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Extreme Criticism

John Brenkman

Like many who came of age in the 1960s, I was led to literary studies because of a passion for poetry and politics. In turn, the emerging projects in theory, which in many respects were an attempt to consolidate intellectually what had been learned and hoped for in the political and social movements that had arisen in the 1960s and were then declining, illuminated the possible relationships between literature and politics in startling ways. The turn to looking at the question of culture, as the determining setting of literary practices and forms, then contributed to the origins of cultural studies in the United States.

The passion of literary intellectuals for politics goes back to the eighteenth century and has manifested itself in everything from the literary-political reviews that have accompanied virtually every literary and political movement all the way to the temptations for writers and critics to become fellow travelers, functionaries, or tourists of the revolution. Today the vitality of the interplay of literature and politics in intellectual life is in trouble.

Why?

Cultural studies, in this its moment of ascendancy, exhibits an exuberant ignorance of itself. It takes great pride in going beyond literature, high culture, and disciplinarity. It defines itself as just this threefold transcendence. But what exactly is the practice of cultural studies?

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For starters, cultural studies *is* literature. It exists through its journals, essays, conference papers, and books. It occupies a significant slice of contemporary print culture—though a considerably smaller one than, say, the world novel.

Second, insofar as the dubious concept of high culture has a reliable meaning in our society, cultural studies—whatever aspects of culture it studies—itself belongs to high culture. To do cultural studies requires an extraordinary level of educational attainment, the mastery of rarefied styles of discourse and argument, and, most importantly, a methodically alienated attitude toward ordinary cultural objects, practices, and experiences. It bears all the marks of the elite and specialized training on which it depends.

Third, as regards disciplinarity, cultural studies's methods, topics, and discursive norms are, on inspection, narrower and more uniform than those of a traditional history department.

So, while cultural studies defines itself as going beyond literature, high culture, and disciplinarity, what defines cultural studies is that it *is* literature, high culture, and a discipline. In the swollen annals of intellectual mystification, that approaches perfection.

The confusions afforded by this self-misunderstanding are multiplying. *Social Text* discovered the dangers of hopscotching disciplines; it's hard to do critical science studies if you can't tell a quark from a lark. When it comes to the question of literature and politics, the obfuscations are dire. Take the recent *PMLA* forum on "cultural studies and the literary." For the official publication of the Modern Language Association to invite interventions on the role of cultural studies at once accurately confirms and rightly legitimizes the presence of cultural studies in literature departments; it also implicitly acknowledges the intellectual conflicts and academic tensions that this presence fosters. But the discussion is skewed right off by the term *the literary*, a decoy concept if there ever was one. Nearly all of the thirty-two contributors to the forum took the bait. The only sensible manifestation of "the literary" as a concept establishing a field of research came from the Russian formalists, but nobody is talking about them. Otherwise, it's little more than the buzzword of those English department sentimentalists who proudly, defiantly announce their *love* of literature as a first line of defense against ideas.

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As soon as cultural studies is pitted against “the literary,” literary studies is reduced to either its most formalistic or its most ineffable dimension. Worse yet, it is cast out of any meaningful relation to politics. Except negatively: the proponents of cultural studies castigate the elitism of literature, while the defenders of literature fend off the intrusion of politics and ideology. The hard question—*what might the active relation between cultural studies and literary studies be?*—and the vital question—*what is the relation of literature and politics today?*—immediately drop from sight.

Two of the contributors whose own work and institutional activism have helped define cultural studies, Cary Nelson and Patrick Brantlinger, latch onto “the literary” and fire away at a target anybody could hit. Nelson’s broadside leads to the pronouncement that “every body of theory” in the past two decades “has found a way to install literary idealization at the heart of its enterprise.”¹ It does not occur to him that there may be something beyond idealization at work in the fact that Derrida crystallized a theoretical project through a reading of Mallarmé, Kristeva through Lautréamont, Said through Conrad, Jameson through Balzac, Gilbert and Gubar through the Brontës, Baker through Ellison, Deleuze through Proust, Lacan through Sophocles, Barthes through Racine, and on and on. These crystallizations of theory did not idealize “the literary” but found their own indispensable resources and sources in literature. Without them, cultural studies itself would be devoid of interpretive procedures and any intellectual framework whatever.

When Brantlinger then declares that literature “fits into [the] agenda [of cultural studies] only tangentially—perhaps merely as one more ideological illusion to be critiqued, together with God, the nation-state, individualism, and ‘free market’ (multinational) capitalism,” who’s illusioning who?² (Though I should admit, up front, that when I get done defending literature, I’m going on to a spirited defense of the nation-state and individualism and, more obliquely, of the free market and, only tangentially, of God. But I’m getting ahead of myself.)

Because cultural studies fails to recognize that cultural and social criticism, including its own variety, are thoroughly a part of literary culture, it is at the moment menacingly contradictory in its attitude toward literary studies. Nelson calls for “a serious dialogue between literary studies and cultural studies” and, in an apparent gesture of magnanimity, comically repeated by half a dozen contributors to the *PMLA* forum, reassures us that, well, yes, there will always be room for . . . Shakespeare! But when it comes right down to it he seems poised to shovel out the Augean stables of literariness: “we do not yet know what it would mean,” he muses, “for the discipline to make cultural studies central and serve it

1. Cary Nelson, “Forum,” *PMLA* 112 (Mar. 1997): 276.

2. Patrick Brantlinger, “Forum,” *PMLA* 112 (Mar. 1997): 266.

fully, though it might mean that literature would no longer be our main preoccupation.”³ Literary intellectuals unpreoccupied with literature.

