

Disputes of Value: Literary Studies, the Humanities and Evaluative Theory

(1975-2015)



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Abstract

Focusing on the period between 1975 and 2015, this thesis explores changing approaches to 'literary' and 'aesthetic' value through the prism of four university disputes. Each chapter considers challenges to prevailing conceptions of value, charts the emergence of new frameworks, and reflects on how institutional pressures impact on theories of textual evaluation. In broad terms, the thesis charts a chronological move from objectivist to relativist theories of value; a subsequent shift to an aporetic middle-ground; and the emergence of a final moment at which the difficulties of this 'paradoxical' position become evident. It also acts as a partial historical recuperation of the intellectual histories of several theorists who have worked on value questions, and of the institutions to which they were, or are, affiliated.

The first chapter focuses on the 'MacCabe Affair' at Cambridge, showing how – partly as a consequence of the dispute – Frank Kermode's writing on literary value moves from a deracinated, loosely idealist conception, to one dependent on, and embedded in, the vagaries of history. The second chapter looks at the 'CIV Debates' at Stanford, suggesting the centrality of a similarly historicist 'pragmatism' both in senatorial discussions surrounding the university's 'core list' and in contemporary writing about value. The third chapter uses the rise of the London Consortium, and the eventual withdrawal of the British Film Institute from its governing structures, to illustrate a return to objectivist evaluation in the early 1990s, as well as the subsequent emergence of an aporetic account of value that endorsed neither objectivism nor relativism, while remaining committed to evaluation itself. The final chapter examines the effect of the RhodesMustFall movement on the University of Cape Town's English Department, suggesting that the Fallist position clashed with the similarly aporetic approach to value favoured by long-standing members of the Department.

In conclusion, the thesis suggests that rather than being seen as constitutively unresolvable, questions of value in literary studies and the humanities should instead be considered as merely

unresolved. It also reflects on the utility of dispute as a heuristic for contemplating value questions in general.

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Introduction

How can I take Pleasure in a reported pleasure...? How can we read criticism? Only one way: since I am here a second-degree reader, I must shift my position: instead of agreeing to be the confidant of this critical pleasure a sure way to miss it I can make myself its voyeur: I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion; the commentary then becomes in my eyes a text, a fiction, a fissured envelope. The writer's perversity (his pleasure in writing is without function), the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of the critic and of his reader.

- Roland Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text*
(Barthes PT 17)

In recent years the debate over ‘value’ in literary studies and the humanities has entered a new phase, with the emergence of an increasingly influential movement in favour of the exercise of judgement and expertise. Taking in direct vindications like Michael Clune’s *A Defense of Judgment* (2021) and more subtle endorsements of evaluative types of analysis including a turn towards form and against ‘suspicious reading’, this movement has recuperated ideas of ‘literary’ and ‘aesthetic’ value following their substantial decline through the second half of the twentieth century.¹ Frequently accompanied by advocacy of ‘aesthetic education’, the new ‘evaluative turn’ is typically politically aligned to the left.² Value assignment has come to be seen as a tool for resisting prevailing norms, and the teaching of evaluative practices as fertile ground for conceiving and incubating alternatives to existing social structures. While the political and economic stakes of these claims have yet to be fully explored, the at least purported inversion of the traditional association of both judgement and aesthetic education with right-wing elitism suggests a need to revisit the recent history of debates over the meaning and cogency of ‘value’ in general.

¹ See the conclusion from 262 for further discussion.

² For a recent synopsis of this work, see the upcoming *PMLA* special edition on aesthetic education – Kate Stanley and Nicholas Gaskill (ed.) *Aesthetic Education: A Twenty-First-Century Primer* (2023).

This thesis is intended as part of that revisiting. It takes the form of a largely historical study of four ‘disputes’ that occurred at tertiary institutions – the University of Cambridge (Cambridge), Stanford University (Stanford), the London Consortium (the Consortium), and the University of Cape Town (UCT) – between 1975 and 2015, and which involved some contestation over the validity and conceptualisation of the idea of ‘value’ in the context of the humanities. Each chapter considers challenges to prevailing accounts, charts the emergence of new frameworks, and reflects on how large, public-facing institutional disputes impact on theories of value and evaluation. Rather than making a case for any single version of how value should be imagined, or for the cogency of evaluative practice, my argument is therefore principally descriptive and diagnostic: I use dispute as a window through which to look back at changing ideas of value in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Despite being presented chronologically, the four disputes are not causally related in any ‘grand’ sense, and much of the interest in each case comes from its specific features. Characteristics unique to each example dictate how value claims are introduced and contested, and insights into the concept of value come of this particularity. People, ideas and institutions do, however, connect the chapters. These interconnections illustrate how divergent value debates cross-pollinate, and help facilitate a loose comparative frame across the chapters. Because my examples are drawn from a relatively narrow segment of the English-speaking academy, these sorts of connection are not altogether surprising. Drawing links between the cases nevertheless gives insight into how ideas move between institutions, and how institutional disputes refract across time and space – in this case decades and continents.

I argue, moreover, that when read together sequentially, the chapters show a remarkably coherent shift in how value is conceptualised. Though in no way comprehensively representative, this shift can, in my view, be useful for mapping a broader theoretical trend. In that heuristic spirit, I argue throughout the thesis that the four disputes exemplify a general move in literary studies and the humanities from an objectivist/idealist to a relativist/historicist understanding of value; a subsequent shift to an aporetic middle-ground that valorises both; and the emergence of a final moment at which the difficulties of this

‘paradoxical’ position become evident, prompting a further move away from historicism in some quarters. Recognising this trajectory in turn allows for a better understanding of the thrust of contemporary value debates.

Building on this analysis, I also develop a second argument about the theoretical presumptions of key thinkers working on value in the period of my focus. In short, I see the drift in the 1970s and 1980s towards historicist conceptualisations of value as replicated in the conceptual premises of many of the key theorists involved in constructing, defining, and critiquing these definitions. At some point in the latter half of the twentieth century, understanding value became an historicist task – emphasis was increasingly put on working out why, as a matter of fact, we see value as we do. The approach of those working on ‘the value question’ has moreover maintained its historicist bent, eschewing more openly ‘normative’ theoretical foundations. At the end of this thesis, I suggest that this is a mistake, and that normative approaches should be seen as central to how we go about answering questions about value. The resulting emphasis on making space for normativity in a theoretical landscape dominated by ‘historicist’ or ‘sociological’ techniques is evident at times in my own theoretical and methodological choices. In particular, while grounded in the factual details of the four disputes, my analysis sometimes incorporates historically detached, normatively determined, premises and arguments.

One of the advantages of a move away from historicism is that it allows for relatively abstract theoretical debate about value to happen alongside historical analysis. Rather than waiting for historical excavation to be finished (an in fact never ending deferral), it becomes possible to do value theorising even as that theory is put into historical context. This in turn opens the possibility for seeing value as itself ‘history’-independent, at least at the level of justification. Put otherwise, rather than value being defined by fact, it is defined by argument. Something like this position is the approach of Ronald Dworkin, who, in *Justice for Hedgehogs*, makes a self-referentially normative case for the nature of value. Instead of evaluative norms being justified by experience, they are justified by one another. For Dworkin, this works best when value is seen as unitary: all evaluations – ethical, political, aesthetic, etc – are interconnected and

mutually supportive. In the conclusion, I suggest, without a full defence, that the impetus of the four chapters is in something like Dworkin's direction.

Such speculative reasoning is however left to the conclusion. The main purpose of each of the chapters is to show how dispute can be used to think about value. In the remainder of this introduction, I therefore turn first to an explanation of the key idea of 'value' around which my analysis revolves. I then give some justification for why I have chosen to use 'dispute', and in particular 'public-facing' dispute within the context of the 'university' as a window through which to review changing ideas of value. Finally, I reflect briefly on what the four chapters suggest about the relationship between value theory and dispute, and give a synopsis of each of the chapters.

Value

The most general of the terms of importance to this thesis is 'value'. In brief, the concept picks out the category to which the relational terms good, better and best, refer. Mark Schroeder suggests the analogy of 'height' as it relates to tall, taller and tallest. (3) The term's use is therefore constitutively comparative, and its key components are 'relationality' and 'positivity', though both of these aspects are put under pressure in the examples I discuss. In general, the value of, for instance, a literary text refers to its positive status relative to other texts, or relative to an outside frame of reference.³ Although I see (with John Guillory) different sorts of 'value' as distinct, distinguishable and incommensurable, the 'piece' of the overall value puzzle around which this thesis is built shifts across the four chapters.⁴ (Guillory CC 326) This is because value is conceptualised differently within the different disputes I consider. My

³ The philosophical discipline of axiology developed to answer the question of which things could be considered as valuable, and how to value them, including in the realms of 'literature', 'art' and 'culture'. In economics, value has traditionally (in David Ricardo and Adam Smith, and then in Karl Marx) been divided into 'use' and 'exchange' value, the first measured by the object's usefulness to a person, and the second by what the object can be traded or substituted for. In the second sense, value is often described as coextensive with 'price' (provided the market had developed such a mechanism), reflecting a thing's equivalence-in-exchange. See further discussion in the Stanford chapter.

⁴ Throughout this thesis, when an author has multiple cited works, I use an abbreviation to differentiate each work (CC in this case referring to Guillory's *Cultural Capital*) in the in-text citation. These abbreviations appear at the end of the corresponding citation in the Works Cited list.

interest throughout is however in a category of value that is grouped around the ideas of the ‘literary’ and the ‘aesthetic’, and is separable from other important forms of value including the ‘moral’, the ‘political’ and the ‘legal’.

Debates over the nature and cogency of value can take on various aspects. My emphasis is broadly on the question of the ‘character’ of value – is it relative or absolute; historically contingent or ideally transcendent; subjective or objective? This reflects the preoccupations of the people and institutions about whom I write, and connects the disputes to the concerns of traditional axiology. While each of these (at least *prima facie*) opposing pairs has a complex history, the contours of which fall outside the scope of this thesis, in broad terms ‘relative and absolute’ speak to whether (or not) evaluative judgements (as opposed to the objects of evaluation) are contingent on physical, social and other properties of the world; ‘historical and ideal’ on whether (or not) the meaning of ideas are dependent on their historical formation; and ‘subjective and objective’ on whether (or not) evaluation is mind-independent. Sometimes contestations over value register in the form of clashes of conceptual framework rather than content, and I am therefore, as previously indicated, also interested in characterising the conceptual commitments of those who have engaged with value questions. At times there is close affinity between a thinker or institution’s methodology and their theories, at other times there are substantial divergences. Confrontations between frameworks unrelated to value also sometimes result in changes to how people or institutions approach evaluative concerns.

Two key evaluative terms that have come to be associated especially with literary studies, and appear throughout this thesis, are ‘canon’ and ‘classic’. When critics approach defining the first of these terms there is a tendency to fall back on etymological explanations. This trend foregrounds the tradition of philology through which the term gained prominence. As is often pointed out, the English word ‘canon’ comes from the Greek *kanōn* based on the Semitic *קָנָן*, meaning a straight reed or rod. Von Fritz suggests that what links early usages is the idea of straightness, which does not immediately carry normative connotations. (112) The term’s early metaphorical deployment was moreover associated as

much with the act of measuring as of evaluation, and the term continues to carry this computational sense. More so than ‘the classic’, the idea of ‘the canon’ is wedded to practical, historical processes resulting in a collection of privileged texts.

In *The Making of the Modern Canon*, Jan Gorak traces the shifting connotations that ‘canon’ has subsequently borne. Developed from its Greek usage as a standard or rule, the canon grew into a broader concept encompassing a ‘complex unity of practices, rituals and writings’. (26) In Gorak’s view, it was ‘Christian and Jewish authorities who align[ed] canon with the inherited traditions, present life, and future destiny of a particular community of beliefs.’ (26) The intertwining of a set of literary standards with notions of cultural good tends, in this period, to take on an encompassing aspect, with the canon ‘coming to signal the difference between human contingency and divinely sanctioned order permanently inscribed in the accepted canonical books.’ (28) When the canon is presented as an all-powerful force, controlling our most intimate categories and ideas, it therefore reverts to early Christian and Jewish usage, which saw it as the inexhaustible, encyclopaedic narrative of a whole people. Gorak also shows the extent to which, ‘Unlike the classical canons, the Christian canon represent[ed] a shared clerical initiative and its maintenance [became] a public responsibility.’ (29) This merging of the canon with ideas of social organisation differentiates its modern secular connotation from its biblical counterpart, but there continues to be an institutional aspect to how canons are thought about in literary studies today.⁵

⁵ As Gorak shows, ‘canon’ has also taken on a mythological dimension: ‘To canonise is somehow to expand the dimensions of the given, to invest it with charismatic properties bestowed from a different region of experience.’ This mythologising has invited scepticism and charges of concealment, but has remained an important component of contemporary usage. In more pragmatic fashion, the ordinary deployment of canon in the eighteenth century regularly refers instead to ‘established usage’ or ‘customary practice’. (46) This was also the period in which the term canon was first applied to a corpus of classical Greek authors, notably in David Ruhnken’s commentaries on Rutilius Lupus in 1768. (Gorak *C/C* 107). Ruhnken’s work is important to the history of the idea of the canon because it is his writing that first refers to the assembling, editing and selecting of texts by Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus as ‘canon formation’. In Gorak’s view, ‘after the publication of Ruhnken’s book, it became common, if sometimes controversial, to extend the application of canon to any list of valuable inherited works’. (Gorak *MC* 51)

In the nineteenth century, ‘canonical texts’, and in particular Homer, became a second-scripture; what Frank M. Turner describes as the ‘Secular Bible’ of a revitalised ‘national culture built on the shoulders of an old one’. (Turner 68) This period also saw the canon develop into a concept of wide-spread reproduction, transferring the ‘roles and responsibilities of the Byzantine canonists to an industrial culture... [creating], in essence, the proliferating functions of the modern canon.’ (Gorak 52) In the Romantic period, the canon, especially in the Germanic speaking world, at moments took on a worldly aspect, with the canon imagined as ‘a source of creative unity that cuts across individual works and nations.’ (54) This influence can be seen in the contemporary grounding of ‘world literature’ in Goethe and his notion of ‘weltiliteratur’. At the same time, Thomas Carlyle’s distinction between ‘good’ books and ‘bad’ books – also emergent in the context of university governance, in this case Carlyle’s 1886 public lecture on his appointment as rector of Edinburgh University – has continued to hold sway in the popular imagining of the canon. As the chapter on Stanford illustrates, the idea that certain books ‘poison the moral character’, while others buttress it, has continued to play an important role in our understanding of the canon.⁶ (Carlyle 74)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a large-scale proliferation of ‘great books’ lists across the anglophone world, but especially in the United States. Contributors as (relatively) diverse as R.L. Stevenson, Pixley Seme, H.G. Wells, Mulk Raj Anand, W. Forbes Gray and Theodore Roosevelt all published lists of this kind. Multiple, and often unattributed, lists of reading were also published by various publishers and writers’ organisations, including by the Society of Women Artists in 1909 and the Everyman Library at various times between the 1880s and 1940. What is remarkable about so many of these catalogues is that they do not use the word ‘canon’ to describe their work. In fact, the notion of canonicity was under attack for its elitism and over-selectivity, as has been the case throughout the term’s history. May Lamberton Becker, the author of an influential list for ‘young female readers’ first published in 1927, for instance argues vociferously against granting special status to the texts that she lists, asserting

⁶ See the discussion of Allan Bloom and Dinsesh D’Souza from 91 below.

instead that the reader should keep ‘an open mind’ in order to develop a ‘discriminating, individual taste’.

(44)

Such a focus on discrimination and individual distinctiveness was a marker of early and mid-twentieth century thinking on the canon. Writers like T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis – both discussed further in the Cambridge chapter below – who tend to be rolled out as defenders of the idea of the canon are in fact often dismissive of the idea of homogeneity. In both *The Sacred Wood* and *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, texts regularly cited as examples of criticism in favour of the canon, Eliot is repeatedly and sometimes explicitly derisive of contemporary forms of canonisation, and Leavis spends considerable energy, for example in *Valuation in Criticism*, distancing himself from educational institutions that ‘mindlessly’ defend set texts. (14) Instead, while both support normative notions of culture, their role in defining our contemporary conception of the canon has more to do with their scepticism than their faith. The institutional connections of these figures also emerge as a key component to understanding their ideas of literary value.

By contrast to ‘canon’, the term ‘classic’ has a remarkably tightly woven modern history. The writers key to our contemporary conception include Charles Sainte-Beuve, T.S. Eliot, Frank Kermode, J.M. Coetzee and Ankhi Mukherjee, and there is substantial intergenerational referencing in their writing on the subject. The twentieth-century ‘bookshop’ usage of the term (now often treated with scepticism, including by booksellers) as an old text with perpetual contemporary relevance has strong roots in Sainte-Beuve’s 1850 *Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?*. The essay is exceptional in Sainte-Beuve’s oeuvre for its departure from a methodology which centres historical trajectory and what he often refers to as the ‘portraiture’ of an individual author, instead making broad meta-critical claims that pass across periods. Christopher Prendergast demonstrates how Sainte-Beuve differentiated throughout his writing between ‘tradition’ as a ‘synthesising tool for organising and understanding a literary past’, and ‘classic’ which is ‘value laden through and through’, providing ‘the litmus test for what really counted, and was thus more fertile conceptual terrain for the exercise of discriminating judgement, for what it meant to make up

one's mind or to "conclude". (16) Usage of the term 'classic' has tended to maintain this teleological orientation. Unlike writing on the canon which has considered the possibility of pluralism, the classic has retained a certain universal detachment which is atemporal and unaffected by geographical location.

The desire for 'conclusion', rest or stasis under conditions of uncertainty and change is the signature sentiment in writing about the classic. Where the idea of the canon patterns cultural and textual trends, the classic tends to reach for a less mythological and more sentimental, even psychological, approach. That writing on the classic is often prefaced or titled with a question rather than a statement is in keeping with this mode. Mukherjee describes the classic as 'inseparable from the endless and unresolved contestations of the question "What is a classic?"', belonging to 'what [John] Guillory calls "the conflictual prehistory of canon-formation"'. (Guillory CC 31) She differentiates the classic from the canon on the basis of it being 'a singular act of literature,' rather than 'an aristocracy of texts'. (31) As Spivak expands, "The singular is the always universalizable, never the universal"; a description which might equally be applied to the classic. (466) That the classic is designated an 'act of literature' suggests that it is internal to the broader idea of the literary, which Derek Attridge describes as itself singular. This conceptualisation draws the classic and literature into close definitional affiliation. J.M. Cotezee goes so far as to argue that 'criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic'. (9) The idea of literary value can also sometimes be used as shorthand for the normative dimensions of literature by those reluctant to accept the idea of literature as normative itself.

