in this case. He writes that “the tree...is a way to ‘open up’ literary history, showing how the course selected by European audiences...is only one of the many coexisting branches that could also have been chosen...‘explaining’ means organizing the evidence we have so as to account for a given result: it doesn’t mean maintaining that that result was inevitable. That’s not history; that’s theodicy” (226).

incidents untouched by speech-acts or that those objects which have outlasted and out-broadcasted others did so because they were empirically the best amongst their peers (along with the idea that they are simply peerless).

Without a canon it would be difficult if not impossible for the discipline of English to exist. But studying culture without studying the problems of culture means hardly studying culture at all. Cultural objects battle for our attention, leaving behind ruins and corpses since as “rot, manure, or compost, culture is also clutter” (Maleuvre 274). Previous attempts to make something cohesive out of the mess of culture like those made by T.S Eliot, who argued that the canon is “the storehouse of Western values” along with similarly aligned 20th century critics like F.R Leavis and his brother Ralph Leavis have made another kind of mess by shoving culture into a closet full of skeletons (Eaglestone 54). In acknowledging the performative nature of culture, critics, students, and teachers can still organize it while realizing that it will always be not just unruly, but also haunted.

Ethnocentrism suppresses variety and vice versa. But what can be seen as universal is a need and desire to understand events and objects in narrative terms. What story are we to superimpose over history, if any? To see history “as a rag-bag of disconnected details is ruinous to the human spirit” (Maleuvre 276). Yet for those left out of the records—or at least of writing them—history itself can be even more demoralizing and oppressive. While some surviving materials continue to minimize the presence and importance of others, these processes can “add coherence to a literature curriculum, enabling one text to be positioned against another as products of and commentaries on different social milieux (themselves socially constructed)” (Aston 113). Despite the flawed nature of historical accounts, those that have survived are the materials available.

To see culture for all its baggage doesn't mean that it has to be a crystallization of regret or an impossible thing. Fragmentation and dissonance, after all, can have great value as lenses and sensibilities themselves. Eagleton writes that there "is no virtue in harmony or cohesion as such...Some of the great artworks of the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists are deliberately dissonant" (191). To tune into this frequency is simply to circulate a more accurate image of the current aesthetic and political world. To do otherwise only hides "the truth of culture, which is that it is a theater charged with concealing individual ignorance and the fragmentation of knowledge" (Bayard 76). It is time for literary studies to be more widely recognized as a space of performance rather than informance.

If the field of cultural studies is something like a museum, it must make the same changes being called for in museums today. Much like these other spaces of display, exhibition, diagramming, and staging, cultural studies should be required to expose its inner workings. By revealing their own previously hidden operations, the discipline and the canon can open up the suppressed potentials within themselves. Acknowledging the 'authoritative' position one speaks from and the many accidents (as well as intentional acts posed as accidents) that puts one there offers a chance to speak more directly to what literature is and can be. Doing so transforms these spaces of textual archaeology, anthropology, and biology into those moving "from a one-sided education of their visitors to a multidimensional engagement with the public" (Schorch 28). If there must be great halls of any kind— and this is a question that remains unsettled here and now— let them at the very least be self-reflexive.¹⁴

¹⁴ Schorch expands on these ideas, proposing that in the field of museology there be: "a shift in conceptualising exhibitions: from products to be presented to processes to be revealed...By revealing the processes leading to the definition of categories and the interpretation of identities, and by giving 'faces' to decisions made, the 'reflexive museum' can become an embodiment of democracy, which does not silence controversies but gives diversity public voices. The 'reflexive museum'... is not only self-aware, but confronts, critiques, questions and ultimately transforms itself and invites the visitor to democratically participate in this process" (Schorch 28).

