AFTER ALMOST TWO DECADES of tumult and transformation in university departments that still claim literature as part of their disciplinary domain, what is most remarkable about literary study at the beginning of the twenty-first century is how similar it is to what passed for such study at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like philology one hundred years ago, academic literary study today—at least at the most eminent universities and in the most prestigious journals—is a highly esoteric activity, unlikely to appeal to anyone outside its own "professional" boundaries, anyone whose foremost interest in works of literature is simply to read them. It is, therefore, an endeavor that could hardly exist outside the university's institutional protection, and it is most strikingly concerned not with the appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of literature but with the historical and cultural "knowledge" that can be acquired from works of literature through a special kind of analysis. The effort, chronicled by Gerald Graff in Professing Literature, to make "literature itself" the focus of academic study and to establish "aesthetic criticism" as the primary mode of literary study must surely be judged a failure, the current academic scene clearly dominated by the sort of scholars Graff terms "investigators."1

But of course the motives for rejecting the merely literary as a focus of study are quite different among current scholarly investigators as compared to the philologists of 1901. The attitude of the latter can probably be captured in the words of one of them quoted by Graff: "Why then waste time and brains in thrashing over again something which is after all only subjective opinion? Mere aesthetic theorizing should be left to the magazine writer or to the really gifted critic" (p. 124). Such "researchers" did not deny the value of reading works of literature; they simply considered this value to be essentially "subjective," not an appropriate object of academic scrutiny. While these remarks do imply some condescension toward the "really gifted critic" and this critic's "mere aesthetic theorizing," they do not repudiate the very idea of an aesthetic approach to literature. The present generation of academics engaged in the investigation of literature, on the other hand, have repudiated the aesthetic approach, either explicitly, through the well-publicized critiques of the canon, of the very notion of the great work, or of the remaining approaches still associated with New Criticism, or implicitly through the gradual establishment of cultural investigation as the new norm for the professional training of graduate students and as the dominant mode of analysis in the influential journals. Moreover, the primary motive behind the renunciation of the aesthetic has more to do with politics than with methodology: for these scholars, the aesthetic is literally useless, quite irrelevant to the paramount goal of "intervening" in a continuing ideological struggle that is thought to be the main business of the university scholar.

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

But in retrospect the New Critics cannot escape responsibility for preparing the ground that would eventually be occupied by the insurgents in their revolt against the very principles the New Critics had sought to secure. Both through the apparent dogmatism of some of their pronouncements and through their focus on the university as the instrument by which their method of taking literature seriously could be most productively practiced, the New Critics made it almost inevitable that not only their method but also their insistence on the autonomy of literature-and thus the idea that the study of literature should properly disclose what is "literary" about literature-would eventually be challenged and ultimately displaced. In this process, both literature and criticism would come to be so closely associated with the academy it is no wonder that for anyone with a lingering belief in the relevance of formalist criticism or who continues to stubbornly believe that literature itself might still matter it now seems that with the advent of cultural studies (and before that, critical theory) what had until then been understood as literary criticism, as well as "literature" regarded as the works of art such criticism seeks to illuminate, have all but vanished from the scene.

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

II

It is doubtful that T.S. Eliot had anything like this premise in mind when he began writing the essays, most importantly, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Function of Criticism," that from our current perspective still seem unmistakably to be the first expressions of the critical outlook that would be articulated more elaborately and programatically by the New Critics. Although Eliot himself had an academic background, albeit in philosophy, unlike those he inspired he never took up a university teaching position, and his own criticism, while certainly learned and high-minded, could hardly be called "academic" according to such criteria as "objectivity" or "detachment," which New Criticism at least implicitly helped to promote. Eliot later in his career admitted, of course, that his early criticism was in part polemical in Frank Kermode's words, "a defense of the poetic practice of his friends and himself." (This polemical element is in turn never entirely absent from the critical practice of the New Critics themselves.) On the other hand, an important effect of the critical writing of Eliot and those allied with him was to in a sense "professionalize" literary criticism, as Louis Menand has pointed out. According to Menand, "[t]he ersatz products of unqualified practitioners could now be written out of the field on the authority of standards freshly articulated and generated from within the discipline-from the consideration of poetry as poetry, and not another thing. . . ."