To recover the question of literature and politics from this chorus of performative contradictions, it's necessary to foreground the social and the aesthetic dimensions of the concept of literature.

First, the social problematic: literature is the social practice of writing. Despite the cultural studies polemicists' frequent obligatory homages to Raymond Williams, they've lost track of his most fundamental insight: the history of literature is coextensive with the social history of literacy. Few societies have achieved universal general literacy, and fewer still have democratized education beyond a basic level. The social “unevenness of literacy and learning” in Williams's phrase implicates all social practices of writing in complex processes of social hierarchy and democratic leveling, of specialization and dissemination, of educational privilege and deprivation, of exclusiveness and reappropriation.⁴ Recognizing that a particular body of writing is “elite” is merely the start of inquiry, not its conclusion; the term does not have an unambiguous value, positive or negative. The place of print culture within culture as a whole is a dynamic, politically polyvalent question, complicated since the first third of the nineteenth century by the fact that the public sphere has had to reach all segments of society. The advent of mass media, which cultural studies seems to think relegates literature to the shadowy past, has merely shifted once more the place and dynamics of print culture. The social practices of writing, including the artistic ones, remain as pertinent as ever to the effective forms of literacy and learning and to the public sphere of information, opinion, and criticism.

Second, the aesthetic problematic: taking literature in the narrower sense of those social practices of writing that are artworks, the study of literature requires the study of literary form. The polemical evocations of “the literary” obviously allude to this aspect of literary studies but misunderstand it. There are formalist and nonformalist approaches to form, and the fruitful antagonisms and interactions between the two have shaped modern criticism. Propp, Jakobson, and Genette are formalists, Lukács, Bakhtin, Adorno, and Jameson are not, but they are all preoccupied with problems of form. I side with the nonformalists. Modern aesthetic theory from Hegel to Adorno has shown that the formative or constructive power of an artwork lies in its capacity to draw contradictory contents, imperatives, and modes of expression into some new form. Adorno identifies the beautiful—in a way that has important corollaries in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Macherey—not with the finished form of an artwork but with the discontinuous moments of illumination that hap-

3. Nelson, “Forum,” pp. 277, 276.

4. Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London, 1984), p. 221.

pen as a result of—or in a countermovement to—the striving for formal coherence. The work's *inner* form gives shape to a rift it cannot overcome in the heterogeneous, incommensurate materials it works on. "Glory be to God for dappled things—" writes Gerard Manley Hopkins in the poem "Pied Beauty":

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.⁵

What an artwork works on—let's simplify a bit with secular reference to the novel—is the material of its own medium (language or discourse) and the content it represents (some historical lifeworld).

The social and the aesthetic problematic of literature thus meet in the problem of form itself. They also meet through the institutionalization of the public realm. The social practice of writing implicates literature in the polity's forms of publicness. The aesthetic experience of inner form, I want to argue, is also implicated in publicness. Among the most suggestive passages in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is the section titled "Of Beauty as the Symbol of Morality." Its key assertion restates and extends his central tenet that the experience of the beautiful "gives pleasure with a claim for the agreement of everyone else," which has most often been construed by Kant's advocates and detractors alike as equating the universalism of aesthetic judgment with some uniform standard of taste. Kant writes:

Now I say the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and that it is only in this respect . . . that it gives pleasure with a claim for the agreement of everyone else. By this the mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere sensibility to pleasure received through the sense, and the worth of others is estimated in accordance with a like maxim of their judgment.⁶

Kant's insight here can be restated, in pragmatic terms, against the grain of his own search for intrinsic mental structures. The experience of the beautiful happens as a claim for the assent of others. Only insofar as I tacitly appeal to others that *this is beautiful* do I experience beauty; conversely, my experience of beauty tacitly carries within it this appeal to others. The artwork's appearance in a public realm and my own participation in that public realm with others are, in other words, *internal* to the experience of artistic form.

5. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (New York, 1970), ll. 7–10, p. 70.

6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1966), pp. 198–99.

Aesthetic “judgment” is enabled by a material, institutionalized space of expression and criticism. The so-called universality of the judgment is thus conditioned by the education, cultivation, and discourse of the participants in the public sphere. In the guise of formulating a “*critique* of judgment,” Kant evokes, to anticipate Hannah Arendt’s phrase, the “worldly space” of *criticism*, that is, the democratic underpinnings of publicness. The beautiful is a symbol of the morally good in the sense that I affirm “the worth of others” in my tacit appeal for their agreement. However, since my experience of the beautiful is enmeshed in the practices of criticism, and since the appeal to agreement takes place on the socially uneven terrain of educated sensibility, aesthetic judgment is in fact drawn into the fray of critical contention and dispute. Estimating the worth of others does not celebrate a communal standard but prompts a task of persuasion. Add to this the post-Kantian view that artistic beauty arises not from harmonious form but from the illuminating, dappled counter-movements to formal coherence. Inner form is, therefore, the regulative ideal of aesthetic experience not in the sense of an established or anticipated standard of taste but, on the contrary, an open-ended, contentious *valuing* at stake in literary and political criticism.⁷