4. Escaping the Marketplace and Other Possible Impossibilities: From Economic to Ecological

We've established that the question is not so much *what* we read but *how*, and that we must strive to make the constant, numerous implicit forms of evaluation happening explicit. Thus far our inquiry has been primarily limited to the classroom and the anthology. We have yet to directly address a space with an equal if not greater bearing on the fate of every text: the market. Regardless of attempts to position the world of criticism and literature as untouched by transactional activity, "evaluations—of artworks along with anything else consumable, and what isn't?—are themselves commodities of considerable value" (Herrnstein Smith 99). Since texts and opinions about texts are still literally and metaphorically bought and sold, the distribution of literary value often mirrors that of other forms of capital.¹⁵

This means that cultural knowledge participates in forms of intergenerational wealth inheritance. E.D Hirsch has argued that familiarity with the canon is the necessary "prior knowledge" for literary study, yet "Lauter calls 'Hirsch's basic understanding of culture... like family silver', something resistant to change" (Aston 65). When the canon overlaps with and is mapped onto a capitalist mindset, it takes on capitalist patterns of consumption and production. The goal of cultural consumption and production becomes manufacturing objects and situations that keep the previous conditions of production and consumption chugging along, only faster. As Eagleton indicates, "the canon is *self-perpetuating*" (56). Exchange happens within

¹⁵ Wherever such an arrangement exists, metaphors of a certain kind tend to spring up. Both Herrnstein Smith and Moretti, for example, compare this to a Darwinist survival of the fittest scenario. Whereas Moretti sees pieces that survive as "better designed" than their "rivals", Herrnstein Smith argues that they were "the best" of their kind only inasmuch as they fulfilled certain "desired/able functions particularly well at a given time for some community of subjects" (Moretti 226, Herrnstein Smith 48). William Franke, meanwhile, prefers the image of "an 'invisible hand,' the result of incalculably complex interactions of myriad individual, intentional efforts" (Aston 71).

sequestered spheres that make a show of circulation but consolidate and define wealth in narrow ways.

Assuming that every student and professional of literature, or every piece of literature itself, begins from an equal standpoint is naïve and another way to perpetuate conditions of inequity. Taking the equal status of all texts for granted guarantees that they will be thrown into an arena in which merit is the last determinant of success. After all, a certain work can:

perform certain characteristic cultural functions by virtue of the very fact that it has endured...and be valued and preserved accordingly: as a witness to lost innocence, former glory, and/or apparently persistent communal interests and ‘values’ and thus a banner of communal identity; as a reservoir of images, archetypes, and topoi...repeatedly invoked and recurrently applied to new situations and circumstances... the canonical work begins...to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing. Nothing endures like endurance. (Herrnstein Smith 50)

This does not, however, mean that one cannot attempt to generate conditions more favorable to a canon that is as widely accessible as possible. Shifting conceptions of the canon from economic to ecological primarily means acknowledging that change and diversity are essential in fostering a healthy intellectual, social, political, and cultural ecosystem.

This conception of the world of literature also involves conceding that canons and the works which constitute them have lives of their own; they move, live, die, are recycled and reintegrated into the system of culture in ways beyond those generated through conspicuous

human intervention. But what does it look like to find a balance between regulation and giving up control in this context? According to Herrnstein Smith:

The image of a type of communication that excludes all strategy, instrumentality, (self-) interest, and...the profit motive, reflects...a more general recurrent impulse to dream an escape from economy...the better...alternatives would seem to be not to seek to go beyond economy but to do the best we can going *through*—in the midst of and perhaps also by means of it: ‘the best,’ ...at least as far as we know those things, or think we know them.

(112)

It is not seeing works as commodities which is an issue per se. The issue is seeing them *only* as commodities. When totally objectified, these artifacts become status symbols to be guarded rather than shared and mutually appreciated.¹⁶

The primary way theory can become more grounded in cycles of urgency and need rather than consumption and profiteering is through linking theorizing intrinsically to activism. As Eagleton says, some argue “that the job of teachers of English and literary critics is to explore and to uncover the ‘assumptions that underwrite texts...investigate the politics of representation, and...interrogate the inequitable cultural positioning of speakers and readers’”. He qualifies this statement, however, by saying that “Questioning assumptions is obviously vital, but following