Another important component of Mukherjee's work is the idea that responses to the question of the classic generally emerge from the writing of those 'outside' the metropolitan centre: the classic is outsider's art. (49) This foregrounding of the biographical position of those engaged with answering the classic question thrusts its political dimension into the centre of the picture. While the term canon has come to predominate in English and American debates, it is unsurprising that notions of the classic have continued to proliferate in postcolonial settings. Perhaps the most widely read reflection on the idea of the classic is Eliot's 'What is a Classic?', in which he argues that Virgil's *Aeneid* is the only classic in

‘Western civilisation’. (WC 9) Eliot’s sometimes disquieting essentialism is profoundly connected to the idea of empire. While his deployment is metaphorical, the context of his usage of imperial figurations means that it is implicated in formalised British (in particular, English) colonialism. The first chapter of this thesis considers Kermode’s reading of Eliot, and the subsequent emergence of Kermode’s own conception of the classic, which attempts to shift away from Eliot’s commitment to empire. In similar fashion, J.M. Coetzee’s ‘What is a Classic?’ is located deliberately away from the metropolitan centre. He develops the notion of the classic as a text that ‘survives’ because of a profound cultural ‘need’ tested by repeated interpretation and engagement with criticism, which aligns it with Kermode’s deployment of interpretative indeterminacy as a definitional frame. (24)

These terms associated with ‘literary value’ have frequently been construed as a subset of what has come to be referred to as ‘aesthetic value’ – a term with a variegated and hotly contested history. Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes aesthetic value as a ‘distinctively noninstrumental positivity inhering in certain purely, or at least primarily, formal properties of certain natural phenomena or artifacts.’ (9) For Isobel Armstrong, “‘aesthetic’ is semantically a protean term, covering the obvious: artworks as material artefacts, extending to the creative experience that gives rise to them, the experience that responds to them, and, in a more devolved sense, metatheories about all three. These metatheories in turn may not only analyse the three elements of the aesthetic in either individual or collective and cultural terms, but can become themselves the object of study.’ (22) The term ‘aesthetic’ gained prominence in the 18th century, including in the work of Francis Hutcheson and Edmund Burke. Hutcheson was a strict formalist who argued that aesthetic value consists of ‘uniformity in variety’, which can be appreciated by the cultivation of taste. (7) Burke, by contrast, saw aesthetic value as inherent in various different formal phenomena (smallness, smoothness and gentle curving lines among them). In like fashion David Hume developed a list of ‘beauties’, which give pleasure, and ‘blemishes’ which bring pain. Hume is unusual for the period in his coded admission that these properties may be relative to their time. The most influential eighteenth-century theorist on aesthetic value was, however, Immanuel Kant, who, in *The Critique of*

Judgment gave a teleological account of aesthetic value, claiming that objects of taste are a form of ‘purpose’, describing aesthetic judgement as ‘subjectively universalizable’. Kant also developed the idea of aesthetic value inhering in a ‘disinterested’ form of attention, which helped him differentiate the aesthetic realm from other forms of experience.⁷

In the nineteenth century, the idea of ‘taste’ was to some degree replaced by that of ‘aesthetic attitude’, which appears prominently in the work of, for example, Arthur Schopenhauer. In the first chapters of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer develops Kant’s notion of aesthetic disinterestedness into a form of separate consciousness, not dominated by the will. This shift to a focus on the form of appreciation rather than the object itself moves aesthetic theory away from evaluation of artworks.

Aesthetic evaluation returned to prominence, however, in the twentieth century, prominently in Monroe Beardsley’s *Aesthetics*. Beardsley claimed that the function of art was to produce a particular kind of sensual response, sometimes referred to as ‘aesthetic experience.’ In his view, only the aesthetic properties of a thing are relevant to a piece of art’s evaluation as art. Unlike Hume, Beardsley saw no connection between the aesthetic value of a piece of art and any form of pleasure or moral goodness that might arise from the same object. Nelson Goodman agrees with Beardsley that art has a complex quality which explains its value, but argues that an artwork’s value is solely a symbol of the cognitive properties it has rather than any special aesthetic quality. Subsequent writers including Frank Sibley and Bruce Vermazen have argued that the range of properties that make up an aesthetic experience makes it impossible for two artworks to be ranked.⁸ For a significant portion of the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of aesthetic value was largely abandoned as the aesthetic came to be seen as ‘more or less continuous with our experiences of numerous other putatively nonartistic, nonaesthetic artifacts, activities, and states, including mass-produced commodities, popular entertainment, sex, sports, work, dreaming, drunkenness, and madness.’ (Smith *CV* 24)

⁷ See generally Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

⁸ See for instance Frank Sibley ‘Originality and Value’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25 (1985) and Bruce Vermazen ‘The Aesthetic Value of Originality’ (1991).

As will become apparent, the line between disciplinary denominations like ‘literary studies’ and ‘the humanities’ is not always clear, and concepts like ‘the literary’ and ‘the aesthetic’ are similarly difficult to keep apart (or consistently relate). The reasons for this lack of clarity, some of which are canvassed in the chapters to come, are historically defined in complex ways, and resistance to categorisation has also fuelled alterations in how value is pictured. As a general rule, I nevertheless see my approach and interests as in the literary studies tradition, and the institutions and writers I focus on can generally be located within the literary studies ecosystem. The first and last chapters focus directly on university English departments, while the second and third are better seen as debates within ‘the humanities’ and ‘cultural studies’, though many of the actors and institutions involved have literary studies affiliations.

I have chosen the period between 1975 and 2015 because it gives proximate context to our own historical moment, and because it incorporates a conceptual phase in which evaluative pronouncements and the idea of value were ‘forcefully pilloried’ within literary studies and the humanities, as well as a phase of gradual positive reappraisal. (Graff *TC* 7) It is also a period – at least with respect to value questions – that has not yet been given sustained attention in the academy. My hope is that some of the material in this thesis can therefore be of use in thinking about evaluative decision making now, and about the practice of evaluation, which continues (and will continue) to occur across a range of settings, including the university, whether a theoretical base exists or not. The thesis also acts as a partial historical recuperation of portions of the intellectual histories of several thinkers who have worked on value questions, and of the institutions to which they were, or are, affiliated.

Dispute

In part because of evaluation’s pervasive practice, there are multiple avenues into thinking about the idea of value and its conceptual history. I have chosen to use moments of university ‘dispute’ as an entry point. Disputes, by their very nature, are generally not representative of the everyday workings of an institution. At least within the university context, they do however magnify, create and distort positions on value, offering an instructive context for study. In addition, there are strong conceptual links between

value and dispute. Ideas like ‘conflict’, ‘disputation’ and ‘disagreement’ have come to play an oversized role in recent writing about the function and meaning of value in literary studies and the humanities. Increasingly, dispute and related terms have come to be seen as not only revelatory of what value is, but also determinate of it. For example, in her influential *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai concludes that ‘all aesthetic judgements presuppose their embeddedness in arguments’, endorsing Guillory’s ‘reminder’ of the ‘constitutive role of conflict for any discourse of value’. (40) For Ngai, following Kant, a recognition of aesthetic judgement’s ‘argumentative context’ and ‘basis in dispute’ is what punctures the (in her view) false notion that the aesthetic is a factual property of texts. ‘Dispute’ in this way confirms the aesthetic as no more than subjectively universalizable: it is the mechanism which enables us to see that aesthetic judgements ‘do not follow from factual ones’. Relatedly, dispute is what roots aesthetic judgements in the social, justifies their practice, and defines their scope. This means that dispute is central ‘to making sense of value’. (44)

So as to illustrate some of the many ways dispute impacts on value discussions, each of the four chapters has a slightly different emphasis. The first chapter homes in on how dispute altered thinking on value in a particular academic’s work; the second on how questions of value were debated by university institutions; the third on the development of a shared institutional position on value; and the fourth on clashes between old and new ideas of value within the context of an English department. Because of this shift in emphasis, the chapters also have shifting methodological approaches, altering with the context in question. In some cases I look at academic writing in print, at others I use interviews, university administrative documents, or existing anthropological studies. Sharing Helen Small’s scepticism toward using claims to ‘interdisciplinarity’ as justification for the value of research, I see this methodologically diverse approach as offering different perspectives, rather than as valuable in itself. (Small *VH* 16)

Any number of disputes may have served as constructive examples. The four I have chosen – taking place at Cambridge, UCT and the London Consortium – are distinct in the broad ranging public attention that they attracted. Each saw unusually substantial and sustained engagement from within and

outside the academy on both the theoretical questions raised, and the practical institutional wranglings that surrounded them. The Cambridge, Stanford and UCT moments all take place at prestigious and well-established universities with considerable influence, while the Consortium was itself an attempt to design a new form of institution based on emergent notions of value previously resisted in traditional university settings. Of themselves, each moment raises unique aspects of the value debate, and reflect distinctive geography and context. Gerald Graff describes the university as ‘a curious accretion of historical conflicts that it has systematically forgotten.’ (73) By recuperating four of these ‘conflicts’ and their associated contexts, I hope to shed light on the relationship between public dispute and the development of ideas; to use these disputes as an historical window into thinking about value over the fifty-year period in question; and to say something about the relationship between history and value.

I have opted to focus on disputes with public resonance because they tend to play out in exaggerated fashion, helping to crystallise differing conceptions of value. Disputes at universities also often attract the attention of academics with a conceptual interest in the idea of value, both because of direct institutional connections, and because these contestations provide useful examples through which to reflect on thinking about value. As many of the theorists I consider are themselves involved in the disputes, returning to the archive also provides an opportunity to reflect on how individual academics’ ideas of value change as a consequence of contestation. Part of the aim of this thesis is therefore to do the historical work of mapping key monuments in academic writing about value during the period, and to give some idea of how this thinking has shifted over time. The architecture of public-facing disputes is helpful in this regard because they tend to precipitate theoretical reflection, and connect ideas and people in both direct and indirect ways.

I have also chosen to focus on university disputes because my own interest in the question of literary and associated value emerged out of one of these moments. While a student at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa, I sat on a national committee elected by students affiliated to the FeesMustFall movement tasked with establishing a list of set texts that would contribute

to decolonising the literary studies curriculum. As a committee, we shared a belief that the current syllabus was flawed in multiple respects. While we could point to numerous deficiencies with respect to authors, forms and themes, we were all also unsure about how to proceed in selecting alternative texts. The problem (perhaps naïve in retrospect) that loomed largest was how we were to think about ‘value’ as a general proposition. Were we content to trust our own predilections, or were there guiding principles we could develop and follow? What role did our own positions play in our selection, and in what way should we describe and defend our process? How did we think evaluation related to the university, and to literary studies as a discipline and field? Did we have views on the established literary canon and our relationship to it, and how did we think of literary value in relation to other forms of valuation? Should texts thought most valuable be those taught, and what role did pedagogy play in value formation? These broad questions crystallised in an interest in evaluation in general.

Within the context of recent work on the role of publishers, translators and readers (not to mention curators, dealers, choreographers, orchestras and other actors of the ‘art world’) in the creation and perpetuation of ‘aesthetic value’, a focus on the university may seem a staid choice of scholarly site.⁹ Moreover, as the university has been progressively side-lined as a centre of cultural influence, debates over value at universities have come to seem less significant. Bill Readings work on the corporatisation of the university and Stefan Collini’s writing on the changing relationship between the university and the state are especially instructive in this regard. While academics and course administrators at universities have continued to discuss, write and generally fret over questions of aesthetic value, the influence of these extensive energies and their associated output has become increasingly slight in broader social terms.

One of the founding assumptions of this thesis is however that it is just this sense of the university’s increased impotence that makes debates within the academy and the institutional site of the university both interesting and important. Following Robert JC Young, I see the university, and particularly those

⁹ See further the set of essays collected in Amit Chaudhuri (ed.) *Literary Activism* (2016).

sections related to the humanities, as relatively unique in their ability to ‘function as a surplus that the economy cannot comprehend,’ producing educative discussions of no obvious ‘service’ to the market. (122) As Young shows, this position is what gives the university potency (profit) as a social actor moving in opposition (or at least not in concert with) market ‘value’. Far from arguing for the virtue of the humanities as a site for the production of ‘useless’ knowledge (and in so doing making a virtue of uselessness), this approach says that it is politically valuable specifically as surplus to the market. Because of their connections to tertiary education, the organising structures of the value disputes I canvass are at the very least partly separable from the usual workings of production, consumption and exchange, making their shape and content of more than just incidental interest in wider value discussions.

This is particularly the case in the period of my focus, as the commodification of education began to reach further into university administrative centres, but did so in a way that moved against the humanities rather than through it, resulting in cuts to public funding and state demands that account be given of the humanities’ utility.¹⁰ As I see it, rather than Young’s position making virtue of necessity, it recognises the extent to which many of the value debates in literary studies and the humanities have operated outside of the ‘comprehension’ of the market ironically at least in part because of the generally opposing force of marketisation; the humanities generates an extra-market surplus precisely within the terms of the market economy. This does not mean that the university always acts in opposition to the logic of capital accumulation, but its situation within the market does promote ‘surplus thought’. (Young 122)

The idea of ‘surplus thought’ also helps introduce the kinds of ‘objects’ that I analyse here. Because of my disciplinary rooting in English Studies and the broader humanities, questions of how to read, appreciate and respond to ‘literary’ and ‘artistic’ texts are a founding concern. My objects of analysis are however almost exclusively texts interested in reflecting on or answering these questions, rather than

¹⁰ This despite the humanities and social sciences in fact subsidising science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research, as Christopher Newfield shows. See for instance Christopher Newfield *The Humanities as Service Departments: Facing the Budget Logic* (2015).

‘primary’ literature or art. More specifically, I focus on texts interested in the role of value and evaluation in our experience of the literary and the aesthetic. These objects are marked by their proximity and relation to the primary text, always carrying with them a sense of dependence and excess – they are by definition surplus. As the epigraph to this thesis suggests, interacting with ‘criticism’ and similar surplus production however generates its own gratification (broadly understood) – a gratification dependent on the *observation* of an already existent ‘pleasure’. Because of my institutional position within the discipline of literary studies, I do not always adopt the roll of full voyeuristic outsider in the way that Barthes describes. This is especially the case of the many interviews that inform my writing. A blurring of the line between observation and participation is also one of the affordances of dispute; others of which are described in the section to follow.

Value and Dispute

In what ways do disputes at universities with public resonance impact on how value is conceptualised? Each of the four chapters to follow gives a different answer. The first, Cambridge, chapter shows how dispute can impact on how one person thinks and writes about value. I suggest that rather than it being any clash of ideas that wrought this change, it was the shape of the dispute itself that brought about an alteration. Specifically, the MacCabe Affair centred the impact and importance of historical particularity, and this shifted Frank Kermode’s thinking about value away from the structuralism of his early *The Classic*. One of the ways that dispute can affect thinking about value is therefore through the emulation of its own form and properties in value theories.

In the second chapter, I show how public disputes can sometimes work in the opposite direction; acting as a centre of gravity compacting and solidifying existing approaches. In the Stanford example, this is evident in the workings of the university Senate, where, through the process of Senate debate, value came to be associated with ‘commonality’ in a fashion I associate with a version of American pragmatism popular at the time. This approach is also in evidence in key writing on value within American academia,

some of which has direct association with Stanford. On the whole, dispute in the Stanford case provides impetus for ideas to bed-down, and for its ramifications with respect to value to become clearer.

This connection between dispute and the clarification (or hardening) of approaches to value is to some extent replicated in the third, London Consortium, chapter. I suggest that the Consortium's clash with British Film Institute administrators linked to the new Labour administration brought to the surface a way of thinking about value latent in the Consortium's work. This approach is evident in the writing of many of the Consortium's affiliates, and in the Consortium's official stance. The dispute moreover enabled the Consortium's position to be situated within a longer history of the humanities in the United Kingdom. Dispute here operates as a mechanism for the recuperation of ideas that have been partially occluded or forgotten. By continuing to follow the career of Colin MacCabe (a key player in the Cambridge chapter), I also show how disputes interact with each other, and the consequences of this on value theory.

Disputes can also operate as fora for the direct clashing of competing ideas that would not otherwise have come into direct contact. The dispute at the UCT English Department discussed in the fourth chapter illustrates this effect. As the 'Fallist' position on value emerged out of various fora and intellectual associations connected to RMF, a clash with the materialist humanism of established members of the Department emerged. This clash gives insight into the approaches to value taken by each side and the broader trajectory of value-thought emergent across the previous chapters. Dispute here works both as a mechanism for thinking about particular value claims, and as a pathway into thinking about changing ideas of value more broadly.

One of the defining features of dispute is that it is a rupture of the ordinary workings of an institution. This rupturing can allow for the formation of new ideas, but it can also cause the occlusion or destruction of more fragile or embryonic theories. Because disputes are often heated, thinking about value at these moments is sometimes determinedly agonistic, but this thesis also shows how dispute can

act on value theory in cooler ways, and over longer periods of time. In the conclusion, I suggest that a focus on dispute moreover plays a role in how changing ideas of value are mapped over the longer term.

Chapters

Structurally, this thesis' first chapter considers how the fractious disputes surrounding the non-appointment of Colin MacCabe to an assistant lectureship at the University of Cambridge in the late 1970s changed Frank Kermode's approach to literary and aesthetic value. Starting with a reading of *The Classic*, I show how, pre-dispute, Kermode developed a 'modern version of the classic', premised on a text's ability to 'offer itself' to diverse readings under new temporal dispositions. This Barthesian structuralist, textually-focused approach came under sustained pressure during the so-called MacCabe Affair. Rather than it being any engagement with his theoretical antagonists that resulted in Kermode altering his approach, I suggest that the dispute itself contributed to Kermode rethinking his position on value. By the late 1980s, Kermode had come to see value as dependent on what he calls 'history', rather than any characteristic of the text or its interpretation.

The second chapter turns to the shift, in 1988, from the 'Western Culture' requirement at Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences to the 'Culture, Ideas, and Values' (CIV) programme. Focusing on the senatorial and committee debates over the persistence of a 'great works' 'core list' of texts, I suggest that 'commonality', particularly of language, became the main justification for evaluative decision making at the university. I associate this approach with the philosophical pragmatism of the period, particularly of Richard Rorty, who made submissions to the core course committees. This form of pragmatism is loosely anti-objectivist, preferring to find evaluative goods within empirically identifiable 'experience'. I subsequently argue that this kind of thinking also marked the work of key American theorists of value from the period, notably Herrnstein Smith and Guillory. In the final section, I show however that an alternative line of pragmatism which sought to hold objectivist ideas of value together with classic pragmatist maxims also emerged from the period. This conjoining prefigures the approach of the London Consortium, discussed in the third chapter.

That chapter looks at the emergence and philosophical foundations of the London Consortium in the late 1980s and early 1990s, suggesting that clashes with the ‘new’ Labour Party administration, resulting in the withdrawal of funding for the British Film Institute (BFI) in 1998, exemplifies the aporetic approach to value that marked Consortium thinking. This approach saw value as dependent on holding objectivist and relativist positions together. In charting the emergence of this position, I argue that the Consortium’s institutional position is closely linked to ideas emanating from 1970s Britain. To show this, I focus particularly on elements of the history of the BFI, the institution most closely connected to the Consortium’s genesis. Picking up on the career of Colin MacCabe, I also show how his work of the 1980s fed into the Consortium’s approach. I subsequently discuss writing of other Consortium associates, including Laura Mulvey, Jacqueline Rose, and Steven Connor, illustrating how their work contributed to the development of the institute’s ‘aporetic’ approach.

The final chapter focuses on the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement at UCT, and its impact on the university’s English Department. In the first section, I track the emergence of a common position on value within RMF structures. This position, through ideas like ‘black pain’, came to associate value with unresolvable abjection and suffering. I subsequently argue that this Afropessimism-infused position subsequently clashed with a version of materialist humanism engrained in the Department. To give content to this second set of ideas, I focus on the work of the two members of the Department most vilified by RMF: John Higgins and Kelwyn Sole. I show how their work emerged from a previous, 1980s, dispute in the Department, solidifying through the 1990s and 2000s. In the final section I suggest that rather than indicating that aporia may be a way out of the dispute, the UCT example demonstrates that debates over the relationship between history and value remain should be seen as unresolved rather than definitionally aporetic.

On the whole, this thesis therefore engages three inter-related concerns. First and foremost, it seeks to answer historical questions about how value was thought about between 1975 and 2015. It does so by recuperating four disputes closely intertwined with value questions. Second, it reflects on the role of

dispute, and particularly dispute within the university setting, in shaping positions on value, and on the utility of dispute as a pathway into thinking about value questions. Finally, it asks conceptual questions related to how we should go about approaching the idea of value, and in particular about the place of 'history' in this work. My hope is that reflecting on these questions will facilitate greater complexity of understanding in the context of increasing interest in evaluative practices within literary studies and the broader humanities.

Chapter One: Cambridge

Introduction

The dispute at the centre of this chapter turned on the outwardly innocuous question of whether an already-appointed assistant lecturer in the Cambridge English Faculty should be upgraded to a full lectureship. At its hottest-point, the so-called ‘MacCabe Affair’ attracted print, radio and television coverage in national and international media – appearing on the front pages of both *The Guardian* and *The Times*. The applicant in question, Colin MacCabe, had been a member of the university since joining as an undergraduate, and had recently published a book on James Joyce from his doctoral research. That book, along with MacCabe himself, came to stand in for what the university senate in its final report on the affair described as a ‘post-structuralist ethos’, ‘opposed by some members of the Faculty, and supported by others’. (University of Cambridge Senate 17)

The sociological significance of the dispute – including the many ulterior motives, mischaracterisations, and cross-factional allegiances that attended it – has recently received some academic attention.¹¹ While I do at times refer to archival material from the period, my intention in this chapter is not to reproduce that sociological work. Instead, my narrow focus is on how the dispute contributed to alterations in individual academics’ ideas about literary (and sometimes aesthetic) value and evaluation. In particular, I concentrate on the writing of Frank Kermode – at the time the Faculty’s King Edward VII Professor of English Literature – and on Colin MacCabe’s engagement with Kermode’s work. While others involved in the dispute also made both direct and indirect contributions to debates over the nature and validity of value in literary studies and the humanities, Kermode’s and MacCabe’s interest in value has been the most consistent, and Kermode’s work in particular has continued to have significant impact in the field. His body of work also stands out for the sharp shift in position before and after the affair, suggesting that the

¹¹ See especially Morgan and Baert (2015).

dispute had a causative impact on his thinking. This makes his work helpful for reflecting on the relationship between dispute and changing ideas of value.