In sum, literary form is the crux of the question of literature and politics in two respects. On the one hand, without grappling with inner form, criticism can’t really grasp the work’s material or its content, that

7. Among Kant’s commentators, Heidegger provides the strongest unconventional reading of the idea that the experience of the beautiful is, in Kant’s phrase, “*devoid of all interest*.” He assails the conventional reading, which he attributes to Schopenhauer: “If the relation to the beautiful, delight, is defined as ‘disinterested,’ then, according to Schopenhauer, the aesthetic state is one in which the will is put out of commission and all striving brought to a standstill; it is pure repose, simply wanting nothing more, sheer apathetic drift.” Heidegger interprets Kant differently:

Whatever we take an interest in is always already taken, i.e., represented, with a view to something else. . . . Whatever exacts of us the judgment “This is beautiful” can never be an interest. That is to say, in order to find something beautiful, we must let what encounters us, purely as it is in itself, come before us in its own stature and worth. We may not take it into account in advance with a view to something else, our goals and intentions, our possible enjoyment and advantage. Comportment toward the beautiful as such, says Kant, is *unconstrained favoring*. We must freely grant to what encounters us as such its way to be; we must allow and bestow upon it what belongs to it and what it brings to us.

Heidegger’s purpose is to create a rapprochement between Kant’s aesthetic and Nietzsche’s, despite Nietzsche’s own conventional, Schopenhauerian reading of Kant. He cites Nietzsche to the effect that what is beautiful is “an expression of what is *most worthy of honor*,” and then claims this *is* the Kantian conception of beauty: “For just this—purely to honor what is of worth in its appearance—is for Kant the essence of the beautiful.” Kant’s *unconstrained favoring* and *disinterested delight* he then equates with Nietzschean *rapture*:

the beautiful is what determines us, our behavior and our capability, to the extent that we are claimed supremely in our essence, which is to say, to the extent that we ascend beyond ourselves. . . . Thus the beautiful is disclosed in rapture. . . . If the

is, its artistically rendered language and lifeworld. And, on the other hand, the aesthetic experience of form is implicated, through its necessary tie to critical discourse, in the social and political conflicts inherent in the formations of the public sphere.

There is a loss of form in current criticism, especially the very criticism that purports to link literature and politics. The reasons are undoubtedly multiple and beyond the scope of this discussion. I want simply to suggest how this loss of form manifests itself in one significant trend in contemporary criticism, namely, the gender/race/class paradigm that has helped orient so much important political criticism of culture and literature.

As typically deployed, gender/race/class has given rise to a new allegorical criticism that deflects the problem of inner form in favor of a hermeneutic that scans a text's network of signifiers in search of its purported representation or "construction" of gender, race, and class. But networks of signifiers are a dime a dozen in literary texts; without the constraining obligation to read those signifiers off the inner dynamic of form, a reading is free to attach the signifiers it gathers up to any framework of meaning (any constellation of signifieds) it chooses, and it is the gender/race/class grid that supplies that framework. The grid is flexible because its three categories can variously be construed as problems of identity, difference, hierarchy, or power. The problem is not that the interpretive procedures start on the side of social content. Nonformalist approaches to form have often done so. The problem is that they seldom get to the question of form, and a part of the reason for that failing is the

beautiful is what sets the standard for what we trust we are essentially capable of, then the feeling of rapture, as our relation to the beautiful, can be no mere turbulence and ebullition.

(Martin Heidegger, *The Will to Power as Art*, vol. 1 of *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell [New York, 1979], pp. 108, 109, 111, 113)

The *valuing* that occurs in the experience of the beautiful does not measure the artwork against an established standard; Heidegger gets at this through the idea that the beautiful "corresponds to what we demand of ourselves" (p. 112). There is something unprecedented about what is beautiful, something beyond the scope of our existing interests, representations, goals, intentions, and so on. Nietzsche and Heidegger encapsulate their sense of aesthetic rapture in their pseudo-aristocratic vocabulary of honor, nobility, and rank, and they seek in aesthetic experience intimations of what the age may hold of greatness and supremacy. Their idiom is antimodern. In Heidegger's own essays on art and poetry, his aesthetic valuing clearly bear the mark of his reactionary and authoritarian beliefs. My argument is twofold. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is a valuing that reaches beyond established taste and standards; on the other hand, that valuing is embroiled in the contentious, democratic or protodemocratic public realm of contending political convictions and historical visions. The conservative convictions and visions of a Heidegger are there to be contested; actively contesting them requires aesthetic valuing as forceful as his own.

way gender/race/class is used to identify the social contents and political context of the artwork in the first place.

There has been no lack of skepticism, even irritation, with the prevalence of gender, race, and class in cultural studies. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., opened their introduction to the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled “Identities” in 1992 by suggesting that these terms, the “holy trinity of literary criticism,” were threatening “to become the regnant clichés of our critical discourse”; they called for more attention to the “multiple intersections” of gender, race, and class to overcome reductive conceptions of identity.⁸ Gates would later voice a more general skepticism toward what he termed the gender-race-class mantra, and denouncing this mantra has since then itself become a kind of mantra.

I am not wanting to repeat either incantation. Much of the most original and penetrating literary and cultural criticism today turns on questions of gender, race, and class. The new social movements of the last several decades—civil rights and Black Power, feminism, the gay and lesbian movement—inspired these efforts in critical discourse to give consistency to politically charged interpretations of literature and culture. What is flawed is the assumption in this search for a method that the gender/race/class *paradigm* tacitly provides a coherent account of social relationships as a whole and thus can reliably undergird and justify particular interpretations.