Nevertheless, while one can imagine that Eliot would have been happy to see this more rarefied conception of criticism take hold among literary critics equipped with a newly-developed sense of professional purpose-not least because such a criticism would likely be sympathetic to his own preferred brand of modernist poetry-it is harder to believe he would have considered it necessary, or even possible, that the "discipline" of literary criticism literally find a home in academe. Perhaps the manifest elitism of Eliot's position could be appropriately pronounced with an Oxbridge accent, and surely he would have found the notion of training new generations of advanced disciples an attractive one, but in the end Eliot's ambitions went well beyond organizing what John Crowe Ransom would term "Criticism, Inc.," and he could hardly have settled on the university (especially the American university) as the most effective instrument for fulfilling them. Although "saving civilization" was undoubtedly an aspiration shared by many New Critics, they were arguably not as thoroughly possessed by the idea, or at least were more aware of the obstacles in the way of accomplishing the task and thus were able to appreciate the benefits of a less all-encompassing movement that would at least secure one important cultural institution.
Menand's reminder that the "discipline" of literature was for Eliot essentially identical with the specific analysis of "poetry as poetry" is worth attending to as well, since many of the figures associated with the development of New Criticism were themselves poets (Eliot, Empson, Ransom) and most of the important criticism actually produced by New Critics was in fact close reading of lyric poetry, including the arguably most distinguished book to be written by a New Critic, Cleanth Brooks's The Well Wrought Urn. The suitability of poetry to a critical method built on a holistic approach to interpretation, that seeks to delineate what a poem does as opposed to what it "says," is obvious enough. If, as Wellek and Warren put it, "[t]he aesthetic experience is a form of contemplation, a loving attention to qualities and qualitative structures" (p. 241), how much more undivided an opportunity for such contemplation, how even more ardent can one's "loving attention" be, when the object of that attention is as textually compact and verbally concentrated as a poem—for example, the highly figurative and allusive verse of the metaphysicals, which the New Critics held in particularly high esteem.6

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

Moreover, while the New Criticism is remembered first and foremost as the preeminent version of formalist criticism in the English-speaking literary world, now that it is so thoroughly out of fashion its more deeply rooted and mostly unarticulated assumptions are if anything more transparently in view. That for many of the poet-critics such as Eliot, Tate, and Ransom poetry had a strong association with religion, sometimes serving as the direct expression of a religious sensibility, is obvious enough, but all of the New Critics conveyed an unmistakable sympathy for what W. K. Wimsatt called in the title of one of his essays "Christian thinking," not least in their very preference for the metaphysical poets and their correlative disdain for most of the Romantics, especially Shelley. To be sure, they did not insist that great poetry should explicitly address Christian themes (if it did so, it would of course always qualify any treatment of these themes through paradox, ambiguity, and irony), and especially did not seek to reduce even poems authored by Christian poets to outright statements of Christian belief (such an effort would be guilty of the "heresy of paraphrase"). Rather, the New Critical method itself, despite the prescription that it arise from "the consideration of poetry as poetry, and not another thing," could work to bestow a kind of religious status on poetry. As Wimsatt put it, "Christian thinking ought to be sympathetic to recent literary criticism . . . simply from the fact that recent criticism
is criticism; that is, an activity aimed at understanding a kind of value, and a kind which if not identical with moral and religious values, is very close to these and may even be thought of as a likely ally."

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

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

In Chapter 4 of The Well Wrought Urn, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" a reading of Herrick's "Corrina's going a-maying," Brooks writes: "I think our initial question, 'What does the poem communicate?' is badly asked. It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself" (pp. 72-73). If any one excerpted passage from the numerous books and essays propounding the basic principles of New Criticism could be said to express its core proposition in something like its purest state, and to capture the view of literature that New Critical literary study would attempt to communicate to its pupils, this passage, in my view, comes close. A successful poem forever eludes our attempts to fully describe it in a critical language of interpretation. Presumably even the preferred terminology of
ambiguity and paradox can only approximate the truly intricate devices the poem uses to escape from us. Subtlety is the keyword for the critic as it is for the poet, but the critic cannot expect to have access to the same resources as the poet in his attempt to fulfill this task.

Yet in this statement of the ambitions of New Criticism we can clearly enough see how its more doctrinaire assertions might be enlisted in critical projects not wholly consistent with the conception of both literature and criticism enunciated here. Almost all of the critical approaches whose fortunes are recounted in Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* or Art Berman's *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* can be said to share an important postulate with New Criticism, or even when explicitly questioning a specific postulate can be described as doing so according to a principle or antecedent example set in place by the New Critics. Some of these approaches fairly obviously represent a variation on New Critical aestheticism or on its bracketing of "text" as the proper focus of the critic's attention. Although Susan Sontag declared herself "against interpretation," her call for an "erotics of art" if anything seeks to outdo the New Critics in dedication to the immediacy of one's ideal relationship to works of literature. The Wallace Stevens-derived notion of poetry as "supreme fiction" whereby, in Lentricchia's words, "[i]magination makes space between us and chaos," providing a "momentary release from sure engulfment, madness, and death" (p. 33) may allow us to break free of the claustrophobia of the text and find room both for the external world and for the poet's creative imagination, but of course encourages us to again retreat into the aesthetic consolation of self-acknowledged literary conceits.