My main argument in this chapter is that events in Cambridge impacted on Kermode's writing not only, or even mainly, by compelling integration of (or resistance to) opposing ideas in the Faculty, but instead by recentring the force and import of 'history' – a term Kermode develops over the course of the 1980s. It was the dispute as a dispute that prompted alterations in Kermode's conceptualisation of value, rather than any clash of ideas. Put otherwise, the form of the MacCabe affair brought about a change in approach, as much as, or more than, its content. Specifically, Kermode moved away from justifying the value of texts through reference to their inherent 'structural' qualities, and put increasing emphasis on the power and particularity of contingent historical fact, seeing value as defined by the flow of history. In addition to strong temporal correlation, what makes the connection apparent is how distinctive characteristics of the dispute start to appear in Kermode's writing about value during the 1980s. While participating in a general move towards historicism in the disciplinary milieu of 1980s English Studies, Kermode's writing is in this way notably patterned by his experience at Cambridge.

Any move away from defining value on the basis of synchronic linguistic 'structure' and towards 'history' entails shifting from 'idealist', 'objectivist' or 'universalist' conceptions of value. Kermode's writing from the 1980s however shows that he nearly always, and sometimes contradictorily, makes space for the possibility of non-relativist evaluative practices. In the third, London Consortium, chapter, I suggest that a similar composite of the materialist and the idealist (and so also of the relativist and objectivist) is evident in MacCabe's approach to evaluative questions. The direction of movement prompted by the Cambridge dispute was however away from objectivism, and Kermode does not argue for any aporetic middle ground. By the late 1980s, Kermode instead sees value as defined by the workings of the past.

So as to illustrate this shift, and the role of the MacCabe affair in it, I start the chapter with a reading of Kermode's pre-Cambridge *The Classic: literary images of permanence and change*, still his most cited work in the literature on value. I argue that the series of lectures collected in the book shows Kermode deliberately moving from an Eliotic and loosely late-Leavisite 'culturalist' definition of value to a form of structuralist idealism. In my view, these two positions, and the methodological approaches they entail, are also a helpful representation of the two sides of the MacCabe Affair, which I introduce in the next section through an exchange between Kermode and Christopher Ricks in the newly formed *London Review of Books*.

In the next section, I build on MacCabe's argument that the 'modern classic' Kermode endorses in the final chapters of *The Classic* is flawed by its exclusion of a 'social frame', suggesting however that MacCabe is incorrect so see the absent context as Cambridge English, instead of New England American. In my view, an 'American' sensibility, cultivated by Kermode's physical and intellectual connections with the United States at the time of writing *The Classic*, pervades much of his textual analysis in the book, as well as his understanding of 'French theory'. Reintroducing this context allows a clearer separation to be drawn between the account of value Kermode puts forward pre-Cambridge, and the idea that emerges in his subsequent writing. These differences in historical account aside, the shape of MacCabe's criticism is helpful because it introduces the kinds of historicist concerns that I argue mark Kermode's thinking about value in the wake of the MacCabe Affair.

To show the close association between these changes and the affair itself, I next give a brief description of the events of the dispute. While there were some 'historicist' or 'materialist' elements to the Leavisism promoted by the 'anti-theory' camp at Cambridge, my view is that Kermode's changing position was not primarily a Graffian swing of the disciplinary pendulum. Instead, the dispute compelled Kermode to take the vagaries of history seriously, encouraging him to theorise value within and through history, rather than outside of it. So as to demonstrate this shift, I use

Kermode's references to James Joyce in the period immediately after his leaving Cambridge as an illustrative example. Reference to Joyce is a helpful exemplar because of the centrality of MacCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* in the dispute, as well as the longer story of the inception of Joyce's work into Cambridge, which I briefly outline for context. I pivot from here into Kermode's writing on value of the 1980s, showing how his new history-centred approach evolves, culminating in 1989's *History and Value*, Kermode's most clearly historicist account of value. I end the chapter with a brief response to this position, suggesting that John Guillory's work on the 'object' of the humanities offers an alternative to some of the capriciousness that Kermode's position entails. Many of these concerns are then taken up again in the next chapter on Stanford's CIV dispute.

The Classic

The four chapters that make up Kermode's *The Classic* were first delivered as the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in 1973, the year prior to his Cambridge appointment.¹² The book therefore provides an instructive example of Kermode's approach to literary value on the cusp of his engagements with the internal politics of the Cambridge English Faculty. In broad terms, the book charts a shift from what Kermode defines at the 'imperial classic' to what he describes as the 'modern classic'. Taking T.S. Eliot's 1944 'What is a Classic?' as a conceptual starting point, the first two chapters develop Kermode's understanding of the former. The third and fourth chapters then use the imperial classic as an oppositional point against which to define the modern classic; the account of value endorsed in the book's final pages.

Rather than beginning the first chapter with Eliot's definition of the classic, or by setting out his own definition, Kermode starts by connecting the classic to the canon. (Kermode *WC* 8) For him, the question 'what is a classic?' emerges 'whenever there is in process any kind of secular canon-

¹² Kermode had joined Cambridge in 1974 from a post as Head of the English Department at University College London (UCL).

formation, any choice of authorities in matters of doctrine and style.’ (15) By bringing the classic into the orbit of the canon, Kermode in this way presents his argument as starting from history rather than ideology. The emphasis on practical grounding takes textual form in *The Classic*’s early invocation of Aulus Gellius, who defines the classic in terms of one’s liability to pay taxes: ‘a classic is a writer, so to speak, in the surtax class.’ (15) To be *infra classem* meant to be free of the burden of taxes, but also outside the only ‘class’ that matters. The classic is therefore a reflection of contingent economic power. The word ‘*classicus*’, as Kermode explains, was first used as a figurative form for this economic differentiation: ‘a writer of quality and note... a writer who counts.’¹³ (11)

All of this would seem to suggest that Kermode’s understanding of the classic is rooted in the practical workings of the past. The version of the classic Kermode is working towards at this point is the imperial rather than the modern. One of the defining features of the imperial classic is that it is defined by a cultural history – the dividing of the metropolitan and the provincial.¹⁴ By starting with an emphasis on history, Kermode is in this way able to both suggest that his approach is sensitive to the past, and at the same time develop a counter-model to his modern classic.

That counter-model begins to emerge in the first chapter of *The Classic*, where Kermode reads Eliot’s doctrine of the classic as an extension of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve and Matthew Arnold’s ‘shared belief in the modernity of the true classic, and the notion of provincialism, which implies a metropolis.’ (19) For Eliot, ‘history, under all the appearance of change’ is a ‘unity’, and the force that establishes and maintains this concord is empire:

¹³ This seems to be drawn from Sainte-Beuve, who notes in *Qu’est-ce qu’un classique?*: ‘Au figuré, le mot *classicus* se trouve employé dans Aulu-Gelle, et appliqué aux écrivains: un écrivain de valeur et de marque, *classicus assiduousque scriptor*, un écrivain qui compte.’ See the discussion in Prendergast (27). Gellius’ definition also introduces the close association between text, writer and society at the centre of Kermode’s understanding of the classic. The classic is a person (writer), a text, and a representative of a cultural group (the surtax class). This frame is taken from Eliot, who, in his appraisals of the classic, draws no distinction between Virgil, the Roman Empire and *The Aeneid*.

¹⁴ Provincial, in Eliot’s sense, means to be outside of metropolitan literary orthodoxies. Kermode says that while this kind of language is adapted to criticism, it is literal rather than figurative: Eliot’s view is that literature is ‘beyond time’, part of a continuum which can be renovated, separable from other artefacts by its position within the empire. (TC 21)

By the action of grace the ancient Roman Empire is revealed as a type of the Holy Roman Empire and the Church; and the symbol of that action is Virgil. Whatever happens in history – decadences and renovations, incursions of barbarism, heresies more or less successful – the Empire remains unchanged. (27-8)

From this understanding of history comes the imperial classic. For as long as the empire persists, so does the value of classic texts. A classic ‘exhausts’ a culture, by which Eliot means something more like summation than depletion. (Eliot *WC* 13) The classic is intertwined with the metropolitan sensibilities of empire itself. Empire implies a metropolitan doctrine, enforcing a ‘centre of authority’. (16) For as long as the empire persists, so does the classic: empire sustains value through time.

The most discernible mechanisms by which this process takes place are philology and historiography. The institutions of empire ensure that a classic is interpreted and interpolated by subsequent generations; the text itself is read, and its value conserved. But Eliot, who is no sentimentalist, recognises that the historical Roman Empire is in ruins, and that its organisational structures no longer persist: ‘everyone knows that there are enormous discrepancies between the mystique of empire and the facts of imperial history.’ (28) What empire is, and what it is said to be, diverge greatly. More nuanced tools are necessary if a classic is to survive. In Kermode’s reading, Eliot finds these implements in Dante, who saw that the Latin of his time was ‘the compound of vernaculars of an earlier stage.’ (37) While the original Augustan Latin, may be ‘more beautiful’, the vernacular, being natural, is ‘nobler’ (*nobilior est vulgaris*). (37) From this arises the notion of the illustrious vulgar (*volgare illustre*), a paradoxical preservation of the prestige of an old language in a new form.

Eliot thinks that ‘the path to comprehensiveness and universality lies... through the illustrious vulgar’. (38) The classic generally does not survive in the same form in which it first presents itself. Instead, it is vulgarised; its meaning altered as its context changes. The classic must be

‘accommodated’ to the modern mind in the form of the *vulgare illustre*. (38) What matters is disposition rather than essence. The ‘chief instrument’ of this accommodation is allegory – although Kermode finds others through the course of his book. (40) Instead of being replaced, classic texts are shifted into the present. What matters is that the idea of empire subsists unaltered, even as the sense of the classic changes. This is some distance from Harold Bloom, who thinks that the ‘principal’ classic, Shakespeare, ‘invented us’. (25) Instead of the classic persisting in the changing currents of history as Kermode reads Eliot, Bloom thinks that ‘we owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition, but much of our capacity for cognition’. (40) The classic holds the key to social meaning, not the other way around. Chapters two and three – the most composite and effective of *The Classic* – trace the alterations and challenges to the idea of the imperial classic from Dante, through Marvell, Spencer, the Augustans and Hawthorne, to Sainte-Beuve and Eliot, who solidify its shape.

The modern classic is then set against this imperial classic. In light of Kermode’s approach to this point – mixing critical and creative texts to construct a lucid, literary record that coheres around the central notion of empire – there is something jarring about the high-philosophical mode registered in the last chapter of *The Classic*. Kermode pivots from a close reading of *Wuthering Heights* aimed at illustrating the novel’s semantic indeterminacies, to a critique of Q.D. Leavis, for whom, ‘there is something . . . [which] has not changed between the first writing [of a text] and her reading.’ (134) This enables the introduction of E.D. Hirsch’s semantic intentionalism – a text has only one meaning, and ‘the object of interpretation is the verbal meaning of the author.’ (135) Kermode dismisses Hirsch as shadowing the worst of Addison, who, at the beginning of *Discourse on Ancient and Modern Learning* (1739), ‘assumes that the ideal way to read the classics is to get as close as possible to reading them as contemporaries did.’ (74) While Addison, prefiguring strands of twentieth-century formalism, ties semantic content to the understanding of a given community

at the point when a text is produced, Hirsch goes further in construing meaning as the preserve of the author alone.

From Kermode's criticism of Hirsch it is a relatively small step, via Claude Lévi-Strauss, to Roland Barthes's structuralism, which, amongst other things, denies the privileged status of the author in favour of a 'surplus of signifiers' within a given linguistic structure; an associated plurality of meanings. (136-7) Kermode's modern version of the classic then emerges as 'the permanent locus of change; as something of which the permanence no longer legitimately suggests the presence of what it appears to designate.' (137) What a text is said to signify is no longer a marker of whether or not it persists. The modern classic is constituted by its ability to 'offer itself' to fresh readings under new temporal dispositions. (140-1) The survival of a classic depends upon the ability of its language to hold multiple meanings. This is a formal characteristic of particular texts, as much as it is a feature of language in general. At the core of Kermode's modern classic is thus a lionising of aspects of what he sees as Barthesian structuralism – a raising of 'constitutive ambiguity' to a criterion of value; a text survives because of its special ability to invite and sustain multiple meanings.

Theory and Principles

It was this sort of approach to understanding literature and its value – one based on general 'theoretical' conclusions about textuality and language – that became the main ideological 'irritant' for those opposing MacCabe's appointment (University of Cambridge Senate 34). While, as I suggest later, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* – the text criticised most directly by MacCabe's detractors – was vastly different in style and methodology to *The Classic*, MacCabe and Kermode's work of the 1970s was increasingly seen at Cambridge as 'of a type.' (University of Cambridge Senate 12) Perhaps the most energetic member of the 'anti' camp was Christopher Ricks, and it is therefore helpful to look at a sample of his writing from the time of the MacCabe Affair, as well as at Kermode's response to Ricks, so as to better understand their differences.

Ricks's clearest statement of the reasons behind his opposition are given in a public lecture delivered in late February 1981, and later published in *The London Review of Books* (LRB) – Kermodé's at the time two-year-old hybrid scholarly/journalistic project.¹⁵ In his lecture, Ricks draws a distinction between 'theory' and 'principles'. (Ricks 32) Theory 'is characterised by its degree of elaboration, concatenation, completeness, abstraction, self-consciousness, and technicality risked'; it 'points towards philosophy', seeking definition and clarity. (32) Principles, by contrast, resist 'elaboration'. They stay in and with 'difficulties', rather than seeking solutions to the 'problems' these difficulties present to those wanting an overarching theory. (33) Samuel Johnson, for whom 'the task of criticism' was 'to establish principles', deliberately chose to think about the application of the principles he perceived, rather than elaborating them into theory. (33) These principles are wedged in contradiction, as in Johnson's illumination of the tension between freedom and privacy in Milton's *Areopagitica*. William Empson is another for contradictions: 'Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions which can't be solved by analysis' – a principle about principles itself resistant to theory. (34) Empson leads Ricks to conclude that, 'A fully-fledged theory is a philosophy; a fully-compacted principle is a proverb.' (34) Philosophical reflection seeks out a final panacea in universal truth. Purveyors of proverb have no such hang-

¹⁵ The founding of the LRB is one of the few career accomplishments for which Kermodé willingly takes credit. He describes in his autobiography how the publication 'began at my instigation to appear in 1979' – a strong declaration by his standards – and unambiguously accepts recognition for its inception and success in a number of interviews he conducted in the final years of his life. (Kermodé *NE* 234) Together with Karl Miller, Kermodé spent considerable energies promoting the LRB during the early 1980s. Jonathan Arac goes so far as to suggest that Kermodé built a 'deuxième carrière' around the LRB following his retirement from Cambridge in 1982 – as a result of the acrimonious environment created by the MacCabe Affair. Ricks's choice of the LRB as the mouthpiece for his most strident rhetorical defence of his position in the dispute also shows the personal esteem in which he held Kermodé (whom he would go on to succeed as the King Edward VII Professorship of English Literature). The two maintained a personal and professional respect, even in the heat of the dispute. This détente also foregrounds affinities between Kermodé's and Ricks's scholarly approaches. Kermodé often casts himself as outside the literary establishment, which is true, but only to an extent. He is also steeped in a metropolitan tradition of literary criticism that bore significant cultural currency in the period between 1930 and 1970 during which he built his career. It is also possible that Kermodé cared more for 'theory' than for MacCabe's work, which he describes, gently but damningly, as 'showing great improvement'. (Morgan and Baert 12). As much as the MacCabe Affair took on increasingly general implications, it remained a 'Cambridge scandal', and the field of engagement was always relatively narrow.

ups, leaving ‘us only (only!) to decide which of two contradictory proverbs applies on any particular occasion.’ (34)

There is an obvious irony in criticising the ‘theory’ pervading English faculties for its rejection of contradiction when so much of it is premised on the opposite. Aporia in signification and deconstructive reading are the defining hallmarks of much poststructuralist thinking. It is difficult to imagine there being much left of Derrida’s work without the paradoxes associated with concepts such as ‘différance’, ‘pharmakon’ or ‘gift’. Even avowed structuralists like Barthes have an abiding interest in disrupting binary oppositions, as *The Classic* itself demonstrates. The modern classic is premised on interpretative uncertainties, and while MacCabe’s vision of Joyce in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* is sometimes overly blunt, its wider aims are much the same. The chapter on *Ulysses* begins with a thorough, didactic explanation of Lacan’s reading of Saussure on signs and signals, which MacCabe subsequently uses to support his own interpretation of Joyce as full of present absences resisting ‘meta-language’ – a point outwardly comparable to the defence of ‘principles’ over concatenated theory. (MacCabe *JJ* 16)

The specifics of Ricks’s opposition come out in more detail in his reproof of Geoffrey Hartman and Stanley Fish. Hartman, Ricks considers an apologist for theory, and Fish, a real practitioner. The former’s fault is not upholding the ‘division between creation and criticism’, meaning a mangling of the writer as a creative force. (Ricks 36) What prompts Hartman’s ‘malfeasance’ is an over-elevation of the reader; which is how we get to theory. (36) Like the Eliot of *After Strange Gods*, Ricks thinks picturing creation as an individual act heretical, although in this case the heresy is ultra-textual. Fidelity to tradition, in Eliot’s expansive sense, is preferable to freedom. Indeed, the democratising of literature by surrendering meaning to the reader is harmful for almost everyone:

“Refusing the subterfuge of a passive or restrictive role, he [the reader] becomes at once reader and writer.” Where does this leave the writer? Nowhere. And where does it leave the reader who is not a critic or hermeneuticist? In the same place. (36)

Giving readers semantic control is as effective a way of erasing meaning as denying it exists at all. And without meaning, there is no valuation: Carlyle’s ‘hero’ and Emerson’s ‘genius’ give way to the proclivities of whomever picks up the book. This is vintage Barthes, for whom ‘by erasing the author’s signature, death establishes the truth of the work, which is an enigma’. Following that oblique philosophical path leads to the ‘constitutive ambiguity’ which grounds Kermode’s modern classic.

But Ricks’s *querelle* is broader than this. The proviso ‘who is not a critic or hermeneuticist’ moves the debate away from an *in-situ* denial of Barthes’s semiotics, and towards the role of the critic in establishing value. Hartman, Ricks rightly notes, is not willing to give up the ‘professional reader’. (36) This indicates that there is more to be had in certain readings than others, which makes the rationale behind removing the writer’s authority that much murkier. Ricks presents us with a ‘double impulse – to occlude non-professional reading, and, complementarily, to occlude the fact that writing is something done by writers prior to critics – which animates... the reigning usurpers.’ (36) The problem with Hartman is that he takes for himself and the critics what he denies the writer and the commoner. Theoretical fascia becomes a cover for privileging a certain class of reader.