There are actually two versions of gender/race/class. The one is a paradigm of identity constructs, the other a paradigm of social inequalities. While gender, race, and class are crucial components of social lifeworlds and of politics, and therefore essential to understanding the contents and the contexts of literature, both versions of the paradigm tend to eschew the complexities of analyzing lifeworlds—the recalcitrant, heterogeneous, experienced content the artwork works on. And they are confused about the relation of gender, race, and class to the prevailing values and institutions of Western democratic politics.

The identity paradigm is particularly inadequate in addressing crucial questions of class formation and distributive justice. Consider the question of the formation of middle classes. Does the cause of social justice in developing societies, for example, require the growth or the elimination of the middle class? Marxism, Stalinism, and Maoism have all linked social progress to the elimination of the middle class; in the Soviet Union and China this was a deadly, nearly genocidal project. Is there a peaceful and judicious path to eliminating the middle class? Or, on the contrary, as Octavio Paz has eloquently argued, does the possibility of combining democracy with development depend on the expansion of

8. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Editors’ Introduction: Multiplying Identities,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 625.

middle classes?⁹ These historic questions cannot possibly be addressed by construing the question of the middle classes as a problem of identity. Closer to home, take the question of the making of the black middle class, originally in the first decades of the twentieth century and then again, dramatically, in the last thirty years. Is it best understood as a bundle of identity markers (“classism”) or as a major progressive achievement of twentieth-century black political movements and social reform? The question is seldom even raised, for the simple reason that the gender/race/class paradigm of identity has nothing to say about it.

The other way of construing gender/race/class has been to take it as a kind of map of the macroinequalities of modern societies. As a rough sketch of the social relationships from which significant political movements and debates emerge, the gender/race/class paradigm of inequality is certainly valid. But its radical tenor and utopian underpinnings depend on a tacit appeal to macroequalities of gender, race, and class. And there the paradigm becomes hollow. With respect to gender and race, it runs afoul of the fact that its own theoretical categories cannot reconcile equality and difference, for the simple reason that equality and difference cannot be reconciled *by theory*; that task can only be carried out in the unending, undecidable conflicts and initiatives within the polity and civil society, culture and law.

The appeal to macroequalities is a *faux* totality. It derives from Marxism’s appeal to the possibility of a classless society as the basis for analyzing the dynamics of class societies. The inequalities paradigm not only puts race and gender in a false parallelism to class, it also ignores that the theoretical benchmark of a classless society is in shambles. For there is today no viable vision of a radically egalitarian society, that is, of a radically egalitarian, industrialized, urbanized, mass society. That is the squandered utopia of 1848–1989. Its shadowy persistence in the gender/race/class paradigm suggests how uncertain we radical intellectuals now are about how to refashion a vision of social justice that Marxism preserved for a century and a half by assuming that the synthesis of modernization and egalitarianism was a realizable goal. The gender/race/class paradigm is, in this sense, an intellectual bulwark against the extreme historical pessimism to which the egalitarian imagination has of necessity succumbed. In an intellectual culture—like ours—that craves optimism, gender/race/class resurrects the rhetoric of egalitarianism in the absence of its possibility.

Though *politics* and *the political* are omnipresent terms in current cultural criticism, the traditions of Western democratic thought and the in-

9. See, for example, Octavio Paz, “Revolt and Resurrection,” *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York, 1985), p. 81.

stitutions of Western democratic practice have an unsettled place in this discourse. These traditions and institutions are frequently cast as ideological illusions, a hegemonic structure of power, or the West's ethnocentric modernity. I agree with Michael Walzer's argument in *Spheres of Justice* that social justice is a question of the distribution of goods and therefore of the cultural and political conflicts over the interpretation of goods and the principles of their distribution; I also agree with his argument that the *setting* of such deliberations, debates, and distributions is the *political community*, that is, the polity. "The community," he writes, "is itself a good—conceivably the most important good—that gets distributed. But it is a good that can only be distributed" insofar as people are "physically admitted and politically received [into it]. Hence membership cannot be handed out by some external agency; its value depends upon an internal decision."¹⁰ I further agree with Walzer that within the realities and horizon of contemporary history, the necessary form of political community is the modern nation-state, with all the limitations and dangers that go with it. Political membership and participation are a question of citizenship.

When it comes to questions of rights, freedoms, participation, self-rule, and citizenship, the liberal and republican traditions of Western democratic thought cannot be superseded. They are the living though damaged and burdened tradition of Western political life. The supposition of much current cultural theory is that these traditions are defunct or can be transcended or are merely complicit in the evils of capitalism, racism, or the West. The temptation to invalidate these traditions, rather than affirming their vitality while assessing their historical burden and criticizing their damaged actuality, has given rise to a style of political and cultural criticism that variously announces itself as post-Enlightenment, postmodern, postpolitical, or post-nation-state.

The liberal framework of rights and freedoms and the republican framework of self-rule and political participation, though always in tension and frequently contradictory, both hinge on the individual. The negative liberty of right and the positive liberty of participation are individual liberties. By contrast, the social-democratic framework of distributive justice hinges on the state's role in channeling, blocking, and regulating the effects of a capitalist economy; the deliberative and decision-making procedures of the state—legislative, bureaucratic, and juridical—are the site of a kind of endless contestation over liberal and civic imperatives pursued by various social movements, interest groups, alliances, trade unions, and mass parties.