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

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

Of course, in the process all of the qualities that for the New Critic made a poem recognizably a poem gradually disappear, as the study of literature as this was envisioned at midcentury and in the name of which the first transformation of the modern English department was undertaken is wholly repudiated in a second transfiguration of English into a more fittingly "academic" department committed to "scholarly" investigation. In this new dispensation, these investigators still exploit the lingering prestige attached to literature, but otherwise works of literature have value only as means to an end, instruments to be used in the ultimate task of leveling all distinctions between high culture and popular culture, between the poetic and the prosaic, between literary expression and all other forms of discourse. It is hard to imagine an outcome more disheartening, not only to the New Critics, but to all those who helped build literary study into a discipline that defined itself through its assumed duty as caretaker of the literary tradition, however differently some of those assigned to the task may have carried it out.

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

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

And here is where New Criticism is itself perhaps most culpable for creating the institutional conditions that would breed academic critics and scholars whose agenda was to displace the study of literature with the study of anything but. It is not so much that these academics make a claim on the techniques of close reading. A truly dispassionate examination of their application of these techniques could only find it in most cases narrow and reductive, if not an obvious distortion of the New Critical attempt to fit the practice of literary analysis to the subtlety and complexity of texts meant to be the subjects of analysis. Instead, what makes the New Critics blameworthy for the trivialization of literature is the strategy of entrusting the guardianship of literature to the academy in the first place. And this was done, I believe, not because the academy was manifestly an institution that could successfully accomplish the task, but because it was, or could be, an institution of sufficient standing that henceforth it would not be mere pretence to spell "literature" with the capital L. When works of fiction, poetry, and drama—and specifically those works that most agreeably responded to the New Critical method—came to be officially marked as Literature, any real chance to make the academy a place where a sincere effort to understand and build enthusiasm for literature could be carried out was effectively forfeited.

It is hard now to read Eliot, Ransom, Wimsatt, and even Brooks without feeling that for them Literature had become the only available substitute for the lost authority of religion, the lost recognition of religion as authority—in an irretrievably secular, irreversibly scientific, and irresponsibly factionalized era. It is hard in this context not to see the individual poems comprising Eliot's "tradition" as forming a collectively created sacred text and the New Criticism with its rigorous protocols as the accompanying commentary dutifully educing and delimiting the ecclesiastical significance of this text. Eliot, of course, said it directly: "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." "In ages like our own," he goes on, "it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards" (p. 97). Brooks and Wimsatt, professors of English, not of religion or moral philosophy, would not have expressed themselves in this way in their own professional discourse, although Wimsatt's assertion, previously quoted, that the value to be identified in works of literature "if not identical with moral and religious values, is very close to these" surely gives the game away. Perhaps it was naive at best to believe that the American academy could function with any stability as kind of seminary where one can learn to read poetry as scripture, although granting the demographic characteristics of the prewar university, it is easier to conclude that the intellectual training of a social elite might serve the purposes of those New Critics hoping to smuggle Eliot's "ethical and theological standards" into the literature classroom along with the literary/critical standards they were also eager to impose.

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

The rise and fall of New Criticism is thus ultimately a story that upon closer examination reveals, appropriately enough, its fair share of irony and paradox. A strategy intended to enhance the authority of literature, it winds up contributing significantly to the subversion of its authority. Designed to establish literature and literary criticism as indispensable elements in the academic curriculum, its most lasting effect may have been to demonstrate they are entirely inessential to academic study. Most remarkably, when we are now able to view New Criticism at some distance from its formerly secure emplacement within the university, and judging it by its own announced decrees, it seems so undeniably to have violated the very principle its proponents were at such great pains to uphold: while claiming to protect literature from the incursions of those with other ethical and political objectives to advance, the New Critics themselves held literature hostage to their own utilitarian purposes. If the struggle for control of the literature curriculum is about the use to which the study of literature is to be put, an appeal to the New Critics on behalf of impartial, disinterested standards cannot seriously be made.

III

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

Just such a consideration of the aesthetic as an existential activity, both on the part of the artist and the reader or perceiver, is at the core of the theory of art presented by John Dewey in Art as Experience, a book that has not received very much attention during the curricular wars of the last two decades (and, curiously enough, at a time of renewed interest in Dewey's work in general)." That it has been relatively neglected is on the one hand surprising, since partisans of literary study that keeps "literature itself" as its focus would find in Dewey's thinking much with which they would eagerly agree. On the other hand, Dewey's reluctance to speak of art objects as "icons" (except in the weak sense in which specifically visual art is of course iconographic), and his insistence that the poet and the reader are engaged in a collaborative effort to produce a kind of experience would undoubtedly make many with a lingering inclination to New Critical rigor decidedly uncomfortable, and not only because Dewey seems so blatantly to indulge in the "affective fallacy." Furthermore, even if one were to acknowledge the soundness of Dewey's ideas about art and the experience of art, it is undoubtedly somewhat difficult to see how they could be translated into a very extensive curriculum of academic literary study.