Ricks here writes like a ‘theorist’ in spite of himself. His problems are philosophical: Hartman’s ‘occlusions’ are damaging only for those committed to seeing meaning as bound up with authorial intent; and there is no avoiding theoretical amplification if this is where you set your stall. Disliking diagnoses ‘malgré lui’ at the best of times, Ricks would nevertheless see in this a false dichotomy. (36) He is stridently resistant to Hartman’s implicit division of criticism into either ‘practical’, in Richards’s sense, or ‘theoretical’, in Kermode’s. Acknowledging that sourcing value in culture risks

vacuity, Ricks continues to resist veering off into rules. His preference is for the ‘principled’ middle-ground, and to Johnson he adds Keats, who praises ‘Negative Capability’; those critical patterns ‘capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. (43) His resistance to Hartman’s reliance on theory is that it elaborates too comprehensibly. The better approach is to rein in general propositions, and read the text as it is. If literature is to both ‘acknowledge and to resist the claims of history or science (fact) and of philosophy or science (reason)’, then it should avoid the needless elaborations of theory. (35)

What it means to read a text for its principles is intentionally left vague. This begs charges of relativism, which Ricks himself identifies as a problem of interpretation. One of the great benefits of both practical and theoretical semantic systems is that they explain how to establish the sense of a text by drawing from sources outside of it. ‘Principles’, which resist external correlatives, are obliged to find meaning in the text, which generally means reference to the author. Unsurprisingly in a piece bristling with rhetorical flair, Ricks turns in this regard to Stanley Fish, whose writing he describes as a ‘lobotomy’ of literature. (36) The Fish of *Is there a Text in this Class?* argues against a distinction between ‘interpretation and that which is interpreted’, which amounts to a rejection of a bright line between reading and writing. For Ricks, this demotes the author to being ‘a spare pen at the hermeneuticist’s wedding’, and the text itself to a present absence: the slighting of authorial intention ‘leaves no way of establishing the text of a text.’ (38) Unconvinced that an interpretative community can be identified, Ricks argues that Fish’s ‘unworkable sacrosanctity’ means that the critic is now doing the work of interpreting meaning into being. (40) As with Hartman, the only guiding values are those of the skilled-reader, and so the critic is once more given precedence.

Ricks’s concern for the whereabouts of the text is shared by Hirsch, who argues that ‘[i]f an interpreter did not conceive a text’s meaning to be there as an occasion for contemplation or application, he would have nothing to think or talk about’. (Hirsch 80) Texts have fixed ‘meaning’, established by the author, and this is different to any ‘signification’, or ‘meaning-as-related-to-

something-else', that readers may subsequently find. (80) The role of the candid critic, who wants to do more than involve themselves in semantic gamesmanship, is to recoup this sense. Such 'recognitive' models are exactly what Kermode agitates against in *The Classic*. He dislikes Hirsch's bifurcation, preferring to see all linguistically tenable interpretations as legitimate meanings, and suggests, through Barthes and Levi-Strauss, that there is always a surplus of meaning to be had in a piece of literature. (135) The value of a text is then associated with this fact about interpretation, rather than with anything that the author hoped to put into the work.

A month after the publication of Ricks's piece, Kermode makes this point in an oblique response for the LRB, couched as a critique of P.D. Juhl's *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Juhl takes the hard line, arguing that there is only one 'universally compelling norm' – the author's meaning. (Juhl 25) This is different from Hirsch, for whom a text's 'significations' can denote something of the text, even if there is an 'ethical' imperative to read for the author's intention. Juhl has no time for 'oughts'. He wants, instead, a descriptive account of what interpretation entails. His answer is that a literary work, 'resembles a speech act in which the very concept of meaning involves an author's intentional activity' – works of art are wholly what their authors 'plan' them to be. (220) Context can sometimes be usefully consulted, but only to the extent that it helps establish the author's original intention; for example, by disambiguating. Kermode finds this analogy disquieting:

The declaration that "context will be able to disambiguate an utterance if and only if it constitutes evidence of a speaker's intention" has at best only a trivial relevance to literature. A phone call from Shakespeare might disambiguate a tricky line, but it could not disambiguate Hamlet, which, it might be maintained, is undisambiguable. (31)

Kermode's point is that literary texts may not have a definitive meaning, and, unlike speech acts, constitutively so. To what extent this may be a function of the author's intention is never properly considered by Juhl; extreme examples may close the gap between the author's intentions and a

multiplicity of meanings in the text, but the point holds. In practice, for Kermode, making sense of *Hamlet* may indeed be a perpetual task. What's more, establishing the author's intention is itself quixotic: at least in some cases even the author is unsure of what they mean. Juhl accepts this, and so sets up a noumenal, 'in principle' intentional meaning, towards which asymptotic interpretative efforts intend. Kermode however finds this alleged hidden meaning too notional to bother 'plain men'. (31) He also sees it as inviting wild interpretations at the expense of 'extreme hermeneutic rigour'; which undermines the certainty that underpins the intentionalist project to begin with. (31) This is the same position that leads him to an understanding of the classic as 'the permanent locus of change'.

At least outwardly, it was these differences on the nature and practice of interpretation, as well as perceived lack of rigour underpinning each, that fuelled the dispute. MacCabe's writing and appointment became increasingly emblematic of the rise of, in Ricks terminology, 'theory'. During one appointment committee debate, Ricks for example expressed how he both 'did not think [MacCabe's lectures] very good', and considered his approach to the study of English, in particular his 'deployment of theory', senseless and damaging. The explicit benchmark against which MacCabe was assessed by the Faculty Board was the 'distinction' of his work – a term that some members objected to on grounds of vagueness, but which became central to discussions. At the first Faculty Board meeting, sections of MacCabe's book on Joyce, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, were 'mockingly read aloud'. (Morgan and Baert 68) At the second, Ricks reportedly went so far as to claim that 'Mr MacCabe's book is a bad book', while Mike Long gave a 'twenty-minute malediction' of it, pointing out discrepancies in argument and style. (Morgan and Baert 68)

By contrast, John Nash describes *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* as 'pioneering', calling it 'the first post-structuralist book published in Britain' (Nash 126). The central argument of the book is that Joyce's writing recalibrates the relationship between the subject of a text and its language. The process of interpretation changes from being an unveiling of authorial intent, to a

mutually constitutive process through which the subject (or author) is seen to make the language just as they are made by it. It is the 'interweaving of forms, which constitutes the writer as it constitutes the text'. (12) For MacCabe, the text itself as a purveyor of meaning is also implicated in the subjectivity of the reader. To 'pretend that we can go direct to the text is to take literary criticism at its word and believe that the text is a simple and definable object.' (3) MacCabe spends much of the book using elements of the psychoanalytic work of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan to argue that the meaning of texts is not a symptom of an author's psychic life, but instead part of the language that constitutes the author's sexuality and self. Instead of understanding the text as the 'representation of an epistemologically distinct area', we should 'conceive it as the articulation of the possibilities of experience, these possibilities being another name for the limits of our language.' (7) An implication of this approach is that there is no separation between language and experience. It does not make sense to speak of texts representing the author's intention, because the 'I' of the author is embedded in discourse – 'the regularities of lexical combinations within both the sentence and larger units of distribution' – rather than their discrete point of view. (8) New interpretations for the same text thus emerge as the structure of the language, its 'discourse', alters. (8)

That raw structuralism is combined by MacCabe with psychoanalytic notions of 'returning the repressed'. (244) 'Good' interpretation is increasingly associated with the idea of what he terms a 'cure'. (235) As in Lacanian psychoanalytic practice, the subject (in this case the text) is not interpreted so to extract its meaning, but in order to unlock fresh interpretations as a form of treatment. The 'process of the cure is the process by which new discourses open up fresh positions'. (245) In this way, the value of a text comes to be associated with how it is interpreted within a changing 'discourse'. Joyce's writing is 'valuable', for MacCabe because it self-consciously foregrounds and encourages these interpretative processes. As for the Kermode of *The Classic*, the value of literary texts is associated with the things it is said to mean, which is never an exhaustive

process – a text is never fully explained. Both recurrently stress that the value of a text is not in its particular properties, but in the meanings it is able to ‘take on’ in a broader linguistic context.

MacCabe on The Classic

What is clear from the above description is that the position on value that Kermode takes in *The Classic*, and that MacCabe takes in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, informs the content of their dispute with Ricks and other members of Faculty, rather than the dispute being a foundational factor in the emergence of their position. This conclusion is notably at odds with MacCabe’s own response to Kermode’s model. From the early 1990s onwards, MacCabe regularly attacks the argument of *The Classic*, and always on the same grounds. In broad terms, his argument is that the modern classic is prejudicially unmoored from history because Kermode was unable to engage with his contemporary moment as a result of the intensities of the Cambridge dispute. While Kermode ‘adroitly’ demonstrates that ‘the time transcending idea of empire’ has been used ‘as a paradigm of the classic’, explaining how ‘the past may retain identity through change’, he makes no effort to contextualise the ‘modern classic’ he subsequently developed. (MacCabe 115) Whereas the history and reception of the ‘imperial classic’ are thoroughly mapped, the conditions for the emergence of the modern version are never made clear. *The Classic* as a result neglects to recognise writing as a ‘social act of language’, impairing its overall quality. (116)

Describing the text as tonally ‘both anxious and aggressive’, MacCabe argues that the text and Kermode’s argument lack a ‘social frame’. (115) No model of literary value can be developed without connection to the moment of its emergence. In Kermode’s case, there is no ‘political or social project’ against which the ‘polemical centre’ of *The Classic* can be made distinct. (115) Frequently deploying psycho-medical language, MacCabe describes *The Classic* as bearing the ‘symptoms’ of Kermode’s ‘ordeal’. (115) *The Classic* reaches for abstract principles (pertaining to indeterminacy in the text) not because Kermode thinks this ‘abstract’ approach to defining the classic is preferable, but in order to avoid entangling with prevailing institutional disputes, and with

the vagaries of history in general. In MacCabe's view, *The Classic* would have been a 'healthier' piece without the incursion of Cambridge politics. (116)

At the core of MacCabe's criticism of Kermode are therefore two interconnected ideas. First, that the question of 'correctness' draws 'its authority from the present': Any model of the classic must draw on its present conditions. (MacCabe *WMF* 74) Second, that this attention to history must also find its way into the model itself. It is only through a focus on the role of history that a justifiable theory of the classic can emerge. While these two arguments do not of necessity imply each other, MacCabe thinks that it is not possible to do either alone – the historicising of the model implies an historicist approach to value, and vice versa.

To give flesh to this argument, and assess its cogency, it is helpful to look directly at *The Classic*. The force of MacCabe's criticism is nowhere more strongly evident than in the moment of Kermode's shift from the imperial to the modern classic. I suggested previously that the pedagogic use of Q.D. Leavis's 'A Fresh Approach to *Wuthering Heights*' as an introduction to the modern classic is peculiarly contrived. The historical course established over three preceding chapters is abandoned in favour of a solitary foundational antagonist. Despite his attack on Leavis being the sole fulcrum of his pivot from the imperial to the modern, the section starts with Kermode describing how he 'came upon' Leavis's essay, 'by chance', amongst the existing 'voluminous secondary material' on *Wuthering Heights*.¹⁶ Kermode's subsequent excessive praise – the text is 'long-meditated', 'rich in insights', 'exhibiting mature authority' – contributes to establishing a dichotomy between Kermode's own pluralistic classic and the 'real novel' Leavis seeks to excavate. (132) Through the course of the chapter, she comes to stand for rigidity: a 'repository of certain, unchanging truths', while his French-infused modern classic is 'an invitation to co-production on the part of the reader'. (113) Kermode gradually develops Leavis into a putative interlocutor rather

¹⁶ Kermode regularly introduces critical points by 'coming upon' the book from which his argument emerges; a strategy that sometimes hides his argument under the veneer of inevitability. Compare, for example, his use of Agatha Christie's *The Secret Adversary* in the final passages of 'Value at a Distance' (105).

than a definite figure in historical relation to his own criticism, or to the tradition of the classic he previously outlined. This creation of a conceptual counter-point is philosophical rather than historical. Leavis's essay is contextualised within no critical or literary tradition, instead it materialises directly through his disinterested perusal of 'what people have been saying about [Brontë's] book.' (131)

The course Kermode's summary takes from here expands this approach. From the outset, allusions are made to the presence of contradiction in Leavis's practice: she for instance admits that there are parts of any texts that resist explanation, but determines that there are nevertheless elements of *Wuthering Heights* which are 'obvious missteps' in the context of the novel as a whole. (131) For Leavis, Brontë's over-ambition and inexperience as a writer mean that there are vestiges of 'false starts' left in the final work, which harm the overall success of the novel. There are remnant shapes of a Shakespearean tragedy; a Romantic incest narrative; a chronicle of brother-lover; and a fairy story. (Leavis 86) Once these 'confusions' are cleared away, efforts can be concentrated on the novel's core story, founded on the contrast between the two Catherines – the one willing her own destruction, the other educated by experience and avoiding the same fate. (Leavis 88) Kermode agrees that this 'real story' is in the text, but sees no reason to privilege Leavis's 'peculiar archaeology' over any other reading: 'what she will not admit is that there is a sense in which all these versions are not only present but have a claim on our attention'. (Kermode, 133) Leavis is 'left with something that has not changed between the first writing and her reading', while Kermode sees himself as 'reading a text that might well signify differently to different generations and different persons within those generations.' (134)

What seems uncharacteristically to have been disregarded by Kermode is that Leavis's essay is as much abstrusely critical as it is archaeological. Her dismissal of competing versions of *Wuthering Heights* is an acute and enriching performance of critical privileging, rather than a statement of holistic truth. Each layer is unpicked and laid out so that its 'recalcitrant elements' can be set aside.

The ‘sociological novel’ (*Wuthering Heights* is really about the conflict between ‘a wholesome, primitive and natural unit of a healthy society and its opposite’) is found deficient because it relegates the Heathcliff-Catherine-Edgar/Cathy-Linton-Hareton relationships to ‘ex-centric dramatic episodes’, when in fact it is ‘surely these relationships and their working out that give meaning to all the rest’. (Leavis 99, 101) Why the one should preclude the other is never made clear, but the discussion of both, and their comparative valuation, is instructive. Leavis’s essay’s comparison of *Wuthering Heights* to *Jules et Jim* then illustrates the drawbacks with making the documenting of relationships on their own central: ‘[Roche’s] characters merely exhibit themselves... setting up a moral vacuum’. (115) Brontë, by contrast, leaves an impression of ‘responsibility and impersonality’. (115) From here gradually, and in largely dialectic fashion, emerges the real novel, and its abiding ‘concern for, and knowledge of, real life’. (137)

Both this process, and the choice of a final ‘authentic story’, are, of course, an overlaying of Leavis’s own ideological position on the text. But this is itself indicative of period and context. The themes she highlights and then accepts or dismisses are valuable independent of her final conclusion, and her choosing between them is revealing in its idiosyncrasy. Moreover, Leavis’s laying out of criteria is as rhetorical as it is serious, and should be read as such. In fact, the point to which she is most polemically committed in ‘A Fresh Approach to *Wuthering Heights*’ is that we should reject a conception of ‘literary criticism as either a game or an industry, not as a humane study’. (138) The establishing of the sense of a text is a varying cultural project, as Richards – her doctoral supervisor – had argued in *The Meaning of Meaning*. Kermode, by contrast, reduces Leavis’s text – full of ‘varying, fading voices’ despite its apparent vigour – into a two-dimensional conjectural foil for his own theorising. (113) *The Classic*’s reading becomes analytic rather than historical, and its deployment of irony overly muscular. The argument operates irrespective of the eddying narrative

structure and contradictory patterns of thought that characterise Leavis's essay, as well as her intellectual background.¹⁷

The outcome is that one ahistorical paragon is made to oust another, rather than idealism substituting for historicism. Kermode employs ahistorical *a priori* reasoning in order to assert the cogency of hermeneutic pluralism over intentionalism. *The Classic's* preference for the semantics of Hans-Georg Gadamer over Hirsch is embedded in a rejection of disembodied hermeneutics in favour of 'the fusion of epistemic horizons'. (Gadamer 7) Gadamer's approach implies that context – both present and at the time of production – contributes to establishing meaning. But the form of argument in the final chapter of *The Classic* is actively non-contextualised. As a result, the modern classic comes to be methodologically associated with analytical reasoning on the part of the critic and invariable aesthetic qualities in the text, rather than with Eliot's imperial accommodation, or the constitutive instability cultivated throughout the rest of *The Classic*. This contradiction has the effect of undermining the force of Kermode's argument even as it asserts it.

It is the deep historical embeddedness of the imperial classic that makes the lack of the same in Kermode's depiction of the modern classic so (to use a Kermodian phrase) shuddering.¹⁸ The theorising that ends *The Classic* is perfunctory, and Kermode's analysis of *Wuthering Heights* is largely emblematic, and is aimed at exemplifying the kind of secular plurality that Kermode sees in the

¹⁷ Kermode's own critical interventions on *Wuthering Heights* are similarly unusually detached from Brontë's social context. His comments on Lockwood's series of dreams focus wholly on internal inconsistencies and 'considerable conflicts', supporting the view that 'classics are books which... are complex enough to allow us our necessary pluralities.' (121) In Lockwood's dream of Jabez Branderham's 'interminable sermon', Kermode finds Brontë straying from the usual novelistic practice of using dreams opaquely to further a 'narrative line', instead leaving the purpose of the dream 'obscure', and in so doing inviting disagreement and divergence. (127) Similarly, the discrepancies between the claim to reality in the Branderham dream and the altogether more real vision of Lockwood smashing a window and finding himself holding the 'ice-cold hand' of a girl (calling herself Catherine Linton) are attributed to 'indeterminacies which the text will not resolve.' (128) The site and sound of a fir-tree touching the lattice at the end of the first dream morph progressively into an 'importune branch', which becomes the girl's hand. This dovetails with the general portrayal of Heathcliff as 'betwixt and between': he is 'in and out of the Earnshaw family simultaneously', 'between names', 'standing outside, or entering, or leaving, a door', and so on. (123) The opacity and indeterminacy that make *Wuthering Heights* a classic for Kermode are in the text itself, and this is true regardless of the author or reader's context.

¹⁸ Kermode, in one of his final published pieces, reads the shudder as an unwanted break in continuum. The shudder comes from a break with 'physiology'; a 'singling out' of a theoretical line at the expense of the body of ideas, histories and texts with which it circulates. See 'Eliot and the Shudder' (2010).

modern classic. It is different, in this respect, from the contrasting of Milton and Marvell in the second chapter, which illustrates how the idea of the imperial classic proceeds, in some altered form, through the latter and not the former. The cadence of the final section, and in particular of the last few pages in which the modern classic emerges, is also palpably changed, being both irregular and clipped, lacking the easy pacing Kermode's breadth of historical knowledge provides in the previous chapters. While plurality and 'over-determinedness' are given literary and theoretical life – the *House of the Seven Gables* is, for instance, described as shifting, unstable, varying in form – Kermode's idea of the modern classic is never expressly situated in its historical or social milieu. (107)

All of this supports MacCabe argument that the modern classic lacks a 'social frame'. Not only is there no mention of Kermode's own context, but his course to defining the modern classic is notably avoidant of historical contextualising. Notably, however, there are reasons to doubt the centrality of the Cambridge dispute to Kermode's absencing of social context. Most obviously, Kermode delivered *The Classic* in 1973, a year before taking up the Cambridge post. Kermode was at that point head of the English Department at UCL, benefiting from the contributions, as he acknowledges, of the supportive theory reading group that he had set up. (Kermode, Birns Interview, 6) His actual writing of the original monograph, however, took place at Dartmouth College in the United States – a bucolic setting 'with the handsome resources of the Baker Library', where Kermode had been on a year and half long sabbatical. (Kermode *TC* iiv) The proximate context of *The Classic* is therefore New England American, rather than Cambridge English. It was also from American sources that Kermode had first garnered his interest in Barthes and Structuralism. He describes a period of 'concentrated' engagement with Barthes's work on the prompting of a 'New York associate' in 1971, and it was through American texts that he first encountered French theory. He also writes of how being in Dartmouth, and engagement with

colleagues in the United States, that prompted his ‘return to Barthes’s earlier work.’ (quoted in ‘Birns Interview’ 4) In the next section, I turn to a consideration of this American context.