Modern democracy requires these three interlocking but conflicting frameworks: the liberal, the civic-humanist, and the social-democratic. As

10. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, 1983), p. 29.

a shorthand reference to the sorts of issues in political thought generated by these interlocking, conflicting frameworks, we might think of the work of, respectively, Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas. I take their utterly marginal, occasionally vexed place in current cultural theory to be a kind of symptom of the latter's disregard for the actual setting of contemporary political life.

I want quickly to refer to two tenets of Arendt's political thought because they bear directly on the concept of publicness that underlies the problem of literature and politics. For Arendt, the democratic *polis* is the human creation that institutes the very possibility of freedom. It indissociably links freedom to publicness. She states this tenet as follows: "Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the *worldly space* to make its appearance."¹¹ Her second tenet follows from this, and derives from Aristotle, namely, that the highest form of human self-realization is political participation. Citizenship, we might say, is the highest form of subjectivity because within it and from it stem all forms of human freedom. These notions run significantly counter to the tendency in current theory to define political subjectivity in terms of the Althusserian interpellated subject or the Foucauldian subjection to power, both of which have then led to endless dithering over the definition of agency. From Arendt's civic-humanist perspective, political identity resides in political participation. The citizen has to be formed, educated, socialized to the practices of participation. The formation of the citizen is a socialization into agency within the rule-governed institutions of the democratic polity. The all-important work of political criticism, in word and deed, by individuals and groups, of challenging exclusions from citizenship or historically burdened and damaged forms of participation or the very rules governing actual institutions requires a commitment to the norms and ideals of the worldly space of the citizen.

The announcements of post-Enlightenment, postmodernity, post-politics, and post-nation-state mistakenly aspire to step outside these norms and ideals of the democratic tradition. Such announcements promise a radical break, foreshadow some fateful turning in the course of modernity, a separation from three or four centuries of modern culture and politics. As intellectuals of all self-descriptions—public, organic, and otherwise—get pumped up for the year 2000, these announcements are taking on a millennialian tone. For just as our intellectual culture craves optimism to hide its darker uncertainty about the future of freedom and justice, so too its mania for announcing postmodernities hides a profound confusion about the directions and possibilities of contemporary history. *Fin-de-siècle!* The end of modernity! Millennium!—these are

11. Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 1961), p. 149; my emphasis.

pretty heady notions for thinkers and seers who just a decade ago, in the years and months leading up to 1989, had no inkling of the imminent collapse of Soviet communism, plausibly the punctuating event of the twentieth century, perhaps of the entire era that began with the revolution of 1789.

Contrary to the vistas of end and post-, our moment of intellectual life is, I suspect, a miniaturized zeitgeist. It announces radical breaks without analyzing actual transformations. Unsettled about the meaning of the past and present, it makes futuristic noise about the traditions it is ever about to overcome. With respect to democratic traditions and institutions, the allure of post-Enlightenment, postmodern, postpolitical, post-nation-state visions is profoundly affecting the language and values of political criticism. To sharpen the sense of what's at stake, I'm going to comment on two examples.

1) Post-Enlightenment. In 1989, in the wake of the *fatwa* issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, the editors of *Public Culture*, Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, wrote an editorial critical of the way many Western intellectuals and the Western media defended Rushdie and castigated the Islamic leaders and crowds who were denouncing *The Satanic Verses* and threatening its author. They questioned the excesses and ethnocentrism in the outcries, including Rushdie's, against Islamic politics and saw in Western liberals' attitudes an ethnocentric attachment to Enlightenment interpretations of free speech.

Their editorial culminated with the following remark:

In our view, the politics of *The Satanic Verses* is partly about the rights of people to resist reading, and especially to resist reading what they have been told by others whom they hold in respect they should not read. . . . Some groups in the Islamic world are saying that criticism—socially, politically and *collectively* constructed—can *precede* the individual act of reading.¹²

Performative contradiction is rather too polite a term for Appadurai and Breckenridge's hypocrisy. Here are two scholar-editors whose own life practice has value and validity to the exact extent that their own writings and what they publish in their journal exercise critical reflection, free expression, and skepticism toward doctrinal authority. Without the so-called liberal public sphere neither that exercise nor its controlling values would have the worldly space in which to happen. When Appadurai and Breckenridge then defended their editorial by asserting that "we intended to ask whether the enlightenment values about freedom of expression were beyond debate and thus rather like the values of Kho-

12. "Editors' Comments: On Fictionalizing the Real," *Public Culture* 1 (Spring 1989): iv.

meini's Islam,"¹³ they absurdly equated commitment to freedom of thought and expression with commitment to theocratic rule and religious authority. One can always of course debate Enlightenment values, but Khomeini's *fatwa* was the moment to defend freedom of expression.

The fretting over ethnocentrism is a smoke screen. While it is always relevant to criticize the tendency of Western liberals to believe freedom is uniquely or intrinsically Western, the Rushdie controversy has been about the perilous struggles in the Islamic world to institutionalize spaces of free expression and critical thought.¹⁴ Those freedoms are not the essence of the West. Nor are they, on the other hand, merely its ethnocentric prejudice or its own particularistic values. Such freedoms have their precedents in other cultures, and they have been and remain the product of continual struggles in the West.¹⁵ For those of us whose lives as writers and teachers require those freedoms, the struggle for them is relevant across borders and cultures.