¹⁶ Commodification itself is not inherently problematic. As Herrnstein Smith notes, according to “those currently called and calling themselves ‘humanists’”, any “exposure of the continuities between...the marketable and priceless, must be vigorously opposed or at least carefully confined lest one risk eroding the protective barriers that constitute the...way to make sure that everything is not sooner or later put up for cash sale.” But it is not clear “why mercantile practices should be seen as any less cultural than those of classification or priestcraft...the associated Christian-Marxist-humanist-redemptionist effort to draw a clear line between societies before and after the Fall into Commerce is made increasingly questionable by recent research and analysis in economic history and sociology as well as in contemporary anthropology...suggest[ing] an *alternate* account of the pre/trans-history of the culture-versus-economics struggle that does not require myths of the Fall, gratuitous culture/nature oppositions, or an elaborated intellectual Manichaeism” (129-131).

such a single explicit agenda might risk simply replacing ‘one way of doing English’ with another ‘one way of doing English’” (133). The relationships between theories must then be interrogated as much, if not more than, the relationships between texts themselves.

Stressing the importance of theory in changing one’s connection to aesthetic objects involves asking where or what theory can bring us on a practical level. To ‘do’ English (as Eaglestone calls it) rigorously requires encouraging the study of the life cycles and shifting nature of theories as well. As is the case with other forms of making, selling, and trade, evaluative activity is only truly sustainable when it adapts to atmospheric and environmental conditions.¹⁷ As long as there have been canons, it seems, many who shape them have tried to keep the power to do so, the means of cultural production, in the hands of a privileged few.

Some have argued that engaging with real world issues through academic theory is simply another form of gatekeeping which avoids any conversation that stretches beyond the classroom. Academia is often associated with clouds of jargon and specialized prior knowledge so dense that they serve as obstacles and traps for anyone attempting to enter the field. As Herrnstein Smith writes, “experience is a provincialism of its own, separating us from our fellow creatures...we become less and less like anyone else, and thus less able to predict anyone else's responses on the basis of our own” (5). Although theory can be alienating in this way, it remains a vital part of the structure governing how texts and the interpreting of texts are themselves understood. So long as theory is also seen as a performative activity acting in conjunction with direct political action, as part of a larger ecology of thought and resistance, its benefits remain clear and straightforward.

¹⁷ Scholes suggests that novel forms of evaluation “demand...a ‘transhistorical universality’—an application of not a single prescribed theory but of myriad theories...the values themselves are not universal; the tools of theories that lead to canons as ‘in the making’ and as never static become both ‘universal’ and ‘transhistorical’ practices for interrogating texts” (Aston 32-33).

Aston suggests that the application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "assemblages" and Michel Foucault's diffuse scheme of power relations to the English classroom, for example, has a wide variety of practical uses.¹⁸ These theories allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between parts and the whole, between individuals and "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (Aston 128). He writes that "teachers could avoid the deification of authors and explore the interconnectedness of texts across time periods [and] can expose and redefine existing power relations by placing texts from different time periods and genres in conversation" (93-94). Placing texts in conversation, meanwhile, is not necessarily the same thing as bringing that conversation outside of the academy.

Educating one another in the formation and reformation of culture—and by extension society—requires a skill set which moves beyond the close reading of influential literature. Author, professor, and activist bell hooks writes that:

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice...Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. (2)

One of these skills that hooks recommends is savvily using everyday language. This, she explains, is an easy way of "creating theory that speaks to the widest audience of people" (8). By

¹⁸ For more on this, see Aston chapters 3-5.

engaging with wider audiences, theory can assimilate a wider scope of sensibilities and thus more diverse ways of being and knowing into its apparatuses. Much like the cultural artifacts one addresses, the language one uses in one's critical endeavours can act as a form of currency or cultural capital, either inviting or alienating potential audiences.