Nevertheless, a brief survey of those ideas should demonstrate they reveal an understanding of art and literature, as well as the role of criticism, at least as encompassing as that evinced by New Criticism (but without its dogmatism) and are in many ways wholly consistent with the more enduring insights of the best of the New Critics. As in all of Dewey's work, "experience" in Art and Experience represents a distinctive human capacity, one that we all too often fail to exploit fully and that, more generally, Dewey attempted to put at the center of his human--focused, temporally directed philosophy. What makes aesthetic experience particularly important in this philosophy is that it is, when allowed to unfold in its own proper fashion, and to a successful completion, an especially ample kind of experience--perhaps the most ample kind of experience. In Dewey's words, "it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" (p. 46). It is not going too far to say that for Dewey aesthetic experience is perhaps the most profoundly human of phenomena and that a careful consideration of the conditions in which this sort of experience occurs would itself be one of the more valuable endeavors we could undertake. As in effect experience of experience, aesthetic experience could potentially provide as much genuine knowledge about the nature of human consciousness as we are likely to obtain.

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

[410x129]mmon what had been isolated and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as
well as to that of those who listen." And for Dewey, "This force of art, common to all the arts, is most fully manifested in literature" (p. 244).

One can easily enough imagine the New Critical objections to the "subjectivity" implicit in this account of art and experience. (And Stanley Fish, who seems to have taken to heart Dewey's emphasis on the role of "those who listen" in the aesthetic/literary interchange, surely did verge on ceding all authority to the latter; furthermore, Fish's emphasis is always on the meaning constructed by readers, rarely, if ever, on the "aesthetic" qualities of the reading experience.) But for Dewey the point is not that aesthetic experience is something nebulous or ineffably personal. Such experience, because it is fully motivated and mediated by the art object is, instead, concrete and, if authentic, thoroughly objective. Further, true perception or appreciation of art or literature requires quite rigorous effort: "We lay hold of the full import of a work of art only as we go through in our vital processes the processes the artist went through in producing the work" (p. 325).

Thus is there also an important role for engaged and discerning criticism. Indeed, many of Dewey's comments on aesthetic form and the practice of criticism seem strikingly consonant with the views of the New Critics, as a few salient examples might show: "Science states meanings; art expresses them" (p. 84); "Criticism is a search for the properties of the object that may justify the direct reaction" (p. 308). The reductive fallacy "flourishes wherever some alleged occasion in the life of the artist, some biographical incident, is taken as if it were a kind of substitute for appreciation of the poem that resulted.... Historical and cultural information may throw light on the causes of [literary] production. But when all is said and done, [a work of literature]is just what it is artistically, and its esthetic merits and demerits are within the work" (p. 316).

Even those contentions of Dewey's that seem to reveal his philosophical pragmatism at its most antiessentialist (if not antihistorical) might betray more affinity with fundamental New Critical assumptions than would perhaps otherwise be expected. For example, the following claim could seem antithetical to a project that seeks to foreground the consideration of literature as a historical tradition: "A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced" (p. 108). And yet, when Eliot famously proclaimed that "for order to exist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" (p. 38), was he not introducing an essentially pragmatic principle of literary valuation that accepts the unavoidable contingency of literary history? Whether or not Eliot was self-interested in doing so, the principle he endorsed remains eminently sensible: all works of literature have value only when they are alive to the present needs of those who read them. Dewey adds to this, then, the important proviso that what all readers of serious literature need, what they implicitly seek if they are themselves serious readers, is the kind of "clarified experience" that art and literature can provide.

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

But it is admittedly improbable that even an argument informed by Dewey's analysis in Art as Experience could have carried the day in the emerging academic culture of investigation. In the end, this culture is driven by the same disdain for the "frivolous" and the "impractical" that has always characterized the American temperament toward art and literature and that once kept literature out of the curriculum of higher education. For the theorists, the historicists, the polemists, literature will be made useful to "real life"-as case studies in the exposition of some more profound conceptual construct, as tangible contributions to the advancement of various revolutions-or it must be discarded. No justification of the study of literature "for its own sake" will likely ever make much headway against this view (although the justification implicit in Dewey's philosophy of art is thoroughly sound, nevertheless) and the twenty-first-century corporatized university with its emphasis on "product" is an even poorer choice as a means of inspiring respect for literature than was the still genteel university the New Critics confronted. Those of us whose respect for literary art, perhaps first kindled by the New Critics, still persists may need most of all to concede to the university its disciplinary prerogatives and allow a disencumbered literature-that is, particular works of poetry, fiction, or nonfiction-to regain its own kind of usefulness in the distinct experiences of its readers.

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