The battle has long centered on writing and reading. In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Julien is examined in theology upon his arrival at the monastery by the Abbé Pirard, who is highly suspicious of the methods of Julien's former teacher Chélan; Julien knows the Bible but nothing of the Church Fathers. The Abbé reflects:

"A thorough, but too thorough, knowledge of the Holy Scriptures."

(Julien had just spoken to him, without being questioned on this score, about the real time in which Genesis, the Pentateuch, etc., had been written.)

"To what does this endless reasoning about the Holy Scriptures

13. Editor's response to David Hollinger, letter to the editor, *Public Culture* 2 (Fall 1989): 123.

14. For a pointed reply to Appadurai and Breckenridge's editorial, see Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, letter to the editor, *Public Culture* 2 (Fall 1989): 123–26.

15. In an extremely important essay, Amartya Sen has cut through the ethnocentric and antiethnocentric obfuscations that surround so many discussions of "Western" democracy and "Asian values." Against the ethnocentrism of Western liberal ideologues, he points out that there is no continuous unfolding in the West of democratic values like freedom, equality, and tolerance. These emerged in discontinuous pockets of political thought and political institutions from the ancient Greeks to the modern era—interrupted by long periods of absolutism and religious intolerance; compromised by slavery, racism, and male political dominance; and contested throughout the twentieth century by fascism and dictatorship. "The roots of modern democratic and liberal ideas can be sought in terms of constitutive elements, rather than as a whole." Conversely, he challenges the standard antiethnocentric view that such ideas are merely Western by showing, with respect to the religious, literary, and political traditions of the Indian subcontinent, that Indian history likewise contains a rich, discontinuous heritage—Hindu and Muslim—of ideas and experiments in democratic values, a wellspring no less ancient or nourishing than the origins of Western democracy (Amartya Sen, "Human Rights and Asian Values," *The New Republic*, 14–21 July 1997, p. 36).

lead,” thought the Abbé Pirard, “if not to *free inquiry* [*l’examen personnel*]; that is to say, the most dreadful Protestantism?”¹⁶

When the editors of *Public Culture*—nice title—abandon the struggle to foster discomfiting scenes like this one everywhere in the world, touting instead “the rights of people . . . to resist reading what they have been told by others whom they hold in respect they should not read,” that is, their “rights” not to have rights, post-Enlightenment has distilled itself down to its baldest contradiction. As an antidote, it’s worth reciting a bit of Enlightenment scripture that remains unsurpassed after more than two centuries of intellectual struggles, namely, the opening paragraph of Kant’s “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’”:

*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!*¹⁷

The maturing of contemporary thought does not lie in believing we can think *beyond* or *post-* that motto.

2) Postmodern. In 1995, the W. E. B. DuBois Distinguished Lecturer at the City University of New York was Robert F. Reid-Pharr. His lecture was provocatively titled “Speaking through Anti-Semitism: The Nation of Islam and the Poetics of Black Counter-Modernity.” Responding to the controversy set off in 1993 by Nation of Islam minister Khalid Muhammad’s anti-Semitic speech at Kean College, Reid-Pharr set out to examine a significant hypothesis, namely, that the anti-Semitism voiced within the Nation of Islam expresses a tradition of black antimodernity or “counter-modernity,” the “very real Black alienation and skepticism in relation to the entire project of modernity: rationalism, civility, universalism.”¹⁸

Reid-Pharr’s own intellectual framework is drawn from Zygmunt Bauman’s postmodern critique of modernity, centering on the claim that “the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence.”¹⁹ Bauman argues that European

16. Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Lloyd C. Parks (New York, 1970), p. 178; Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le noir* (Paris, 1960), p. 172.

17. Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’” *Kant’s Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (New York, 1970), p. 54.

18. Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “Speaking through Anti-Semitism: The Nation of Islam and the Poetics of Black Counter-Modernity,” paper given at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1995, p. 7; hereafter abbreviated “S.”

19. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), p. 7; quoted in Reid-Pharr, “Speaking through Anti-Semitism,” p. 11.

anti-Semitism arose, in Reid-Pharr's words, because "Jews and gypsies represent a threat to the structures of modernity, particularly the nation-state, precisely because they somehow seem to escape the yoke of definition" ("S," p. 12). Reid-Pharr then argues that Africans and African Americans, like Jews, have been alienated from the project of modernity because made to represent the ambivalence that Western rationalism and universality engender and then seek to destroy. Since racist ideology itself associated Jews and blacks, the Nation of Islam's project of anchoring black identity in opposition to whiteness reencounters the figure of the Jew as an identity-threatening ambivalence, white and not white; the Nation's anti-Semitism is "calculated to demolish the ambiguity that the Jew represents in relation to the Black community" ("S," p. 11). "Caught up . . . in the same ideological structures of modernity against which it purports to struggle," the Nation of Islam adapts anti-Semitism as an expression of Black alienation from modernity by transfiguring Jews into the quintessential figure of whiteness ("S," p. 13).