American Influences

Along with Kermode’s being physically in Dartmouth, the most compelling evidence of the centrality of American thought to the emergence of the modern classic is the content of the text itself. As I read *The Classic*, it is through American literary texts that Kermode actually develops his modern classic. The chapter on Hawthorne, ‘the great inventor of American attitudes to the metropolitan past’, is as much, or more, indicative of the historical moment from which Kermode draws his modern classic than anything in the final sections when the modern classic is putatively introduced. (113)

Kermode starts the section on Hawthorne by describing ‘the early settlers of New England’ as ‘Miltonic in their fervour’. (89) Miltonic fervour ‘suggests puritanism’, which Kermode finds ‘radiate[s] certainty about emblems and types’, manifestly in opposition to the shifting accommodation of empire that marks the imperial classic. (119) More directly, Kermode sees Milton himself as outside of the imperial tradition. Milton ‘cites Virgil and all other classics only to reject them, to explain that the new truth is different’; his citation of empire is driven ‘by the revolutionary need to confute and transcend’. (54, 55) Milton’s provincialism is absolute and ideological – meaning is in scripture, with its Hebraic, not Romanist, provenance. The Rome that so foundationally informed the new American Republic is different to the imperial predecessor that Eliot sees in Virgil. The Roman eagle, the citation of Virgil on the American emblem, and Washington’s triumphal march – all Roman in their iconography – were founded ‘on the conviction that the truth of religion and of the old civilisation had been transferred to a new world’. (88) This is not a translation, or a return to type: ‘the *novus ordo* apparently could not be founded on the translated Roman Empire’, with its connotations of European continuity. Even the American forefathers are fundamentally anti-imperial, in Kermode’s special sense. As a result,

Americans, particularly of the New England North, like Milton, ‘chose in the early nineteenth century a new past which was not classical but Hebraic.’¹⁹ (88, 89)

In Hawthorne, this new American history inspires a disposition to reading that is, for the first time, ‘modern’ in its invitation to plurality. Hawthorne had, ‘the “modernist” sense of a future whose relation to the past is far more than ever ambiguous.’ (110) *The House of the Seven Gables* is built on ‘types’ – historical events or persons ‘that are themselves, but may presage others.’ (89) But this typology is unreliable. Gothic paraphernalia merges with junk, allegories are too evident or too obscure, and Holgrave’s recording of the whole (the ‘daguerreotype’), mixes with old portraiture, from which he then seeks distance. Holgrave himself is so congenitally unassertive that his utterances become untrustworthy. The novel emphasises some details, while letting others slip, in a manner that invites suspicion. In general, it is ‘carefully unauthoritative, open to multiple interpretations because the modern world is so.’²⁰

Emerson, whom Hawthorne ambiguously admired, charts ‘the cramp exigencies of English experience’, rejecting ‘wholes’ in favour of ‘the sublime... doctrine, obey thyself, with all of its associated constitutive ambiguities. (Emerson *CL* 62; *DSA* 108) Harold Bloom, Kermode himself points out elsewhere, used ‘the American sublime’ and ‘the Emersonian sublime’ interchangeably; and this is born out in his analysis of Hawthorne.²¹ (Kermode *AP* 100) Famously for Emerson, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*, ‘a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds’. (Emerson

¹⁹ As Samuel Stollman describes, Hebraism in Milton is associated with freedom, resistance, the deployment of individual resources, engagement with spiritual sanctity, and action or deeds. This in contrast to the classical mould of a continuous, unbroken empire, that, in Arnold’s formulation, allows things to be seen ‘as they really are’. See Samuel Stollman ‘Milton’s Dichotomy’ (1974).

²⁰ Throughout Hawthorne, the law of the *imperium* is persistent, ‘yet requiring to be broken in the new world.’ (113). Rome is mutually ‘beautiful and sinister, unforgettable and yet to be dispelled from the memory.’ (113) What animates this ‘double vision’ is a new historiography that founds an ‘Empire in the West’. (112) It bears the possibilities and uncertainties of the new America, animated by the ‘handful of half-starved fanatics’ in Milton’s puritan mould. (112) Hawthorne is steeped in provincialism and instability – his texts lack the certainty of Aeneas’s *nostos*, chastened as they are by the corrupted European metropole in the wake of the War of Independence.

²¹ Building on Burke, Bloom characterises the American/Emersonian sublime as a ‘peak experience’, which ‘ambiguously’ transforms the mundane into something ‘theophanic’, or, as he puts it in his latest intentionally abstruse interaction with the term, ‘a sense of something interfused that transforms a natural moment, landscape, action, or countenance’. See Harold Bloom *The Daemon Knows* (2015).

SR 34) This primary instability is why Hawthorne rejects the imperial classic, and why, for Eliot, ‘The essays of Emerson are already an encumbrance.’ (quoted in Bloom *RWE* 97) There is no accommodation of empire in the American tradition; essence gives way to constitutive uncertainty, and inauthenticity is indistinguishable from received truth. From here emerges a thoroughly modern uncertainty in the text itself. The new model goes further than suffering transmission in the Eliotic sense; it premises its meaning on ambiguity. The classic offers itself only ‘to readings which are encouraged by its failure to give a definitive account of itself.’ (Kermode *TC* 114) This turn to indeterminacy is a result of a new set of what Kermode later calls ‘probability systems’ – shifting epistemic landscapes.²² (140)

While a thorough study of the ‘America’ from which Kermode was writing *The Classic* (and through which he had earlier been introduced to ‘French theory’) is outside the scope of this chapter, it is helpful to briefly note that the process of Kermode’s intra-textual genesis of the modern classic through American literary texts can be consistently read in line with the social conditions of his contemporary American context. In fact, Kermode himself acknowledges in a Dartmouth collegiate journal that, ‘while... in Dartmouth’, he ‘reflected on the influence of certain East Coast conferences [of] the 1960s’, and the relationship of the work emanating from these conferences to the ‘poetic prose’ of America in the ‘previous century.’ (Kermode *EPU* 154) He moreover notes that those conference papers were a key ‘mediating influence’ on the UCL theory group through which he developed the ideas underpinning the modern classic, and acknowledges that his reading of ‘French theory’ was centrally mediated through the lens of the ‘American academy’. (154) This suggests that in the final chapters of *The Classic* Kermode is bringing together two trains of American thought – the one ‘literary critical’ and the other ‘theoretical’, and it is in this context that the argument of *The Classic* is best understood.

²² Jacqueline Rose, a member of Kermode’s theory reading group, is correct in this sense to see Kermode’s notion of the classic as ‘always tempered by history’, though the theoretical shape of the modern classic settled on in the final chapter jettisons these material conditions. (Rose *MF* 6)

The 'East Coast conferences' Kermode has in mind would seem to include centrally one held in 1966 at Johns Hopkins (it was almost Dartmouth, which is listed as the hosting venue in early concept papers, and there were strong organisational connections between the two universities throughout the period). That pivotal conference – Cussett calls it a 'founding event' – is now widely seen as a point of introduction and 'translation' of what is now called French theory. (18) The conference itself was in part provoked by members of the conference organising committee (some of whom were in French Studies) being interested in Barthes's work particularly. Barthes had published *Critique et vérité*, which Kermode relies on heavily in *The Classic*, earlier that year. *Critique et vérité*, together with Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* and Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, also released in 1966, enjoyed 'unexpected public success' in France, although they were not generally considered to be part of the same corpus at this point. (28) Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, literature professors at Johns Hopkins, aware of these and other French works in the loose 'structuralist' tradition, organised the conference between 18 and 21 October 1966, under the organising title 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man'.²³

It is also helpful to note that this period of American academic history was politically fraught. The fractures of the 1960s culminated in 350 student strikes at United States universities in 1970 alone, with something in the region of 30 per cent of registered students involved in demonstrations. (Luvas, 200) Many of the ideas that appeared in French *revues* prior to and just following the 1968 uprising, including *Tel Quel* (created in 1960), *Communications* (1961), *Langages* (1966), *Poétique* (1970), and *Littérature* (1971), found currency with politicised students in the United States at this point.

²³ The conference programme lists just over one hundred presentations, including by Barthes, Lacan, Jacques Derrida, René Girard, Jean Hyppolite, Lucien Goldmann, Charles Moraze, Georges Poulet, Tzvetan Todorov, and Jean-Pierre Vernant. The historical repercussions of this gathering are significant: Derrida met Lacan for the first time, as well as Paul de Man, who became the symbol of American deconstructionism. The introduction to the final conference proceeding tries to bring the disparate threads of the speakers under one rubric in inventive, and largely unsuccessful ways. Nietzsche is invoked as the 'genealogical' forefather of all the contributors, and anti-Kantian and anti-Hegelian rhetoric is rife. The preface to the second edition tries again; this time rejecting the structuralist label that many of the theorists now bore in favour of a 'theoretical deconstruction' of the term; one of the first, if not the first, uses of 'deconstruction' as an organising moniker. C.f. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato *The Structuralist Controversy* (1972) xii-xiii.

As far as I can tell, it was also through small journals – ‘intellozines’, less organised or formally arranged than their French counterparts – that first saw the publication of ‘French theory’ in America. These publications, including *Glyph*, *Diaspora*, *Semiotext(e)*, and *boundary 2*, more closely resemble journals like *Semina*, *Beatitude*, or the *Black Mountain Review*, than established journals of either the American left or right. Other, more formally experimental journals, including L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E – which Kermode writes about reading while at Dartmouth – began to interpret, *inter alia*, Barthes’s work, and put questions of plurality and textual indeterminacy at the centre of their focus.

The relative centrality of American literature and social conditions to Kermode’s argument in *The Classic* brings to the fore questions over why MacCabe sought to link the modern classic’s lack of historical framing to events and literary traditions at Cambridge rather than America (or elsewhere). What makes the misdiagnosis especially striking is that MacCabe’s own writing shows the same absencing of context it criticises – there is no clear explanation of the historical or textual sources from which MacCabe develops his alternative model of literary value. Moreover, that the Cambridge dispute revolved around the promotion to full lectureship of MacCabe himself is never mentioned; a notable omission in the context of an argument that associates the value of criticism with its fidelity to social and material circumstance.²⁴

By my reading, one of the reasons for this omission is that it is in fact the Cambridge dispute which most proximately contextualises the ‘historicism’ underpinning MacCabe’s criticism of *The Classic*. Rather than the Cambridge Affair obstructing a turn towards historicism, it was a prompt for its emergence in both Kermode’s and MacCabe’s work. This especially as MacCabe’s understanding of value is centrally drawn from Kermode’s writing following the MacCabe Affair, and in particularly Kermode’s 1987 *History and Value*, which MacCabe later describes as ‘the single greatest

²⁴ Nor does MacCabe see the affair as historically unimportant, writing sometime later that the dispute ‘represented the last hope of preserving the study of English as one of the central academic disciplines.’ For MacCabe’s own account of the events see MacCabe ‘A Tale of Two Theories’ (2011).

contribution to literary theory in English'. (MacCabe *AA* 3) Rather than the dispute occluding or preventing Kermode from taking an historicist approach to value, it is what triggered a transformation in his thought. As I see it, in important respects, MacCabe's criticism of *The Classic* is the statement of a later Kermode against an earlier self. So as to explore the emergence of this new understanding of value in Kermode's work after 1980, the next section briefly outlines the contours of the dispute, before illustrating some of the ways the MacCabe Affair prompted Kermode's shift towards historicism in his writing post-*The Classic*.

The MacCabe Affair

In 1976, Colin MacCabe was appointed to the (now defunct) position of University Assistant Lecturer at King's College, Cambridge. It was an immediately unpopular move in some corners of the Faculty, and his appointment was possible only because the college had a deciding vote. Opposition to his involvement with Faculty functioning was spirited and immediate: certain members of faculty refused to teach on papers he was involved in organising, and suggestions he made were 'rigorously opposed in nearly every forum'. (Morgan and Baert 34) When he was appointed to the Faculty Recruitment Committee, Ricks resigned as a result (prompting MacCabe himself to resign, and Ricks to subsequently re-join). Matters came to a head in March 1980, when the Upgrading Committee – a subcommittee of the English Faculty's highest decision-making body, the Faculty Board – voted, four to three, against upgrading MacCabe to a full lectureship. Kermode, who sat on the Committee, voted in favour of MacCabe's appointment, together with the soon-to-retire Raymond Williams, while Ricks voted against.

The Upgrading Committee's recommendation was subsequently sent to the Faculty Board, who met in April of the same year. It voted ten to nine in favour of MacCabe's promotion; reversing the Committee's earlier decision.²⁵ The Board's decision however merely created the post, and

²⁵ Again, Kermode voted for, and Ricks against.

MacCabe's appointment had still to be ratified by the University's Appointments Committee. This Committee, composed of many of the same people as the Faculty Board – including Kermode, Williams and Ricks – as well as two members of other faculties, reversed the Faculty Board's decision, voting four to three in opposition of MacCabe's appointment.

As Raymond Williams notes, 'when a Faculty Board, by however narrow a majority, has recommended an upgrading and then a Committee of much the same people plus two, do not accept the decision, what happens? Where can it go?'. (Quoted in Morgan and Baert 14) Further machinations were taking place behind the scenes. In November 1980, at the Annual Meeting of the Faculty Board, Kermode and Williams, along with Stephen Heath and John Barrell (both supporters of MacCabe's appointment) were voted off the Appointments Committee. Kermode, although in fact still a member of the Committee in his *ex officio* capacity as a full Professor and therefore unremovable, subsequently resigned from it, apparently in protest.

In January 1981, Kermode and Williams spoke at an open meeting attended by more than 600 students. The English Faculty student body then passed a (non-binding) vote of no confidence in the Faculty Board, demanding that an inquiry be held into MacCabe's non-appointment. Heath, a supporter of Kermode, subsequently collected the signatures necessary to constitute a meeting of the University's Senate. Following the Senate meeting, which lasted seven hours and was attended by Kermode, but not MacCabe (who was away on lecturing commitments) or Ricks (who boycotted: 'to come is to condone'), the General Board of the Faculties, composed of 12 senior members of the University's Faculties and the Vice Chancellor, appointed a Special Committee to examine the matter further. Subsequent delays led to MacCabe abandoning his application and leaving the university entirely, and to Kermode resigning from the 'cauldron of unholy hates' six months later (Kermode *NE* 248).

Kermode on Cambridge

As can be seen from this brief summary, an overpowering emphasis on controlling institutional apparatus – whether curricula, staffing or Faculty organisational – pervades the MacCabe Affair. While ‘abstract’ questions relating to how texts should be taught and evaluated do arise in various meetings, discussion over control of committees and appointments becomes a far more regular, and long-winded, topic of discussion. Also notable is the extent to which these two separate concerns – that relating to the study and evaluation of literature, and that relating to the institutional workings of the University – become increasingly intertwined. In one meeting of the University’s Upgrading Committee, the minutes even note that a member ‘remarked on’ how ‘compositional’ and ‘curriculum’ questions are ‘now being seen’ as ‘bonded’ to ‘how those decisions are made.’ More and more it was the institutional processes that were driving the curricula and staffing choices, rather than any individual or group. This is different to what seemed to be the case in the early stages of MacCabe’s upgrading process, where Faculty committee minutes suggest that formal questions related to the composition and workings of the committee were carefully kept separate from discussion of MacCabe and his appointment.²⁶

This is a shift that Kermode also notices. In a reflection piece written for *London Magazine* in 1983, he argues that there was a closeness between ‘debate about rival literary theories’ and ‘the whole question of the Faculty’s fabric and history.’ (Kermode *ROD* 24) He concludes that the discussion over institutional arrangements began to ‘set’ the debate over ‘selection of texts’, and how to teach them. (25) It became increasingly ‘clear’ to Kermode that the ‘disputation [was] prescribing’ the Faculty’s approach to curriculum decisions rather than the other way around. (24) While in the ‘commencing years’ of his time at Cambridge, Kermode thought that there was ‘an earnest disputation’ between two competing theoretical positions, by the end his impression was that ‘the

²⁶ On one occasion, a meeting was for example adjourned so that a formal query relating to committee composition could be separately discussed.

committees were the meat and not the bone'. (24) It was the process by which decisions were made that that was crucially determinate of the curriculum, rather than the competing theoretical positions.

This conclusion fits with Kermode's impression of himself over this period as primarily a university administrator 'sometimes doing' literature and theory. (Kermode *NE* 65) His response to MacCabe's 'predicament' is institutionally focused, and his academic work during 1980 and 1981 does not relate directly to the theoretical debates underpinning the conflict.²⁷ He goes so far as to describe literary theory as 'another country [in] which I went to live without feeling truly at home'. (Kermode *NE* 198) As a result, his writing of the period is awash with a keen sense of alienation. He characterises himself as 'the victim of a destabilising conviction, somewhat at odds with the evidence, that none of it really has anything to do with me', and his role in the MacCabe affair reflects this ambivalence. (Kermode *NE* 198)

Opposing what reformative ambitions he did have was a Cambridge English Faculty where, 'it sometimes appeared that a disposition to row was inherent in [its] very personality, taking opportunities to erupt in every decade since its foundation in the 1920s'. (250) This bellicose institutional tendency manifested itself initially in sharp resistance to any form of reflection on the Faculty's composition, approach or curriculum. In the first years of his tenure, Kermode used his position as the holder of a prestigious Chair to establish a working party to take stock of the Department's practices. Despite internal resistance, the committee produced some 'sensible proposals for a new teaching and examination programme'. (251) The report and recommendation were refused even discussion by the Faculty Board. It instead chose to maintain the existing

²⁷ Kermode justifies his own extensive involvement in the MacCabe Affair as one of professional obligation. He casts MacCabe as sympathetic not so much because of his 'structuralist, or rather post-structuralist... opinions' but because of his 'unfair' treatment by the same 'seniors' in the Faculty resisting a structural overhaul. (Kermode *ML* 7) 'In a manner quite contrary to normal practice', Kermode describes how, for instance, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, 'was savagely studied by [MacCabe's] enemies and attacked on all possible occasions.' (Kermode *NA* 255) In response, Kermode enlisted Richard Ellmann, Goldsmith's Professor of English at Oxford University, and a known Joyce specialist, who subsequently wrote publicly in support of MacCabe's writing on Joyce.

teaching and examination system, within which a majority of members were energetically pursuing the removal of the theory-infused paper 7; its eventual death-knell occurring in 1980, right on the cusp of the public eruption of the MacCabe Affair.

As I see it, Kermodé's deep imbrication in these institutional wranglings began to shape his thinking about value. It did so primarily by encouraging him to put more emphasis on the role of material structures in how we think about the value of texts, and the processes of canonisation that accompany this thinking. This implied moving away from a focus on the properties of text and language, and foregrounding the vagaries of history as in some way value commuting. Notably, this did not amount in Kermodé's mind to a cynical move towards relativism. Instead, the MacCabe Affair made him more receptive to the idea that historical processes could, in a more positive sense, contain within their own functioning the reasons for wanting to preserve certain texts. As he obliquely puts it in a 1983 reflection piece, '[My time at Cambridge] has encouraged reflection on how it is that history relates to textuality.' (Kermodé *ROD* 23) His conclusions were not, however, 'as one might expect' to 'do away with' the 'pretence of the importance of poetry', but instead to take more seriously that the decisions we make are sometimes idiosyncratic and 'the product of strange disputation', but that this may 'itself be a virtue'. (25) The acrimony and frustration of the Cambridge moment were undeniable, but this 'experience of fact' gave Kermodé an appreciation for the texture of history. (23) In the wake of the dispute, he began to see the processes by which some texts are valued and others abandoned, as valuable in itself.

To expand on this shift, the next section uses Kermodé's engagement with the work of James Joyce as an illustrative example. I have chosen to use writing about Joyce in part because of his centrality to the MacCabe Affair (through, in particular, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*), in part because of Joyce's long-standing 'cultural' centrality to the Cambridge English Department, and in part because he is the writer that Kermodé most often cites across his writing of the early 1980s – a new trend in his work. In addition, in Committee meetings, 'Anti-MacCabe' members

of the English Faculty increasingly slip between attacks on MacCabe and attacks on Joyce, making his importance increasingly emblematic. By the time of the university Senate debating the MacCabe Affair, the value of Joyce's work at moments comes to stand in for judgement on MacCabe and his 'position'. As a result, Kermode's use of Joyce in his writing about value is strongly connected to the dispute itself.