Another practical and effective way to create a more ecological approach to study (literary and otherwise) is through interdisciplinarity. When English becomes a collaboration between not just student and teacher but also between different fields of—and approaches to—investigation, its conclusions can be strengthened while its absolute authority as a mode of inquiry is interrogated. Artist, professor, and author Natalie Loveless insists on interdisciplinarity as part of the methodology she calls “research-creation”. She writes that her “approach insists that it is to our deepest, doggiest, most curious loves that we are beholden, and that it is love—eros—that must drive our research questions as well as our methodological toolkits”. This does not mean eschewing “disciplinary inheritance” or “seriousness and care”, but, she argues, “Disciplinary approaches...think they know the parameters of the question and the appropriate form for the answer. Disciplines discipline us” (Loveless 28-29). Interdisciplinarity thus represents an additional way to encourage the mindful acknowledgement of the power relations formed around pedagogy and taste-making while simultaneously engaging with the epistemic and technical voids these relations produce.

Certain approaches also allow for a productive breach in the barrier between subject and object. A need to speak to the materiality, accumulation, and fragmentation of cultural artifacts and knowledge has in recent years led to the advent of what Susan Signe Morrison refers to as “waste studies,” which “intentionally situates itself as touching multiple disciplines...This in itself reflects waste—a field of scraps, detritus, and snippets” (Signe Morrison). Filtering literary

studies through the lens of waste allows practitioners to tackle both theoretical and applied issues by embracing a schema of incompleteness and brokenness. The forms of waste that canonization produces can turn the labour of interpretive criticism into a fountainhead of alienation, separating professionals, audiences, and consumers alike from the tangible results of all this writing, speaking, and discourse about writing, speaking, and discourse.

Many forms of theory created to address some of these forms of waste, meanwhile, have themselves created more waste in turn.¹⁹ Severin Fowles writes that within cultural studies,

the recent focus on materiality...can be understood as a response to a world reduced to discourse, filled with unstable meanings that have been cut free from anything solid or unproblematically 'out there'...a corrective to certain strands of late twentieth century social theory in which the real seemed to be lost in the hyperreal and in which the world was left feeling a bit like shadows and fog. (24)

We are again faced with the problem of what to do with all this intellectual, physical and metaphysical *junk*. Once again, the solution cannot lie in sweeping it under the carpet or shoving it into archives and scientific displays that separate it all neatly into piles.

A more workable and humanly attainable fix lies in seeing these mass accumulations of culture not as junk, but as *organic* matter which grows, shrinks, and acts upon other systems and beings with a will of its own.²⁰ Junking obsolete conceptions of authorship and ownership means

¹⁹ Signe Morrison explains that “waste is both material and figurative. The substance of waste—landfills, trashcans, and garbage dumps—becomes metaphoric, to indicate, for example, psychological and spiritual states. The interiorization of waste renders one’s inward spiritual being as ‘a waste’ or ‘wasted’ and meaningless” (Signe Morrison).

²⁰ For more on this, see Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

junking the systems of subjugation and mastery which have enabled these conceptions.

Philosopher, sociologist, and literary critic Jean-François Lyotard notes in his proposal for an installation entitled “Les Immatériaux” that:

New materials...are not merely materials which are new. They question the idea of Man as a being who works, who plans, and who remembers: the idea of an author...the mind of Man is also part of the ‘matter’ it intends to master...At the end of the eighteenth century, Europe and America, in the name of the free and virtuous enlightened mind, claimed to spread light, law and wealth over the human world. After two centuries of massacres and civil, international, world wars, we are now beginning to go into mourning for this arrogance. (“Les Immatériaux”)

Continuing to participate in early conceptions of what the canon is and should be, what art, history, cultural and material life should be, allows for a form of collective forgetting driven by regret, greed, and chauvinistic hoarding.²¹

The story of culture and the stuff it leaves behind is the story of humanity and what *it* leaves behind. To leave the forgotten things, the broken things, the ignored things out of this story is hardly to tell the story of humanity (if, again, such a thing can be done) at all. The texts we read and interpret read and interpret us back to ourselves. They act as depositories of our intentions, values, and histories while *embodying* these things and, in a very real sense, *giving* them to us. Fowles notes that “by attending to things in themselves, we stand in a much better position to understand people in themselves, due to the inescapable conclusion that people and things are mutually constitutive” (25). Seeing things as *living things*, as part of not just an