The dialectical elegance of this formulation obscures some problems. The premise drawn from Bauman that European anti-Semitism derives directly from the so-called project of modernity and the nation-state is deeply flawed. Nazism was in fact an antimodern ideology and mythology in the service of militarizing, racializing, and de-democratizing the nation-state and characterized Jews as emblems of modernity, capitalists *and* workers, rationalists and communists. By embracing the postmodern critique of political modernity, Reid-Pharr validates the antimodern experience that he finds *expressed* in black anti-Semitism, even as he rejects the expression itself: "I believe that anti-Semitism from any quarter is morally reprehensible," and, further, "that it mitigates against the further advancement of African Americans" ("S," p. 19). He thus implies that what's required is some kind of postmodern expression of black alienation from modernity, freed at once from anti-Semitism and from modern rationalism, civility, and universalism.

What gives this indistinct postmodern politics its aura of validity? So long as the politics of the Nation of Islam, from W. D. Fard through Malcolm X to Louis Farrakhan, is analyzed primarily as a trope (an "expression," a "poetics," a "speaking through anti-Semitism") played off a purely theoretical paradigm of Western modernity (modernity = extermination of ambivalence), the meaning of the movement and its ideologies looks central to the African American experience of modernity. But if the movement and ideology are, instead, played off the other political and ideological movements that have shaped African American participation in modern politics, everything looks very different. The three most influential black political thinkers and activists in American history—Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—were all political modernists. Each took up the leading *modern* trends in the political discourse of his time and *advanced* them by forcing that discourse to com-

prehend racism in the United States. And each of them pegged the cause of freedom and justice to the transformation of the polity through black political participation and citizenship. Black *civitas* was the guiding thread of their respective criticisms of American democracy. Only by bracketing this more central tradition of the African American political response to modernity can Reid-Pharr make the Nation of Islam a key if distorted cipher of a vaguely defined postmodern politics.

The language and values of political criticism are ill-served by this bracketing. The most disturbing impasse in Reid-Pharr's essay is his failure to suggest any perspective on how to counteract the anti-Semitism fostered by the Nation of Islam. He says, "I have imagined my audience as primarily Black, progressive, and anti-anti-Semitic," but the urgency and difficulties of enacting that anti-anti-Semitism are set aside: "If we can disengage for a moment from the particular sting we feel when we hear that it is the Jew who keeps the Black oppressed, what we find is very real angst and melancholy, in a word, alienation, in relation to the Black experience of modernity" ("S," pp. 19, 16). The deciphering remains an empty exercise, for it cannot generate a moral-political criticism of anti-Semitism. I'm not suggesting Reid-Pharr should supply a programmatic plan for answering anti-Semitism in the black public sphere or at large. His work is in political theory and cultural interpretation. But the rhetoric of his essay is relevant. Even the most theoretically inflected, methodologically sophisticated reflection on politics and society traces, as it were, the contours of the public sphere at large through its terms of persuasion and its argumentation. My criticism of Reid-Pharr's rhetoric is that it traces a closed circle in which theory supposes it can *understand* anti-Semitism *without contesting* its manifestations in the polity. He treats anti-Semitism as the distorted symbol of a deeper truth rather than a set of beliefs and values held by fellow citizens and to be disputed. Further, I consider this kind of retreat from the uneven battle over values, beliefs, and persuasive symbols to be characteristic of postmodern conceptions of the political.

Appadurai and Breckenridge and Reid-Pharr exemplify how post-Enlightenment, postmodern themes in several currents of contemporary theory, in aspiring to step outside or invalidate the traditions of Western democratic thought, authorize a misguided political stand that in effect undermines or forestalls the possibilities of democracy itself. But of course a part of my thesis is that the link between theory and politics is never quite so organic or inevitable. I therefore want to take up a kind of converse example, Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*, in which an altogether progressive political stand seeks its justification or rationale in many of these same currents of contemporary theory.

I agree with every political position Butler takes in *Excitable Speech*: she is against speech codes; she's against antipornography legislation;

she's against restrictions on the speech and sexual conduct of gays and lesbians in the military; she's against the censoring assault on the National Endowment for the Arts; and she reviles the Supreme Court as wrong-headed, nearly delusional, in ruling that an act of burning a cross in front of a black family's house was protected by the First Amendment as an exercise in free speech and unravels the Court majority's willful opacity about the history and reality of race relations in the United States.

What I question is the status of the theoretical arguments used to support these views, the theory that claims to establish "a politics of the performative." Butler's opening chapter persuasively turns J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts against those who use it to justify restrictions on hate speech on the grounds that such speech *is* action.²⁰ But as a legal and political matter, her argumentation is quite misleading. What she's ultimately advocating is that speech is best answered by speech, not the police, that it's better to sustain, even stimulate, a contentious public sphere of free expression in which all manner of discourses and counter-discourses contend. But you don't need Austin's logic of speech acts to arrive at or argue for this position. Moreover, contrary to Butler's procedure, you cannot derive the positions she advocates from Austin's theory as such. While her argumentation starts with Austin's pure, logicizing categories and meticulously builds up to the legal and political controversies, those controversies could not happen, could not make their appearance, except for the worldly space already created by an entire set of democratic institutions and practices, in particular the liberal public sphere and the right to free speech guaranteed by the Constitution and ultimately enforced by the nation-state's monopoly on legitimate violence. Like Habermas, Butler relies on the idea that there is something in the *logic* of language or communication that determines the horizon of democracy. Arendt shaded the question significantly differently, arguing that human beings attain their "highest possibility in the faculty of speech and the life in a polis" in Aristotle's sense "that Greeks, living together in a polis, conducted their affairs by means of speech, through persuasion, and not by means of violence, through mute coercion."²¹ It's not the logic of speech but the practices of persuasion that anchor democratic life. Persuasion draws on beliefs and values, as does the underlying commitment to the polis and freedom in general.²²

20. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, 1997), pp. 1–41.

21. Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future*, pp. 22, 23.

22. Habermas devoted an important essay to Arendt in the midst of working out his own communicative theory of democratic institutions. He shows that Arendt conceived of power as communicative action. "Power," she writes in *On Violence*, "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt: On the Concept of Power," *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence [Cambridge, Mass., 1983], p. 172). Using the distinctions I have drawn regarding the different

I have no quarrel with Butler's implicit beliefs and values. Like Foucault, she is a libertarian *manqué*: she exhibits a deep commitment to a radical conception of individual liberty, but does not affirm the principle of individual liberty. Instead, she seeks to justify her stand via an ostensibly anti-individualist theory of the subject, language, and power.

If made explicit, the libertarian commitment would raise some hard questions. As is more obvious in Foucault's work, libertarianism in European thought has a complex lineage: it is part aristocratic, anchored in eighteenth-century male libertinage; and part anarchistic, anchored in radical proletarian resistance to modernization. Walter Benjamin's remark that Europe had lacked a radical conception of freedom since Bakunin held true until the appearance of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. But to carry the aristocratic and anarchistic traditions into the lifeworld and politics of the relatively stable Western democracies of the late twentieth century encounters two sets of problems. On the one hand, the exercise of individual liberty requires the protection of the liberal rights and freedoms guaranteed by the modern democratic state. Neither the aristocrat's privileged standing apart from the polity nor the anarchist's refusal of its legitimacy has relevance today. Foucault did not solve this conundrum, though he was clearly aware of it in his last writings. On the other hand, a libertarianism that embraces, as Foucault and Butler do, and rightly so, I believe, radical freedom in sexuality, political and artistic expression, public assembly, and so on has to come to terms with the other branch of modern libertarianism—that is, the neoliberal branch—which grounds radical freedom in the individual's right to the unfettered pursuit of material gain and generally rejects the role of the state in communal provision. All manner of thorny questions about the meaning of freedom and individuality and the role of the state are nested in these different strands of libertarianism. It, too, in short, is a living but damaged and burdened tradition.

Back to literature and politics once more. Through a kind of pragmatist restatement of Kant, I have argued that the aesthetic experience

frameworks of modern democratic thought and practice—liberal, republican, social-democratic—I see Habermas as attempting to translate, or transfer, Arendt's civic-humanist conception into the social-democratic framework of the impersonal, procedurally grounded deliberation required by modern bureaucracies, parliaments, and courts. However, something is lost in the translation. While Arendt insists on the historical relevance of the discontinuous heritage of republicanism, Habermas attempts to locate the norm of "coercion-free" or "undistorted" communication needed to sustain modern social democracy in the pragmatics and logic of communication itself. In the German context, where republicanism has had little historical actuality, Habermas's efforts to ground democratic commitment in a kind of philosophy of language is understandable. But, in addition to the theoretical problems this endeavor encounters, it also tends to deplete the historical experience of self-rule and participatory democracy of its symbolic and practical resonance.

of the artwork's inner form arises from our participation in publicness. Modern aesthetic receptivity is our *individual* experience only by virtue of being enmeshed in the public realm or worldly space of artistic expression and criticism. At the same time, Kant's account of aesthetic experience shares with Arendt's account of the democratic polity a normative reference to personhood. Aesthetic experience tacitly makes symbolic reference to "the worth of others" in the claim and appeal that *this is beautiful*; political participation tacitly makes practical reference to the cultivated, self-realizing citizenship of others in the claim and appeal that *this is unjust*. The double norm of publicness and personhood is thus at the heart of modern aesthetic and political experience, of the artwork's inner form and the polity's practices of deliberation and persuasion.

The Greek polis gave Aristotle the figure of personhood in the form of the *zoon politikon*; the Enlightenment, the stirrings of modern democratic revolution, and the aesthetic claims of the beautiful gave Kant the figure of personhood in the form of "one's own understanding" and the "worth of others." I'm calling these concepts *figures* of personhood because they carry a strong normative, even symbolic charge in Aristotle and Kant. And they resonate with religious figurings of person. *Your body is a temple*: while this symbolization originates in Jesus' polemic with Jews regarding his divinity (John 2:21) and is then taken up by Paul, with characteristic severity, to denounce fornication (I Cor. 6:18–19), it has been continually reappropriated and rewoven in Western poetry and ethics to express the intimations of the sacred in eroticism and love, the integrity of the person in moral and sexual relations with others, and the rights of the individual in moral and political relations with institutions and governments. Like all symbolizations of moral experience, *your body is a temple* is polysemous and ambivalent; it is susceptible to politically regressive as well as progressive uses. But the Foucauldian body, the Lacanian mirror stage, and the Althusserian interpellated subject are hardly less ambiguous, and most certainly are less resonant. It is indeed hard to imagine these theoretical constructs truly doing the work of articulating sexual freedom, individual inviolability, or essential human rights more effectively than the enlightened commitment to the integrity of the person tinged with the symbolism of the sacred.