Joyce

In order to show the connections between the MacCabe Affair and Kermode's writing about Joyce, it is helpful to first sketch the acrimonious historical trajectory of Joyce's reception into Cambridge criticism and teaching. At the centre of the early acrimony was, unsurprisingly, F.R. Leavis.²⁸ Leavis's first involvement with Joyce came in response to the serialised publication, from 1927, of *Work in Progress* – a 'working' draft of *Finnegans Wake* – in Eugene Jolas's Paris-based little-magazine *transition*. In 1929, Jolas published his own 'manifesto' entitled 'The Revolution of the Word'. In it, Jolas presents literary texts as aesthetic renditions of social change, and presents *transition* as a vehicle for this 'revolution'. (Jolas *transition* 16 2) As he explains in an earlier editorial:

We believe that there is no hope for poetry unless there be a disintegration first. We need new words, new abstractions, new hieroglyphics, new symbols, new myths. These values to be organically evolved and hostile to a mere metaphorical conception must seek freer association. Thus there may be produced that sublimation of the spirit which grows imminently out of the modern consciousness. By re-establishing the simplicity of the word, we may find again its old magnificence. (Jolas, *transition* 3 178-9)

Jolas sees revolutionary potential in the word itself, and rejects 'the metaphorical conception' of language that construes words as a representation of the world. He goes on, in 'The Revolution of

²⁸ Leavis had taken an interest in Joyce from a relatively early point. In 1926, he applied to the Home Office for permission to bring a copy of *Ulysses* into the country but was refused on morality grounds.

Language and James Joyce' – written for a symposium organised by Samuel Beckett on the in-progress *Work in Progress* – to peg the value of Joyce to this reasserting of the primacy of the literary text. As he puts it, 'The Real metaphysical problem today is the word.' (Jolas *transition* 3 77)

It is to this 'raw aestheticism' that Leavis objects in his 'James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word'. He takes particular umbrage at Jolas's claim that, 'in developing his medium to the fullest, Mr Joyce is after all doing only what Shakespeare had done in his later plays, such as *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*.' (Leaves *JJ* 132) Leavis responds:

Mr. Joyce's liberties with English are essentially unlike Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's were not the product of a desire to "develop his medium to the fullest," but of a pressure of something to be conveyed. One insists, it can hardly be insisted too much, that the study of a Shakespeare play must start with the words; but it was not there that Shakespeare – the great Shakespeare – started: the words matter because they lead down to what they came from... Those miraculous intricacies of expression could have come only to one whose medium was for him strictly a medium; an object of interest only as something that, under the creative compulsion, identified itself with what insisted on being expressed: the linguistic audacities are derivative. (Leavis *JJ* 132)

The primacy here is of the object over language. Leavis sees the value of a literary text as wedded to its mimetic capabilities, or at least its relationship with the world, and the esteem of its author as in their capability to 'subject' and subjugate language to objective reality. 'Reality', in Leavis's sense, need not be empirical, but it should be objective. This objectivity is gradually grounded in culture and community: Shakespeare enjoyed the 'general advantage' of 'belonging to a genuinely national culture, to a community in which it was possible for the theatre to appeal to the cultivated and the populace at the same time.' (135) What comes first in demarcating a great author is a creative 'impulsion from the inner life' drawn from this culture that only subsequently receives form in language. By contrast, in *Work in Progress*, 'what controls the interest in technique, the

preoccupation with the means of expression' is 'a philosophical theory'; meaning it will never be a truly 'great work'. (136)

Leavis's mode of criticism has strong parallels with what Kermode describes as the imperial classic, which grounds literary worth in an author's 'exhaustion' of a culture by their language. In this way, the Jolas-Leavis debate prefigures Kermode's response in *The Classic*, and the debates over theory in the 1970s. In his own personal account of changes in the Cambridge English Department from his arrival as an undergraduate in 1939, Raymond Williams describes how debates over Joyce 'fossilised' in the departmental ethos. (Williams *CEB* 14). In practical terms, resistance to Joyce appeared in *Scrutiny* throughout the 1930s; the English Faculty, under the influence of the 'golden age' of the *Scrutiny* movement despite Leavis's own estrangement, did not officially condone Joyce until 1941 (also the year of Joyce's death), when his name first surfaces on an English Faculty examination paper.²⁹ From 1948 his star rose rapidly – appearing in at least one English examination every subsequent year – but not without contestation and demurrer. Between 1940 and 1970 Joyce only appeared in Part I of the two-part Cambridge Tripos, meaning he was only obliquely studied by finalists, if at all.³⁰

Matters began to change in 1970, when the English Faculty radically reformed its curriculum, adopting a full range of period papers in Part I and Part II, as well as allowing for special subject papers and an updated History and Theory of Literature Paper. Joyce's work appears with increasing prominence and regularity throughout the early 1970s. The most significant shift however occurred in 1974 at the behest of MacCabe and Stephen Heath. Through internal advocacy, they arranged for the inclusion of paper 7, Special Subject: James Joyce. Notably, they at the same time ensured introduction of a second new paper entitled Modern Critical Thought,

²⁹ Raymond Williams sat the exam before leaving to join the army. Cf. Raymond Williams 'Cambridge English and Beyond' (1983).

³⁰ *Finnegans Wake* was not referenced at all in this period. At Oxford, Joyce's name first appears in an examination on language rather than literature – 'consider any features of diction and syntax of special interest' – in 1962.

which taught ‘structuralist’ and later ‘poststructuralist’ theory. This reinforced the close institutional connection between Joyce and ‘theory’ at Cambridge. The introduction to *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* added to this effect, claiming forthrightly that ‘Joyce’s writing produces a change in the relations between reader and text, a change which has profound revolutionary implications’.³¹ (1)

To cement his divergences from Jolas, and so also from that part of the Cambridge tradition, MacCabe took the title of his book from Leavis’s article. Doing so both demarcated his subversion, and placed him in and against Leavis’s critical tradition. This helps contextualise some of the ways that Joyce is engaged with in committee meetings. Strikingly, the most often quoted of Joyce’s works in these proceedings was *Finnegans Wake*. That trend seems to have emerged from MacCabe’s use of the text in the introduction of *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* to equate ‘traditional literary critics’ with the fictional professor appearing in Book 1.5 of *The Wake*. As MacCabe sets out, ‘The literary critic labours under the same delusion as Professor Jones in *Finnegans Wake*. He is unable to decipher the letter because he mistakes its very constitution; his error is not that he cannot find the right interpretation but that he tries to interpret at all.’ (3)

A reading of this section of *The Wake* helps illustrate this position, and shows how it connects to some of Kermode’s own work. Book 1.5, analysed in some detail in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, describes part of a dream had by HCE (the father in the notional family drama that plays out across the novel) in which a letter is read and interpreted. Beginning with a comical imitation of a religious call to prayer – providing the narrative voice with mock-authority – the chapter is prefaced by an extensive list of seemingly random titles, described as the ‘many names’ of the narrator’s ‘mamafesta’. (310) The mamafesta is subsequently used to refer to the ‘letter’ at the centre of the chapter’s limited plot arc. (310) In this way, the text is de-particularised, suggesting

³¹ MacCabe’s argument is essentially structuralist: ‘every text is already articulated with other texts which determine its possible meaning and no text can escape the discourses of literary criticism in which it is referred to, named and identified.’ (2)

that it is transposable. Even when textual particularity is to some degree restored at the end of Book 1.5, it is done in order to divest both the letter and the chapter of authority: the final line is a sign-off by ‘Shem the Penman’ (whose name is associated elsewhere with ‘sham’) – a practice which the narrative itself derides: ‘why, pray, sign anything as long as every word, letter, penstroke, paperspace is a perfect signature of its own’. (332, 353) The effect is to assert the independence of the text from any author-intended meaning, even if the phrase ‘of its own’ carries connotations of completeness.

Between the parentheses of its opening and closing sections, Book 1.5 continues to allow for no identifiable semantic structure. The letter itself is protean: at least two narrative chains – one located in Boston and associated with Issy (and her alter-ego Maggy), and the other related to ALP – coalesce during the chapter, as they do across the novel. The mamafesta is sometimes referred to in the singular; sometimes in the plural; and sometimes both, as when it is described as the ‘documents or document’. (316) The narrator is similarly undesignated. Critics have tended to read ‘the tone and interests of much of the narration’ as identifiable with a professorial figure, but other voices manifest throughout. (Nash 236). HCE himself seems to interject where his moral righteousness is called into question. The repeated recurrence of the word ‘tip’ further suggests Kate; a cleaner employed by the HCE family, with whom the exclamation is generally associated.³²

There is a frequent association between the chapter’s commentaries on interpretation and the doing of ‘work’, suggesting a closing of the gap between the reading of the educated, ethical professoriat and the working-class ‘poorjoist’, even as the narration at times strains consciously to keep them apart: the two ‘cannot say aye to aye... cannot smile noes from noes’. (319) At the same time, ‘These ruled barriers along which the traced words, run, march, halt, walk, stumble at doubtful points, stumble up again in comparative safety seem to have been drawn first of all in a

³² Another example is put forward by Shari Benstock, who argues that a significant portion of the reading is done by ALP in the guise of the hen, Biddy Doran. See Shari Benstock ‘The Genuine Christine’ (1984) 185.

pretty checker with lampblack and blackthorn.’ (319) The barriers themselves are marked in black ink, with the result that it is textual inscriptions that ‘draw’ the meaning, rather than the other way around. This raises the ‘theoretical’ question of how meaning and textuality relate. Specifically, if texts are interchangeable, and the author’s intention provides no semantic direction, can texts be said to be meaningful at all. That the answer may be ‘no’ is the menace that Ricks sees in Hartman and Fish, especially where a critical, professorial voice is allowed to establish meaning instead. Kermode’s response, by contrast, is to accept the outcome. In his view, texts are only meaningful within their reader’s specific hermeneutic web; each reading churns out a new meaning, even if our shared sociological setting means considerable homogeneity in what emerges.³³

A tendency to focus on the psychological state and context of the writer instead of the reader is also parodied in Book 1.5 through the narrators’ metacritical musings on how the letter should be read. One emergent narrative voice is that of the professor who ascribes various interpretative practices. The first is arch-contextualism. The narrator-as-professor warns against fixing meaning to a text ‘solely on the literal sense or even the psychological content of any document to the sore neglect of the enveloping facts themselves.’ (332) His (this voice is masculine) concern is with meaning being lost in the rush to unearth the authors intention. To ignore context, is

‘just as hurtful to sound sense (and let it be added to the truest taste) as were some fellow in the act of perhaps getting an intro from another fellow turning out to be a friend in need of his, say, to a lady of the latter’s acquaintance, engaged in performing the elaborative antecistral

³³ Derek Attridge systematises this intuition by arguing that both the creation and reading of a text are events; happenings rather than wholes. What he calls the singularity of literature ‘is something that happens over and over, each time differently, in the life of the literary work; the work, that is, comes into being only in the event of its being read, or performed, or witnessed, within particular historical contexts.’ (Attridge *WL* 138). A text is newly animated – becomes literary – every time it is interacted with; it is in the readers interaction with a text that literature ‘occurs’. As the category of the literary emerges through conceptually unarrangeable ‘singular’ experiences, the value of a literary text must itself be associated with singularity. Attridge therefore uses singularity in an ‘unashamedly evaluative way.’ (146) As he explains, ‘it’s precisely in its openness to alteration in new contexts that the work manifests its singularity. And its openness to the future stems from its having no unchanging core: it’s constituted by the very norms and rules that it exceeds.’ (142-3) This is in some ways comparable to Kermode’s thesis that the modern classic is grounded on a text’s constitutive ambiguity; its ability to ‘offer itself’ to new readings. A theory of the literary based on singularity seems to imply that there is no universal or objective literary value inherent to a text, but that the more open a text is to multiple readings – to ‘otherness’ – the more its ‘worth’ emerges.

ceremony of upstheres, straightaway to run off and vision her plump and plain in her natural altogether, preferring to close his blinkhard's eyes to the ethiquethical fact that she was, after all, wearing for the space of the time being some definite articles of evolutionary clothing...'

(332)

Reading the text 'plump and plain' is to miss half of its meaning. The portmanteau 'blinkhard' suggests naivety and confusion follows from such an approach. But the professor is no guileless historicist. He makes clear that it would be an 'unlooked for conclusion' to deduce from the 'absence of political odia and monetary requests that its page cannot ever have been a penproduct of a man or woman of that period or those parts.' (338) This suggests that meaning emerges out of some combination of the 'penproduct' of an author, and the context that surrounds the text's authorship.

The novel in this way became a 'primer', for MacCabe, for a 'revamped discipline', which rejects the possibility of reading any objective truth 'in the text itself.'³⁴ (MacCabe *JJ* 2) As suggested earlier, this kind of argument was a central bugbear of Ricks and others in the 'principles' camp. MacCabe's attack on 'the traditional literary critic' centres on the mutual-constitution of 'the word' and 'the world'. Joyce shows that this process is always ongoing, constantly and contradictorily reconstituted. MacCabe's position is therefore markedly linguistically-focused – emphasising textual indeterminacy. In this respect, it bears some similarities to Kermode's modern classic, even as MacCabe emphasises the political and social dimensions of interpretative practice.

³⁴ This position links to MacCabe's general claim that, 'Interpretation as the search for meaning must cease when both meaning and interpreter become functions of the traverse of the material of language. In its place we might begin the study of the positions offered to the subject within language and of how literature confirms and subverts those possibilities.' Where literary criticism had previously been a 'search for meaning', MacCabe sought to 'found' a new 'discipline' that deliberately centred interpretation. This would mean transforming literary criticism from, 'a transient epiphenomenon which can be ignored in favour of the original literary text' into a study of how language operates in its relationship with a reader. (MacCabe *JJ* 2)

Kermode, Joyce and the MacCabe Affair

Despite these connections, Kermode's direct responses to MacCabe's reading of Joyce tend to be oblique, and occur in fora away from Cambridge. He writes around *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, noting its significances while avoiding its substance. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the context of the dispute, he refrains from stating his views on MacCabe's theoretical position even when prompted. Where he does comment, his interventions instead relate to the value of MacCabe's work as an object of institutional scrutiny.

The one exception is a talk given at Kent – the same university where the lectures underpinning *The Classic* were first delivered – in February 1982. Titled 'What Joyce Would', the lecture is conspicuously mostly a close reading of the same Book from *The Wake* discussed above. Instead of starting the lecture with a focus on the Book's language, however, Kermode's introduces the close reading through a detailed description of the history of the 'Joyce Centre' that he had helped set up, together with Richard Ellmann and others, at UCL in 1974. His descriptions persistently point to the constructed, sometimes haphazard, nature of this archive, and of the historical implications of this fact. For him, the contribution of the Centre to 'Joyce's advance into the canon' comes from its being 'disorderly' – there is a persistent 'sensitivity to chance' that marked the process, and because of this also the making of the 'whole' that is 'Joyce in the canon', but also the 'figure of the canon' in general. (4) The role of chance does not, however, 'cheapen' the canon, instead, its 'corporal failings' are what give the canon its 'sense', meaning both semantic content and legitimacy. (4)

This is the first occasion on which Kermode expresses the idea that there may be something in the ordinary work of history that can support an objective account of 'value'. The idea is perspicuously introduced through a discussion of the workings of an institution, and he then uses the moment of transition from this institutional description to a reading of *The Wake* to make his only express mention of the MacCabe Affair. Noting the centrality of the section of Joyce he is

about to discuss to the Cambridge dispute, Kermode says that his ‘neonate’ understanding of the way ‘history and chance’ ‘play’ in the processes of canon formation, and our understandings of ‘literary goods’, was ‘cast’ through his own ‘close’ engagement with the heat of the Cambridge forge. (7) For Kermode, it is one thing to ‘make a classic’, but to understand the processes by which classics are made requires a closer, ‘less purposive cascade’ through specific moments, or, as Kermode puts it, the ‘enactment of history on oneself.’ (8)

This is a notable departure from his position in *The Classic*, where value is seen to come from the text’s inherent indeterminacies. It is also a departure from his next encounter with Joyce in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, where Kermode uses the example of a critical response to the figure of the ‘man in the mackintosh’ in *Ulysses* to set up a binary between ‘fulfilment men’ who seek wholes (including canons), and those including the ‘French utopians’ who ‘condemn... the desire for order.’ (110) This earlier engagement with Joyce does however mark a shift in his general view away from one that sees value in the text’s holding or creation of uncertainty. It is only in ‘What Joyce Would’ that Kermode is however able to begin to articulate the idea that there is something valuable in the mere historical fact of previous valuation. This position is refined through the 1980s, before reaching maturity in an *Appetite for Poetry* and *History and Value*, both published in 1989. By the end of the decade, Kermode had come to see value as a contingent, historically-malleable concept, with all the provisionality that this entails. At the same time, he does not see ‘history’ as entailing the end of objective evaluation, and much of his writing of the 1980s is dedicated to deterring scepticism toward value judgements. Like compatibilists in free will debates, Kermode comes to see a genuine statement of value in the processes by which value is historically created. The next section follows the contours of the model’s development from the point of Kermode’s leaving Cambridge in 1982, until what MacCabe describes as the zenith of Kermode’s work on literary value in 1989.

'Out of History, Value'

Where Joyce's work appears in Kermode's criticism post-1982, it is recurrently linked to the idea of what he terms 'secrecy'. Emerging out of a larger body of work on religious canons (and often bearing the hallmarks of Northrop Frye's construal of literature as displaced mythology), secrecy comes to be associated in Kermode's writing of the 1980s with an 'accepted unknown' in the text, in which interpretation engages. (Kermode *PNH* 29) Kermode explains how philological interpreters of Jewish and Christian writings tended to assume, 'that there were secrets in the text, and that they could be brought to light only by devoted research.' (20) Accompanying this conviction was an acceptance of the text's unsettled semantic bounds, which explains why interpretation of canonical texts was associated with secrets. 'Notions of faith' encouraged interpretation to continue even when its completion was consistently deferred. (21)

Kermode argues that this kind of doctrinal reading, 'anticipated ambitious secular commentary, which really became possible only when certain texts were granted a pseudocanonical status.' (31) The historical genesis of secrecy was a necessary precondition to evaluative reading. As with his analysis of *The Classic*, Kermode therefore continues to see canonical literary texts as those that are considered worth constant interpretation, even if the limits of the text are unclear, but whereas the classic is defined by its interpretative irresolution, the canon operates on the historically occasioned assumption that there is truth to be had, even if the bounds of canon 'need to be more permeable' as their selection remains a secular pursuit. (Kermode *AP* 189) A text is canonical because we recognise its importance, 'although in some radical sense we are not able to understand it'. (16)

Kermode habitually describes *Ulysses* as canonical in this sense. He writes for example that 'when a book reaches the quasi-sacred status attained by *Ulysses* we assume that everything we can find out about it is valuable, including every possible parallel, whether intended or not; and whether we are baffled or not by this magical view of the world' (Kermode *PNH* 31). The texts that have become canonical are those that we regard as 'having secrets': the great value of *Ulysses* is in its

attributed secrecy, which engenders a critical response. While Kermode's analysis of *Wuthering Heights* in *The Classic* focuses on the openings left by the text for interpretative indeterminacy, his work on *Ulysses* is more deliberately rooted in its historical reception.

In place of the textual specificity and critical abrasiveness that marks the final chapter of *The Classic* emerges an idea of value as historically attributed secrecy. In Kermode's early work, value is associated with a text's abstract capacity to invite interpretations, while in his writing on Joyce in the early 1980s value is seen to be produced from the historical process by which a text comes to be seen as worth continuous interpretation. The process of canonisation is variable and contingent; in the case of *Ulysses*, Kermode even sees Joyce's own hand. He describes *Ulysses* as, 'expounded with a devotion that might well, even in its occasional excesses, be called religious. We are talking about a spiritual encyclopedia' (Kermode AP 211). The author may therefore contribute to the text's relative worth, but it is the collective interpretative response that grounds textual value rather than any property of the text itself, or any recourse to the author's semantic intentions.

A further representative example of this shift is 'Intelligent Theory', written for the *LRB* in 1982, in which Kermode seeks to close the gap between Ricks's antithetical 'theory' and 'principles' under his new rubric. Four of five texts he chooses to review in the article deal with aspects of theory, but are taken from outside of Britain (the authors being American, French and German) – neutralising some of their sting. He similarly starts his analysis dialogically, drawing his central point out of a letter sent to the *LRB* in response to an article written by an unrelated author. He gets at Ricks's notion of principles through the letter's transformation of Eliot's maxim that, 'there is no method except to be very intelligent', into a pronouncement that intelligence is 'largely a matter of perceiving the disabling restrictions of method.' (14) This rendering of intelligence, Kermode intimates, is too restrictive: it is disproportionate and unfair to portray those who adhere to method as 'stupid'. (14) While it may be true that no theory in any field can accommodate all

‘the relevant data’, there is still advantage to thinking about language and literature holistically. Nor should this theorising mean a fatal departing from the data itself.