²¹ For more on this, see Russell Jacoby’s *Social Amnesia, A critique of conformist psychology from Adler to Laing*.

economy but an ecology, allows them more mobility and range. This in turn allows us *as things* and as *subjects interpreting things* more mobility and range. Perhaps the most important result of this mobility and range is the ability to face and correct errors in evaluation since evaluation is no longer seen as the production of final words and judgements. Waste, after all, acts as a record of our existence, it tells our own secrets to us since “inanimate objects...speak to us of what has transpired, even if we humans are incapable of confronting our iniquities. Only in waste does truth appear” (Signe Morrison). The canon, any canon, consigns texts external to it to the trash heap.

New ideas about canonization, however, allow us to return to the trash heap, rooting around and pulling objects back out. As is noted in *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice*:

The dustheap of history...should not necessarily refer to a place where things go to be forgotten...the dustheap of history is where we must look to confront our possibilities and failures, and where we must seek interruptions to entrenched and unproductive disavowals of how the material and symbolic work together when it comes to garbage...the dustheap of history as a vital, productive site of human activity. (Pellow 12-13)

Changing one's ideas about waste and therefore about cultural contamination and pollution can not only curb future waste, but also address waste in the process of being produced. An openness to the lateralization and democratization of culture creates new avenues for the study of not just

its most institutionally prized objects, but *all* of its objects regardless of any ultimately superficial status.

Embracing cultural spaces and moments that are liminal, that generate as a result of pollination across social, aesthetic, and other generic strata, that are intentional in their happy accidents, swaps, collisions, and encounters, can only make the study of textuality infinitely more rich. As Herrnstein Smith explains,

We can hardly hope to understand the social mechanisms and political consequences of popular culture and the mass media so long as we regard any contact with them as pollution, complicity, or ‘lax’ tolerance; nor can we move toward adequate analyses of their complex and differentiated effects so long as we begin and end with assumptions of mental and moral torpor, cultural stupefaction, and mass exploitation. (77)

To base our line of inquiry on readily available assumptions is to open the book of culture only to shut it again. Exhuming the biases at the heart of evaluative criticism prevents it from narrowing the answers to the question ‘How did we get here?’.

In allowing for this question to be constantly asked and re-asked, the status of objects and beings, along with objects *as* beings and beings *as* objects can be assessed and reassessed according to expansive collective need rather than narrow individual or collective desires. The consequences of relabelling and reinscribing even something as seemingly inconsequential as what media is considered ‘trashy’ are incalculable. This is because:

As the cultural model of waste is mapped onto humans, ethical dangers loom. Those who handle filth become tainted by it. Whole classes of human beings become equivalencies for

trash...‘thrown out’—geographically, economically, and morally...In the most egregious instances, ‘wasted’ beings are killed.

Yet the metaphor of waste can reveal the humanity we *share*. Only when something is seen, can that recognition spark change. If things have dignity, then we cannot ‘waste’ other humans *as* things. (Signe Morrison)

In not just capitalist conceptions of the world but many others, we are what we make and vice versa. As subjects in a globalized society, we are constantly making not just works of art, but also one another as we appraise these works and thus ourselves and others through the fruits of our labour.