Kermode then finds in Gérard Genette’s *Figures* both intelligence and theory. Genette – who Kermode greatly admires – ‘always starts with the data’, approaching the texts he analyses with principled ‘flexibility and rigour’, even as he seeks to develop a holistic, and structuralist, ‘poetics of language’. (14) The same, to a lesser degree, is true of Tzvetan Todorov, Peter Hohendahl and Ann Banfield, who Kermode depicts as moderate structuralists, unthreatening to the architecture of criticism. That theory and principled literary criticism are reconcilable is the review’s main point. It comes out most strongly in the comparison of *Figures* to Harold Bloom’s *Breaking of the Vessel*. While Genette’s methodology is deeply rooted in a Jakobson and Todorov inspired structuralism, Kermode sees it as coming closer to what Eliot might call intelligence than Bloom’s oedipal gnostic mysticism, even as *The Breaking of the Vessel*’s origins are more obviously literary critical. Kermode thinks this shows that the gains made by professional readers’ of literature over the preceding century need not be incompatible with the insights of ‘theory’.

At the same time, while Kermode is disapproving of Bloom’s ‘doctrinal high-handedness’, he on occasion plays into *The Breaking of the Vessel*’s Freudian configuration. (14) As is often the case on the (rare) occasions when Kermode reads Bloom sympathetically, the experience of literature, rather than a shared critical outlook, is the catalytic factor. In a minimally empathetic moment, Kermode recalls thinking while reading *The Breaking of the Vessel* that the book ‘was but a spume that played upon the ghostly paradigm of *The Anxiety of Influence*’, only to turn the page and read: ‘Yeats wrote that “Plato thought nature but a spume that plays/Against a ghostly paradigm of things.”’ Kermode interprets the substitution of ‘against’ for ‘upon’ as a ‘strong misreading’ of the kind that grounds Bloom’s pivotal contention that psychoanalysis is a ‘culture’ rather than a ‘description’; a viewpoint Kermode finds ‘astonishing’ rather than convincing. (14) Nevertheless,

admitting to his own subconscious presaging of the Yeats line illustrates the extent to which Kermode is attracted to Bloom's totalising system, even if not in its overt, critical form.

This attraction to totalising systems manifests during the same period in Kermode's increasingly extensive work on religious canons. His interest is chiefly sparked by a debate in theological circles over whether canonical religious texts (such as the Bible) should be interpreted as discrete entities, or as part of a composite whole. This marks the first occasion that Kermode ventures systematically into meta-critical debates over whether concepts like 'canon', which presuppose the existence of literary value, are vindicable at all. In both his journalistic and academic work of the 1980s, Kermode repeatedly nudges secular literary critics to engage with their theological counterparts, sometimes with considerable proselytising fervour. His interest is not devotional – Kermode remained an atheist throughout his life – but instead relates to the import of writing and thinking on religious canons to the question of literary value. In particular, he sees in the exchange a defence of canons against challenges to their validity sourced in criticism of their composition. What crosses the disciplines is the question of whether canons are valuable of themselves, aside from the content of their composite books.

On one side of the debate are writers like Brevard Childs, who 'wants to reinstate in a modern form the concept of canon which, first weakened by the Reformation, has collapsed during the past two centuries, when a predominantly historical style of criticism has directed attention away from the wholeness of the Bible to the study of individual books and segments.' (Kermode *C* 19) Childs sees the Bible – invariably the text in focus, reflecting the Western bias of the debate – as a literary and theological unit 'with fixed parameters'. (20) While acknowledging that, 'the canon was the product of a series of decisions which need to be considered historically,' Childs argues that the canon should nevertheless be read as a constituted whole. Individual biblical books can be interpreted and applied within their own framework, but not rewritten or separated from each other. Now that the segments of the bible have been 'endowed with perpetual applicability', they

only make sense read together. (20) Kermode describes the position as ‘moderate’, requiring only that the historians ‘admit that the canon isn’t simply a wrapping that has to be removed before one can get at the historical goodies inside’; which is not the same as saying that that the canon is not a result of brute historical fact. (20)

On the other side of the debate are those like James Barr, who thinks it ‘only sensible to hold that individual books are more important than the collections in which they may be found; and [who] also thinks that what the books are about is even more important than the books themselves.’ (Kermode C 22) It is not the canon that confers authority on its members, ‘but the events and persons they report’. (22) For Barr, to claim that the canon exerts special authority is dishonest, understating the mutability of the historical process which brought the canon about. Barr points to the ‘whims’ of history that have seen some texts included and others excluded (he instances the *Book of Wisdom*, which is in the Catholic canon, but not the Protestant), and suggests that it is hubristic, and lacking scriptural support, to argue that influential non-canonical texts such as St Augustine’s *Confessions* are in some sense less valuable than those in the Bible. That we have no access to the debates that were involved in choosing canonical texts is another mark against them: why should the decisions of this (seemingly small) group receive perpetual endorsement in the face of compelling arguments in favour of other texts? All of this amounts to arguing that if there is a canon, ‘we should be far better-off without it.’ (22) Ditching the vestiges of canonical authority allows religious scholars to seek the true meaning of the scriptures away from the impediments of a constructed canon.

Kermode sides with Childs. He sees Barr as a recognitive originalist in the mould of Hirsch. Both are sceptical of eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics because it substitutes relevance for truth: ‘only the original meaning matters, and it has to be got at by cumulative historical research.’ By contrast, Childs sees the meaning constituted by the canon, the ‘final meaning’, as the ‘interesting one’. This aligns him with Gadamer, who denies the separation between

understanding and application, between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’. (23) Once it is acknowledged that truth is not accessible through textual archaeology because our interpretation is bound to our context, hermeneutics again looks viable. Barr is, ‘the victim of a myth which has supported historical criticism throughout its relatively brief history, and which claims that we can have immediate access to objects and texts remote from us in time, that we have no difficulty in liberating ourselves from the constraints of our own historical situation.’ (23) What matters is the text as we have it, rather than the text as intended by the author, or any apparent underlying meaning.

Both historicists in the mould of Barr and canonical critics like Childs are therefore committed to some form of mythologising. The historian refers his events and persons to an inaccessible context of total history, while the canonical critic establishes his total text and context within fixed parameters. The historian is ‘performing’ in relation to the ‘great text’ – the full history of the world – while the canonical critic does the same ‘in relation to the world of his separate cognitive zone.’ (23) But the advantage of the latter approach is that it is anti-intentionalist; the claims it makes are about the text in its final form, and there is no pretence that a book can be definitively described and understood. The meaning of the text is instead established by reference to the canon.

Kermode then draws a parallel between those who ‘wish to end the distinction between “inside” and “outside” books on grounds that “[t]he whole idea of literary canons’ is ‘arbitrary or authoritarian’, and the ‘fore-understanding’ that underpins Barr’s historicism. (23) By attacking it for failing to be inclusive, opponents of literary evaluation reduce the secular canon to discrete texts, in much the same way as the Bible is reduced by historicists to individual *biblia*. Those who condemn the idea of a literary canon are in this way committed to the same originalism as Barr. Kermode admits that ‘there is a leap of faith’ involved in continuing to view the canon as worthy of special focus, but the pay-off comes in the consequence ‘that we do not treat certain books as mere historical records but as possessing each its own kind of integrity, and also as belonging to a

larger whole.’ (24) These virtues are independent of the canons development and shaping. It is simply a text’s position as part of a chosen corpus that grounds its relative value.

This approach defends canons on structural grounds: it is more theoretically coherent to ground textual evaluation in constructed sets than in any imagined ‘original’ truth entombed in the texts themselves. (23) In addition, canons throw up special analytic methods and tools of study which provide both rigour and coherence over time. Against the charge that the canon is a form of hegemonic cultural power – ‘arbitrary and authoritarian’ – Kermode asserts the value of canons as organisers of meaning. (23) His argument is that the ‘endowment of permanent applicability’ allows us to read texts in context. Canons emerge through historical processes that fix parameters, and which, once fixed, propagate traditions of study and interpretation. Kermode points out that it is never made clear by adversaries of literary value why asserting that a particular canon is, for example, overly white and male, need be construed as an attack on the idea of literary value as a whole. In doing so he brackets the content of the canon, and homes in on the value of the canonical effect.

Forms of Attention, published in 1985, is the most comprehensive example of this genetically-focused period of Kermode’s work on literary value. The book – a collection of three public lectures – begins by asking two connected questions: ‘By what means do we attribute value to works of art, and how do our valuations affect our ways of attending to them?’ (ix) In order to answer the first, Kermode relies on two historical examples of texts that have become canonical: the paintings of Botticelli, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In Botticelli’s case, canonisation came belatedly; Kermode tracks the rise of his status in the nineteenth century, owing ‘not to scholars but to artists and other persons of modern sensibility, whose ideas of history were more passionate than accurate, and whose connoisseurship was... far from exact.’ (6) This shows the extent to which it was opinion, ‘never to be observed without its shadow, ignorance’, that galvanised or ‘established’ the rise in status of canonical works like *The Primavera* and *The Birth of Venice*. (ix, 17)

In the years subsequent to Botticelli's revival, scholars contributed belatedly to the canonisation process, but it wasn't critics who cemented these texts' place.³⁵

The same is true of 'the almost opposite case' of *Hamlet*, 'a work that from the first appears to have enjoyed great celebrity'. (35) Kermode shows how varying and contradictory commentaries have held influence over the text in the years since its publication, including a twentieth-century shift from an emphasis on character to one on language. Most of the chapter is dedicated to Kermode's own commentary on 'doubling' in the text. He describes his reading as a form of rabbinical 'play', intended to engage the text rather than explain it in any definite manner. What interventions he makes he sees as part of a conversation – an act of 'consorting or having dealings'. (47) Through his reading of the play, Kermode then attempts practically to demonstrate the varying range of responses that canonical texts invoke, and the kind of assumptions that are possible within the context of an established canon, concluding that canonical texts 'share with the sacred at least this quality: that however a particular epoch or a particular community may define a proper mode of attention or a licit area of interest, there will always be something else and something different to say.' (62)

The final chapter combines Kermode's inferences about the canonisation of Botticelli's paintings and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to confirm *Forms of Attention's* central point: it is neither commentary nor any feature of the text that grounds literary value. Evaluation and canonisation are instead a 'form of attention' that arises from outside of description or reasoned debate. The phrase is repurposed from Kermode's writing of the 1960s, and refers to the ways in which a text, or collection of texts, is 'regarded'. The canon is built by and large on opinion – 'the great canon-

³⁵ The second half of Kermode's opening chapter is then dedicated to the role played by Herbert Horne and Aby Warburg in reinforcing and securing Botticelli's reputation through their academic writing and institutional apparatus. Their approaches are vastly different: Horne, a product of fin de siècle Britain, comes to Botticelli through an aesthete's appreciation of Florentine history; while Warburg, a German émigré arriving in England shortly prior to World War Two, approaches him through 'a German tradition of scholarship' with proto-positivist tendencies. Kermode's argument throughout is that there is no theoretical tradition that explains Botticelli's canonisation, nor is there any form of critical nexus that has come to sustain it.

maker' – with commentary playing a subordinate role as product of the canonical form of attention. Kermode diverges purposefully from Samuel Johnson's normative preference for 'genuine shoots of consequential learning' over 'accidental prescriptions of authority' in evaluating texts. (67) Whereas Johnson was sure that, 'It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish between nature and custom, and that which is established because it is right from that which is right only because it is established,' Kermode observes in the history of canon formation an unruly combination of the two, and finds no harm in that fact. As he explains, 'the only rule common to all interpretation games, the sole family resemblance between them, is that the canonical work, so endlessly discussed, must be assumed to have permanent value and, which is really the same thing, perpetual modernity.' (62) The 'assumption' of permanence is what enables the kinds of criticism that only canonical texts can elicit. (78)

Kermode increasingly describes the canonical form of attention in mythological terms. To be inside the canon is 'to acquire magical and occult properties that are in fact very ancient.' (90) As in his writing on secrecy, Kermode construes the dogma of interpretative indeterminacy as central to the canonical form of attention. He also describes the persistence of a text through time as an exercise of 'virtue' against 'fortune'. (91) In this vein, Kermode ends *Forms of Attention* with a demurral from Paul De Man's contention in *Blindness and Insight* that the value of the canon is drawn from its constitutive texts, but agrees that interpretation is 'only the possibility of error'. (91) In the end what matters, 'is that ways of inducing such forms of attention should continue to exist, even if they are all, in the end, dependent on opinion.' (92) The form of attention is what grounds value, no matter its murky pre-history.

By deriving literary value partly from opinion, Kermode moves some distance from *The Classic*, where *Wuthering Heights*' objective propensity for 'inviting' commentary is used as a marker of its status. In *Forms of Attention*, Kermode's approach is considerably more historical. Methodologically, it starts with a factual account of the emergence of canonical texts, and its final conception of

value reflects this process. His account of the canon, and of value more generally, is largely based on what empirical findings allow. The more general conclusions are also willingly circular: a text is valuable because we attend to it as so, and because we attend to it, it is valuable. As he summarises: ‘Simply: whatever takes the part of virtue against fortune, whatever preserves and restores some object of which the value may have been or may be in danger of getting lost is, however prone to error, good.... What is not good is anything whatever that might destroy the objects valued or their value, or divert from them the special forms of attention they have been accorded.’ (92) The preservation of what has, for indeterminate historical reasons, become valuable, is valuable of itself.

This represents a shift from the syllogistic and ideational approach of the last chapter of *The Classic*. The move firmly answers MacCabe’s complaints about *The Classic* lacking a political or social project. *Forms of Attention* ensconces literary value in ‘affaires publiques,’ and Kermodé’s work on *Hamlet* in particular is indicative of a shift away from viewing commentary or interpretation as central to value. Much focus throughout the book is instead put on the institutions that promote or retard the canonisation of texts. In particular, the Warburg Institute, where Botticelli’s fortunes were to some extent secured, comes to look the antithesis of Cambridge: open to shifts in perspective; transparent; non-partisan; anti-bureaucratic and resistant to dogma. The normative claim that canons are good is then drawn from these institutional arrangements. Kermodé slides liberally between descriptors of the canon and arguments for it. What is ‘good’ is what society and social processes have come to say is good. The canon is a normatively valuable institutional form.

What *Forms of Attention* does not answer is why we should overlook the normative dimensions of the canonisation process. The book does no more than defer the central challenge to Kermodé’s system: if literary value is just history writ large, what reasons do we have for accepting the valuations of the past as prescriptively correct? There remains in Kermodé’s work an awkward optimism. He sees value as emerging from history, but continually avoids explaining why the

canons of the past should be accepted merely because they have emerged. It is not only ethically dubious to define canonical texts as valuable solely because they have gained this reputation, it is also methodologically fanciful. Any claim in favour of preserving evaluations must justify the valuation itself. Texts can be considered valuable because they are part of the canon, but reasons still need to be given as to why the canon itself should be accepted.

The closest Kermode comes to addressing these concerns is *History and Value*. MacCabe thinks the text, published in 1989 and drawn from two sets of public lectures given during 1987, ‘the best literary theory written in English’, because it investigates social context ‘with all the acuity and scholarship previously limited to the intricacies of language or the history of ideas’. (MacCabe *RFK* v) Kermode begins the book’s second section by recognising that historical fact is not enough to ground value: ‘Questions about the value past literature may be thought to have in itself, if asked, tend to get dogmatic and ineffectual answers. We are happy to relinquish the whole question to that useful allegorical figure, Time. Time, we say, will separate the sheep from the goats. But, as Heywood Broun wisely remarked, posterity—or Time—is just as likely to be wrong as anybody else.’ (Kermode *HV* 85) Unwilling to follow the Stanley Fish of ‘Interpretative Communities’ into a definition of value based solely on communal agreement, the book’s primary concern is thus to give an account of why canon-formation and other forms of trans-historical valuation are justified. Dismissing first the notion that literature has ‘immanent value’ which ‘remains constant in different temporal contexts’ – a major shift from his early work – Kermode turns to the resultant question of how history and value relate. (87) The first possibility he considers is Terry Eagleton’s ‘discrepancy thesis’:

In *Criticism and Ideology* Eagleton presents a version of what I have been calling the discrepancy theory, arguing that texts can under Marxist analysis reveal a meaning not intended by the author. On this view what interests the analyst is the *non dit*; he works in the gaps of the text rather than in the text itself, practising what Althusser called ‘symptomatic reading’. (16)

Kermode reads Eagleton as seeking out what the text itself cannot say, as a window into what it really means. This is an aesthetic as well as thematic pursuit, with the prevalence of bourgeois form a telling symptom of capitalist hegemony. The value of a text thus cannot be located in what the texts shows or says. Instead, the value of the text is in the gaps that it leaves: ‘the value of the work of art is said to depend on the exposure of the faults, and so on the faults themselves’. (18) Canonical texts may, by this approach, remain as valuable, even if now because of what they unconsciously imply, rather than what they consciously say.

The problem, says Kermode, is that this system nevertheless implies an objective standard by which truth in texts is assessed; this time found in what the text does not say, rather than what it does. However you look at it, there is an appeal to authority, which Kermode thinks antithetical to ‘secular plurality’, and in any case lacking in clear justification. Eagleton’s approach can give no explanation of a what we should be looking for in the gaps, even if there are reasons to be looking in the ‘unsaid’. Late Kermode, shaped by the Cambridge dispute, committed wholeheartedly to historically-situated accounts of value, is consistently sceptical of the idea that cross-temporal criteria for literary value can be found.

In this vein, it is unsurprising to see Kermode dismissing, in the two subsequent chapters, the use of both ‘canon’ and ‘period’ as mechanisms by which objective value can be determined. Canons are ‘unjust and self-serving’ and the emergence of a period, ‘always entails the construction of... a myth, which simplifies history and makes valuation of the work of one period easier by devaluing another period.’ (127, 143) What connects *History and Value* to *Forms of Attention* is, however, Kermode’s argument that the construction of both is nevertheless justified. His argument, in short, is that canonisation and periodisation are valuable processes in and of themselves, their inherent violence and selectivity notwithstanding. ‘In the end’, argues Kermode, ‘the question is not whether texts are unfairly selective, but whether we want to break the only strong link we have with the past—our ability to identify with the interests of our predecessors, to qualify their

judgements without necessarily overthrowing them, to converse with them in a transhistorical dimension. Though inevitably tainted with privilege and injustice, that still seems a valuable inheritance.’ (126-7) While there is a clear manipulation of history that goes with canon and period formation, the wholesale eradication of history brought by removing all forms of canonisation and periodisation is an even more damaging inheritance. The removal of the canon, for Kermode, leaves our collective reading habits at the whim of ‘fashion or prejudice’.

Like in *Forms of Attention*, Kermode sees the creation of an ‘imagined whole’ as valuable in itself, whether or not the constitutive parts – within literary studies, the individual texts – are themselves objectively valuable. The alternative, ‘deal[ing] with the mere offcuts of history’ is for Kermode ‘impossible’. (146) Creations of fictive historical wholes facilitates remembering – without this process the full jumble of historical desiderata becomes too large and varied to be accessible. While this may not be, ‘on some God’s-eye view, wholly just; if it is a good thing it is only humanly so. Just as there is a permanent tension between our perceptions of totality and our perceptions of dispersity, so there is between our habit of forgetting and our preservation of archives to facilitate remembering.’ (146) Value is a ‘human’ creation – a mechanism for remembering. ‘There is no magic by which immanent value ensures survival; that depends on our ability so to construct history that the valued object stands out from the unvalued and belongs to a totality of literature rather than to an archive of hopelessly diverse documents.’ The tradition of value, flawed as it is, remains valuable – ‘out of history, value’.

Conclusion

The extent to which this fictive remembering is actually connected to the flow of events Kermode sometimes refers to as ‘history’ remains conspicuously under-explored. Rather than upholding memory, Kermode’s approach seems to privilege one hegemonic telling of the past. Moreover, the extreme violence that has come with canon formation is remarkably under-emphasised. Canonisation is nearly always the prerogative of the powerful, and it is the voices of those most

vulnerable who are generally silenced. While canons and periodisation give a structure by which some of the texts of the past can be read and appraised, they also function as exclusionary cultural formations themselves. At the level of language and historical knowledge, canons can also function as tools by which some people are excluded even from literacy. Because of the space that they demand, canons also preclude other, more context-specific forms of remembering, operating as tools for enforced forgetting rather than shared memorialisation. For present purposes, what is in any event notable is the extent to which Kermode moves away from methodologies that attempt to detachedly theorise literary or aesthetic value in favour of an approach that sees value as determined by history. At the same time, he is eager to make space for normative justifications compatible with these facts.