This reality calls for a high level of sensitivity and care in the making of such appraisals. A cultural division of labour driven by specialization and alienation makes all these processes more efficient, but efficiency comes with its own profound costs. Bachelard thus calls for a flourishing of the intimate, poetic, and imaginative possibilities of space, language, and objects which he names “a slower ontology” (231). It is hard, painful work to enlarge the catalogue of cherished cultural artifacts, but the benefits are undeniable. Careful attention to any object, after all, “increases the object’s human dignity” so that these cherished things “produce a new reality of being, and they take their place not only in an order but in a community of order” (Bachelard 87-88). This enterprise can then be extended towards individual humans, societies, cultures, and histories, allowing for a more unified and harmonized taxonomy of all things.²²

²² Signe Morrison writes that “Only by taking one’s time can a path be scavenged among, around, and between the piles of historical and material detritus in the narrative...weighed by memory, how does one fashion a narrative line of coherence? Doesn’t such an endeavor junk people, events, and occurrences containing history and memory itself? How can we disentangle ourselves from the past? And, if we do, don’t we risk forgetting what we need to remember in order to act for the future?” (Signe Morrison). For some (contingent) answers to these questions, refer back to the sections of this essay on the subject of disciplinary, historical, and cultural coherence vs. fragmentation.

If we see literary studies as a space for dwelling, dreaming, and rumination, a space where life and feelings and history are lived, made, and remade, or even a space for “crashing,” where we are all guests rather than landlords or owners,²³ we can build that space collaboratively and contingently into something communal. If this means that all our judgments are impermanent and unstable, then let us buy our many truths at the cost of Truth. If such a conception of disciplinary and educational activity is foolish, then:

it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in...so much later...that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final...would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality. (Bachelard 82)

It is more naïve to think that the world and its many works can be properly ordered than to study the disorder and conflict which there are sure signs of wherever one turns their attention. We must concede that “to get out of prison all means are good ones. If need be, mere absurdity can be a source of freedom” (Bachelard 169). If so-called madness (and we must always ask so-called by who?) *is* our method, and freedom our goal, then these are goals and methods much more attainable than scientific or ascetic purity.

Early critical attitudes created a shallow scheme of alienation and disconnection brought about by a cerebral worldview that ignores vital relationships. Critics can no longer embody the figure that Herrnstein Smith makes note of:

²³ See Ryan Trimm’s “After the Century of Strangers: Hospitality and Crashing in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.”

the ‘ideal’ critic...who, in addition to possessing various exemplary natural endowments and cultural competencies, has, through exacting feats of self-liberation, freed himself of all forms of particularity and individuality, all special interests (or, as in Kant, all interests whatsoever), and thus of all bias...one who is ‘free’ of everything in relation to which any experience or judgment of value occurs. (41-42).

To embody this image is to withdraw from the world, retreating to Zarathustra’s cave and leaving behind any audience that lives beyond the walls of the academy. One other way to foster a deeper sense of engagement with the interconnectivity of texts is therefore to bring affectivity, and thus the self, back into criticism. Doing so involves listening to our own inner murmurings and those of others, as well as reevaluating what it means to be an expert. As Slava Polunin, Russian performance artist, clown, and founder of the Academy of Fools laments, "Nobody creates the academy of joy" (National Geographic). Taking an ecological approach to criticism requires acknowledging that the activities of the mind are reciprocally fed by and reliant upon one’s emotional landscape. This means allowing for a wider range of not just academic approaches within the field, but also a wider range of voices and modalities.²⁴

Dian Million, author and professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Washington, alerts us to the urgent need to “put an analysis of affect and emotion, a felt theory, back into our quest to understand both classic colonialism and our present in neoliberal

²⁴ Loveless also sees this as an essential part of research-creation, since “research-creation is taught by the ways that feminism has dealt with the denigration of certain forms of work (maintenance and care work) and certain vocalities (the ‘personal voice’). It is taught this not only by feminism, but by Indigenous, decolonial, and antiracist scholarship challenging institutional structures and intellectual traditions that draw their power from seeing certain kinds of research as non-research” (29).

governance” (30). She finds “the abstraction sometimes necessary in explanation hugely sterile and lacking key parts of the strength of resistance,” reasoning that “what good social movement, good social analysis, and good poetry have in common is the ability to incite, as in arouse, as in feel...to make relations” (31). The explanation, interrogation, and interpretation of literature and culture must then not only be self-aware, accessible, and conscious of social issues, but also lively, joyful, and accommodating to the addressing of traumas both within the classroom and out. When carried out as such, discourse transcends itself and becomes an inherently radical activity.

Answering this call involves relinquishing reductive loyalties to both discipline and narrow streams of theory while also encouraging students and critics to extend their reading practices beyond the classroom and the journal. Using not just intellectual but also emotional resources to address texts, is yet another way to reduce the waste involved in exploring forms of language and communication. As Eagleton writes,

A good deal of literary language is copious and exuberant...it can act as a critique of our everyday utterances...a rebuke to a civilisation for which language has become for the most part crudely instrumental. Soundbites, text-speak, managerial jargon, tabloid prose, political cant...Literature is about the felt experience of language, not just the practical use of it. (192)

As with many other forms of waste, there is a performative or self-fulfilling function to such labelling of kinds of communication as “copious” or “exuberant”. For much of the Western world’s history, these labels have been applied to emotional statements and resonances

themselves, appearing to bar such expressions and instincts from a wide range of methodological approaches.²⁵

Given the deeply problematic nature of canons and the activities that form them, the question of whether we should simply prohibit, restrict, suspend, or otherwise get rid of these seemingly obsolete monoliths and occupations altogether is still being asked. Critical evaluation, after all, can be considered gratuitous from a certain perspective.²⁶ The proposed solution of purging evaluation from criticism has proven as disagreeable to others as it was agreeable to a select few. It represents another moment in the story of taste where its variability and history are left out in order to expedite the course of textual examination.

6. Conclusion: What Does it *Really* Mean to Read?

Even as English begins to disappear as a discipline, its significance as a tool for examining the world remains pronounced, its core questions unsettled. The leverage its practitioners and custodians wield over what counts as culture has (and must have) deep and widely felt political implications. Eaglestone notes that:

²⁵ Bayard argues that “artistic creation and criticism...cannot in reality be disjoined” (99). For him, “the only true object of criticism is not the work it discusses, but itself...criticism attains its ideal form when it no longer has any relation with a work...its object is...the critic himself...Reflection on the self, meanwhile, is the primary justification for critical activity, and this alone can elevate criticism to the level of an art” (102-103).

²⁶ As Herrnstein Smith describes, “The boldest move in the mid-century effort to give disciplinary respectability and cognitive substance to criticism, was...Northrop Frye's call upon it to redefine itself as a project that banished evaluation altogether...he derided ‘all the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange,’ and observed: ‘this sort of thing cannot be part of any systematic study, for a systematic study can only progress; whatever dithers or vacillates or reacts is merely leisure-class gossip’”. This maneuver “was remarkably effective, at least to the extent of haunting a generation of literary scholars, critics, and teachers, many of whom are still inclined to apologize for making overt value judgements, as if for some temporary intellectual or moral lapse” (21-22). Yet Herrnstein Smith positions Frye’s supposed miracle solution as not just unnatural, but also as shirking the moral responsibilities of the critic. She writes that “for a responsive creature, to exist is to evaluate. We are always...calculating how things ‘figure’ for us—always pricing them...in relation to the total economy of our personal universe” (42).

English was developed to mould people...Arguments...about what should or shouldn't be read, about the canon, about how people should talk and write, or about assessment, are 'actually arguments about shaping...people's views of the world'...the study of literature is one of the very few subjects where individual experience is taken seriously as knowledge...Its hallmark is...the 'value and attention it gives to the personal and the subjective'. (130)

When we talk about literature, we are thus also talking about *anything but* literature. To engage in literary discourse is, and must be, to engage with the problems, value, and status of diversity, representation, interpretation, subjectivity, and culture itself. Realizing the urgency of addressing the unaddressed and uplifting that which has been put down is half of a battle which, it seems, will rage on so long as art and opinions about it are being made, discussed, and disseminated.

Some have argued that the only responsible thing to do is to put a stop to all these debates, disagreements, and discourses. I would argue the opposite.²⁷ We've established that we can wrestle with literature and what it means, but when it steps on the scale before a match, how much does Literature weigh? In "The World of Wrestling", Roland Barthes writes that "the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him" (Barthes). Perhaps literary criticism can be seen as a similar kind of theatre, a way of going through the motions or putting on a show, making a spectacle of the internal conflicts we face constantly when presented with making a pronouncement about a work of art. But if it is to

²⁷ Along with Eaglestone and Herrnstein Smith. The former writes that "Looking at texts, interpretation and a wide range of significant ideas, then relating this to our cultures and societies, involves knowledge and careful thought. Perhaps most of all it involves constantly taking *responsibility* for each interpretation. English also asks: *Why* do you think that about the text?" (Eaglestone 148). The latter writes that "the securing of authority from interrogation and risk could hardly be thought an unqualified or intrinsic good. On the contrary, it might be thought there was some communal value to ensuring that all authority was *always* subject to interrogation and *always* at risk...that of parent, teacher, and missionary as well as that of tyrant, pope, and state flunky" (Herrnstein Smith 161).

stay in motion—that is, stay alive— criticism must also recognize that “what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice” (Barthes). In this cultural moment, to *do* English is to *do* justice, and this must also mean *doing justice* to an ever-growing scope of texts and textualities. This involves studying culture itself, the way it is formed, reformed, settled and unsettled.

If culture itself is a text, what is its theme? Moreover, what is the theme of this century and the last, perhaps even this millennium? Waste. Waste is perhaps the only thing neoliberal systems of governance and self-governance have laid down the infrastructure to make sustainable. Capitalism and bureaucracy, which ironically insist on the cutting off of the redundant, have created mass accumulations of useless junk we don’t even have the space to throw away anymore. Potential, potentiality, and their waste. This has been the refrain of our time.²⁸ By reflecting on waste and its presence in structures like the canon, we can see how changing our relationship to things—even cultural things—and the way we classify or interact with them, is vital to facing larger existential threats.

What do we do to a piece of literature when we write about it? Peck at it? Wrestle with it? Tear it to shreds? More importantly, what does it *mean* to write about literature? Is it just telling other people how to read a particular text? Is it a documentation of our own wrestling with the text like Jacob wrestling an angel? Or is the struggle so that someone can learn something from the story, the parable, the myth of one’s own encounter? Is it a way of stripping the text naked or dressing it up? Do you reveal the bare essence of the text or add the fluff of interpretation to its content? Or do you open new passageways and doors into the text? New

²⁸ This sentiment echoes that expressed in the introduction to *Histories of the Dustheap*, where it is written that “the individual human body and body politic can be coordinated around metaphors of waste and garbage; all bodies in late capitalism...are out of place, and the political and aesthetic project of improving the self has made the relationship between waste and human value the central issue of our time” (Pellow 5).

passageways and doors out?²⁹ Maybe I wrote this essay because I wished to turn paper into more paper, or words into more words. Maybe literary criticism and the keeping alive of these discourses are not only inevitable, but also vital. Maybe the productivity of criticism is in the struggling itself, in the ongoingness of the ongoingness of evaluation. Whatever the case, we still need to guide and shape these processes to our needs and aspirations to the best of our abilities given their many contingencies.

Although posed as such time and time again, oppressive practices of interpretation and evaluation—along with the suffering engendered by these practices—don't have to be seen as inevitable. In a time where more people are asking what is required of a 'new normal', we need cultural practices that address the unfamiliar circumstances we find ourselves in. In a demonstration of literature's enduring weight, some parting words:

As soon as we submit
to a system based on causality, linear time
we submit, again, to the old values, plunge again
into slavery. Be strong. We have the right to make
the universe we dream. No need to fear "science"
groveling
apology for things as they are, ALL POWER
TO JOY, which will remake the world.

-Diane di Prima, Revolutionary Letter #51

²⁹ Professor Rudine Sims Bishop offers that "Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (Sims Bishop). The 'windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors' approach, which insists that students are offered as many of these ways of accessing a text as possible, is becoming a common one in North American English classrooms.

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