In the final section of this chapter, I want to suggest that the position Kermode comes to by the late 1980s can be read as doing both of these things. The first important point to note in this regard is that Kermode's defence of the canon in fact has nothing to do with the value of literary or other texts. Instead, his interest is in defending the value of evaluative practices like canonisation and periodisation. In my view, Kermode's insights therefore have less to do with what makes literature valuable or otherwise (or if it can be valuable at all), and much more to do with conditions necessary for literary and related studies. In particular, Kermode's system describes the humanities as caught up with the relationship between the 'archive of hopelessly diverse documents' that make up the human world, and the 'monuments' that exemplify 'the documents we value.' (Kermode *HV* 146, 117)

John Guillory, in 'Monuments and Documents: Panofsky on the Object of Study in the Humanities' comes to a similar conclusion, with the added perception that this relationship is not a descriptor of the methodology of the humanities, but of its *object*. For Guillory, the humanities study the object that is defined by having both the properties of 'documentality' and of 'monumentality'. Drawing on the work of Erwin Panofsky, and mirroring Kermode, Guillory

defines a document as, ‘all of those artifacts or traces of human making, action, or thought surviving into the present, the total accumulation of human artifacts, events, and ideas.’ A monument refers to, ‘to those artifacts, events, or ideas that have the most urgent meaning for us at any present moment and that most demand our recognition or study.’ Documents and monuments give two necessary ways of looking at the same kind of object, what Panofsky calls ‘the record.’ (19) The record is an historical fact, and the student of the humanities (the ‘humanist’), is therefore ‘fundamentally, an historian’ (17) By this designation, Guillory explains, Panofsky is not raising the discipline of history to primacy in the humanities, but rather locating, ‘the humanistic disciplines in the field of a long temporality, not that of memory but of memorialization.’³⁶ (17)

Kermode’s defence of the canon can in these terms be seen as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Instead of arguing for the canon, Kermode is arguing against the reduction of the humanities to the study of documents. Rather than opposing the dismantling of the canon in its current form, he rejects the notion that questions of value – of monumentality – are not a constitutive part of what the humanities is, both as an historical and contemporary fact. In the absence of the complementary concept of the monument, the document can give only a partial account of what defines humanities’ scholarship. Monumentality is an aspect of the object of humanist study, because this is part of how it is created. It makes little sense to say that scholars in the humanities study documents, in and for themselves, when we know that documents are always instrumentalized in the process of scholarship, that they are studied because they tell us about

³⁶ Thought of in this way, the humanities are always embedded in historical fact, because the documents/monuments that form the object of their study are always historically given. Unlike the sciences which are method-driven, the humanities take their cue from objects. The relative documentality/monumentality of a work is nevertheless unstable; shifting according to perception and the currents of time. Because these objects are the product of human endeavour (even if only ideationally, as in naturalistic descriptions in language), they are caught up from the outset in culture and subjectivity, and therefore ‘do not bear with them the assumption of truth telling.’ (20) This applies as much to the object’s monumentality as it does to its documentality. No monument is ‘simply unequivocal’ because ‘every monument is historical.’ (25) The difference, however, is that documents are capable of infinite accumulation, while monuments, as their underlying metaphor suggests, are finite and take up space – are monumental.

something else. This something else, according to Guillory, is ‘what Panofsky means by a monument.’ (23) The act of judgement forms part of the object’s formation.

Centrally, the mere fact that monumentality is socially embedded does not mean that it is not assessable on normative grounds – not only do some objects draw their monumentality from their claims to normative worth, but normative response is an essential part of what engagement with this sort of object elicits. As Galt Harpham puts it, ‘the humanistic object calls out—solicits, exercises, and rewards—acts of judgement, evaluation, and interpretation, in which the student or scholar mixes his cognitive labor with the object.’ (5) The correctness of these normative judgements is not a property of the object, but normativity is still constitutive of what that object is. Crucially, these normative truths are however themselves embedded in the social. Moreover, because the humanities is an object driven discipline, questions of curation will always be front and centre. In Guillory’s words, the disciplines of the humanities are ‘characterized not only by a method (or methods), but more fundamentally by a curriculum, a program of study. The notion that the object of study is a matter of indifference, that the humanities are defined rather by a method, is only a professional deformation of our moment...the most important fact for us to acknowledge is that by the humanities, we mean the study of a particular kind of object. This object is realized in a curriculum.’ (28) Following this line of thought, the next chapter considers just this sort of curricula dispute, situated within the institutional confines of the university.

Chapter Two: Stanford

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the ‘MacCabe Affair’ at Cambridge contributed to a shift in Frank Kermode’s thinking about literary value. Moving away from an interpretation-centred model, Kermode’s new approach takes Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* as its exemplary ‘image.’ (Kermode *HV* 147) Evaluation is depicted as an act of ‘secular remembering’, fashioning meaning from indeterminacy. (145) As with Proust’s novel, the ordering of ‘disject facts’ generates a ‘human’ good – a sense of totality valuable for its function rather than its contents. (145, 146) Chastened by his experience at Cambridge, Kermode modified his early, ‘theory’-infused portrayal of the classic as a text prized for the panoply of interpretations it invites in favour of an ‘imagined whole’, rooted in contingency and historicism. (145) There ‘is no magic by which immanent value ensures survival,’ evaluation instead ‘depends on our ability so to construct history such that the valued object stands out from the unvalued and belongs to a totality of literature rather than to an archive of hopelessly diverse documents.’ (146) The value of a text comes of a constructed ‘canonical memory’: ‘out of history, value.’ (146)

This work of the late 1980s is the least sentimental or nostalgic of Kermode’s career. He describes his account as ‘sensible’ rather than ‘good’, accepting that its ‘governing criteria’ are neither reflective of ‘intrinsic worth’ nor ‘just.’ (145) This chapter explores a dispute over evaluation and curriculum reform at the university of Stanford that shares and expands on this ‘sensible’ – pragmatic – picture of value. My main argument is that events at Stanford culminating in the 1988 shift from the ‘Western Culture’ programme to the ‘Culture, Ideas and Values’ (CIV) core course shows the importance of ‘pragmatism’ in conceptualising value at the university. This approach, with theoretical roots in a long line of American philosophy, saw the recognition and fostering of commonality as the basis for justifying evaluative practices. Where the previous chapter illustrated how a university conflict can drive the development and

alteration of conceptualisations of value in one academic's writing, this chapter demonstrates some of the ways that a university decision-making body – the Stanford Senate – can develop, cement and replicate existing evaluative frameworks.

The first part of the chapter outlines the Stanford CIV dispute so as to illustrate the emergence of the version of pragmatism I have in mind. As the Senate debate progressed, 'commonality', particularly of 'language', came to be the key justification for retaining and teaching a 'great works' 'core list' at the university. To give conceptual context to this emergent approach, the next section argues that there are strong ties between the Senate's position and the theoretical writing of the preeminent pragmatist of the 1980s, Richard Rorty. I next show how these connections extend, both theoretically and institutionally, to the work of two key writers on value in the literary studies disciplinary tradition at the time of the Stanford dispute: Barbara Herrnstein Smith and John Guillory.³⁷ While there were robust disagreements between the three thinkers, I suggest that they shared the Stanford Senate's preference for defining value through factors internal to a given institution or community's practices. In general, this entailed a relativist position on value, and the championing of loosely sociological methodologies for the study of value as a result.

The pragmatism of the Stanford Senate shares the emphasis on historical fact evident in Kermode's writing on value post-Cambridge. For the Stanford Senate, this takes the form of a commitment to 'commonality' as justification for evaluation, whereas Kermode emphasises the canon's ordering function. Both downplay or defer the importance of formal qualities of the texts. In the final section, I however show how an alternative line of pragmatism open to the possibility of reconciling pragmatism with strains of objectivism emerged in the wake of the

³⁷ I focus in this chapter on the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith, John Guillory, Richard Rorty and Cornel West because of their especially direct involvement with, or responses to, the Stanford dispute. Elements of writing on value during this period by writers including Nancy Fraser, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Harold Bloom can also be read in this tradition, though their engagement with Stanford was more peripheral.

Stanford Dispute, notably in the writing of Richard Poirier, Hilary Putnam and Cornel West.

This shift prefigures the position of the London Consortium discussed in the next chapter.

I have so far written as though ‘commonality’, ‘pragmatic’ and ‘pragmatist’ are interchangeable terms. This kind of imprecision is characteristic of much writing about pragmatism in the United States; Charles Saunders Peirce notoriously rechristened his theory ‘pragmaticism’ – ‘ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers’ – so as to differentiate it from William James’ appropriation of ‘pragmatism’, and general ‘American practicalism’ (Peirce *CP* 482). The pragmatist account of value I have in mind – drawn from work published in the 1980s and early 1990s – draws on various strands of this broad, sometimes contradictory, tradition.

Centrally, it roots its understanding of evaluation in neither the formal ‘cultural’ tradition Kermode attacks in *The Classic*, nor the interpretative indeterminacy that he defends. Instead, the pragmatism of the Stanford moment brackets both the congenital properties of a text and any general semantic uncertainties in order to focus on contingent social relations as the basis for grounding evaluative decisions. Both the Stanford Senate and the writers on the value question whose work I consider in this chapter view value as conditional on social configurations, rather than on texts as either a definite repository of worth, or sites of aporetic but value-inducing irresolution. What connects their positions is a picturing of value as dependent on examining existing ‘patterns of human inquiry’. (Misak *AP* 3) Their major points of internal disagreement revolve around how ‘human inquiry’ and the ‘social’ should be (internally) conceptualised, and how this conceptualisation impacts on value, and on our specific evaluations.

The CIV debate is an interesting dispute for present purposes both because of its widespread public impact and because of the prominent position the debate holds for writing about value within literary studies. The dispute provoked sustained academic engagement over the meaning and validity of evaluation, both historical and theoretical. It also provides a useful context for linking institutional arrangements to broader academic writing as a result of the close association

between the university and the broader humanities community. At Stanford itself, numerous committee and senatorial discussions focussed directly on questions of canonicity and evaluation, and the debate was subject to extensive media coverage both at the time and in subsequent years. While in no way wholly representative of value discussions across the United States, the CIV debate has attracted more academic engagement than any other curriculum dispute relating to literary studies since the 1960s, and continues to inform thinking about literary evaluation today.

The CIV Debates

The fractious senatorial debate leading to the change, in 1988, from the Western Culture requirement to the Cultures, Ideas and Values (CIV) was officially triggered by a complaint brought by the Stanford Black Student Union (SBSU) to the Senate's Committee on Undergraduate Studies (CUS). In both written and oral testimony, the SBSU argued that Western Culture – centrepiece of the university's 'Area One' programme, a set of prescribed courses for all Stanford first-year students – was 'racist', and 'failed to reflect the needs of the many black students who had been recruited to Stanford during recent years'. (Lindenberger 150) The requirement had been adopted on an experimental basis in 1978, and as a permanent fixture of the undergraduate curriculum from 1980. Every student was expected to choose one of six (eight from 1984) 'tracks' built off a mandatory 'core' reading list of fifteen texts, with a further eighteen 'strongly recommended'.³⁸

The requirement was the successor of Stanford's Western Civilisation course (colloquially referred to as Western Civ), established in 1935. Administered by the History Department,

³⁸ The core reading list was composed of the *Hebrew Bible*, *Genesis*; major selections from Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*; at least one Greek tragedy, Plato's *Republic*, major portions of Books I-VII of the New Testament; Augustine's *Confessions* I-IX; Dante's *Inferno*; More's *Utopia*; Machiavelli's *The Prince*; Luther's *Christian Liberty*; Galileo's *The Starry Messenger* and *The Assayer*; Voltaire's *Candide*; Marx's and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*; selected texts by Darwin; and Freud *Outline of Psychoanalysis and Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Western Civilisation was founded with the aim of studying ‘the development of European thought from classical origins to modern times’ (Manuel). While drawing on the ‘Core Curriculum’ model developed at Columbia University in the 1910s, Western Civilisation was less prescriptive than some of its ‘general education’ counterparts, having no defined list of ‘core’ texts.³⁹ Put under pressure during the latter half of the 1960s from various sources including both student activists and members of Faculty (particularly outside of the History Department), the course was scrapped in 1969 while the university conducted a comprehensive review of its educative practices under the auspices of its wide-ranging ‘Study of Education at Stanford’. This review reflected what James Rosse, the university’s Provost at the time, described as a ‘nationwide trend in curricular philosophy away from specific course requirements’ (Rosse 3).

The Western Culture programme was therefore a return to ‘general education’ after a ten-year hiatus. It emerged from a study undertaken by the CUS following consultation between 1976 and 1978. The programme was unusual, by Stanford’s own standards, in the rigidity of its textual prescriptions; the concluding report of the CUS study that inaugurated Western Culture (adopted by the Faculty Senate in 1978) insisted on a defined core list, noting that, ‘the study of Western Culture, systematic and sustained, should be an essential part of the kind of education we have been describing (one that prepares students both to scrutinize our society’s values and to understand their relation to individual and social action.)’ (CUS 321).

In student surveys of the early 1980s, this ‘consistency’ was often the reason for the course receiving high satisfaction ratings (CUS 369). Despite this, as Albert Camarillo, a member of the Stanford History Faculty from 1975, describes, Western Culture ‘was already on shaky ground, although the reasons for this weren’t yet properly formed’ (‘Camarillo interview’). That

³⁹ While there is some commonality in the yearly prescribed book lists over the period of Western Civilisation’s incumbency, there is also considerable variance in the number of texts prescribed, the texts themselves, and the approach to their teaching. The programme’s lodgement in the History Department meant that the texts selected were less ‘literary’ than was the case at other universities who had adopted the Core Curriculum model, particularly those in the tradition of University of Chicago’s ‘Great Works’ courses, developed in the early 1930s.

underlying instability has subsequently been attributed to an emergent critique of Western Culture's 'political orientation' (King). With the appointment of Carolyn Lougee as Dean of Undergraduate Studies in 1982, challenges to the 'traditional curriculum' intensified. Lougee made an influential report to the university's Trustees on General Education attacking Western Culture for its lack of representivity. This report impressed the committee, and particularly Rosse, resulting in a transfer of the issue to the Faculty Senate in late 1983. Lougee was subsequently able to convene the Western Culture Subcommittee on Gender and Minorities from 1984. Momentum for a change in approach came with the appointment of Donald Kennedy, who 'understood...the shift in scholarship', as Stanford President in 1980 (Maher 73). That change in leadership, buttressed by 'a very real sense of frustration' amongst 'minority' faculty and students as well as teachers on the Western Culture course, resulted in the appointment of a task force in September 1986, reporting to the CUS, aimed at undertaking a 'comprehensive review' of Western Culture's structure and content (CUS 84).

The task force presented its report in the Fall Term of 1987, advocating widespread reform, including a name change from Western Culture to Cultures, Ideas and Values (CIV) – the abbreviation an 'homage and caricature' of Stanford's original Western 'Civ' ('Lougee Chappell interview'). Among other recommendations, the committee proposed greater inclusion of works by 'non-European cultures', and a relaxation of the strictures accompanying the core list (CUS 16). The report received immediate attention in Stanford media, with Pulitzer-prize winning historian Carl Degler responding to it in *The University Report* with a general defence of the prioritisation of 'learning from the West', arguing that, 'Few historians of the United States believe that the culture of this country has been seriously influenced by ideas from Africa, China, Japan, or indigenous North America... we are part of the West because the language, religions, institutions, laws, custom, literature and yes, the prejudices of this country were overwhelmingly

from Europe.⁴⁰ (Degler 288) In general, the move from Western Culture to CIV has since been analysed as a staging ground for this ‘culture war’: on the one side revisionists seeking to reform the curriculum and challenge its white, straight, male, western hegemony (with all the prejudices and violences that this entails); and on the other, revanchists wanting to uphold the original list of texts because of its perceived importance in constituting American principles and identity.

Culture Wars

Of the latter group, Allan Bloom and Dinesh D’Souza are two of the more influential representatives.⁴¹ Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, published in 1987 became a bestseller, and was the ‘motivation’ for United States Secretary for Education William Bennett’s rejection of CIV (Bennett 3). The book attacks the rise of ‘openness’ at American universities. As Bloom explains, the ‘recent education of openness... pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime, which are now thought to have been essentially flawed and regressive (Bloom *CM* 27). The ‘minorities’ who advocate for openness instead proclaim that the ‘study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was made in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism’ (26, 27). The aim of these ‘groups’ is ‘not to correct the mistakes and really be right’, but rather to embed the idea there is ‘no right at all’ (26). Believers in openness have ‘no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything; they are ‘unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality’ (25, 27).⁴²

⁴⁰ *The Stanford Report* and other Stanford newspapers were an important part of why the dispute attracted wider interest – at the height of the Senatorial discussions, *The Report* published all the submissions in full and verbatim.

⁴¹ See also the contemporary commentary of Saul Bellow, who wrote the introduction to Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*.

⁴² For Bloom, ‘openness’ leads to ‘conformism’, and threatens rule by majority ‘in favour of a nation of minorities and groups each following its own beliefs and inclinations’ (31, 34). More sinisterly, this ‘intellectual minority’ has selfish goals; seeking ‘to enhance its status, presenting itself as the defender and spokesman of all the others’ (31). The antidote to openness is a return to the ‘liberal education’ of the 1950s, which ‘flourished when it prepared the way for a discussion of a unified view of nature and man’s place in it, which the best minds debated on the highest level’ (347). At the heart of such a revival is the centring of reason: ‘Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason’s power’ (38).

With respect to questions of literary value, Bloom proclaimed himself ‘well aware of... the objections to the Great Books cult’:

It is amateurish; it encourages an autodidactic self-assurance without competence; one cannot read all of the Great Books carefully; if one only reads Great Books, one can never know what a great, as opposed to an ordinary, book is; there is no way of determining who is to decide what a Great Book or what the canon is; books are made the ends and not the means; the whole movement has a certain coarse evangelistic tone that is the opposite of good taste; it engenders a spurious intimacy with greatness; and so forth. (344)

But, at the same time, in the university context, ‘wherever the Great Books make up a central part of the curriculum, the students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling, getting something from the university they cannot get elsewhere... The advantage they get is an awareness of the classic... an acquaintance with what big questions were when there were still big questions; models, at the very least, of how to go about answering them; and, perhaps most important of all, a fund of shared experiences and thoughts on which to ground their friendships with one another’ (344). While Bloom’s assault on openness is embedded in ‘objectivity’ and ‘reason’ (he elsewhere speaks of ‘books in their objective beauty’), his defence of great works courses is constructed around nostalgia for the past and the building of community, as well as a general admiration for ‘academic unity’ (380).

Like Bloom, D’Souza, in *Illiberal Education*, argues that ‘instead of liberal education, what American students are getting is its diametrical opposite, an education in closed-mindedness and intolerance, which is to say, an illiberal education’ (D’Souza 229). Proper education is ‘best pursued when students are taught to search for universal standards of judgement which transcend particularities of race, gender, and culture’ (251). This can be achieved ‘through a carefully chosen set of classic texts that deal powerfully with those issues’ (254). While ‘non-

Western classics belong in this list when they address questions relevant to the subject matter’, ‘[t]he study of other cultures can never compensate for a lack of thorough familiarity with the founding principles of one’s own culture’ (254-5). Because ‘the younger generation of faculty’ ‘express lack of interest, if not contempt’, for the ‘Western classics’ these texts have begun to retreat into ‘the pathos of time’ (255). The ‘current revolution of minority victims threatens to destroy the highest ideals of liberal education’, and thereby stymie the struggle for ‘racial harmony, social justice, and minority advancement’ (256).

With respect to Stanford specifically, D’Souza concludes – via a cursory study of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, a text taught in one of the eight CIV tracks – that the ‘multicultural project’ which underpinned the shift from Western Culture to CIV was one of ‘paradoxical provincialism’ (a phrase recalling Eliot’s *What is a Classic?*), by which ‘the ideological proclivities of American activists’ were smuggled in under the cover of attempts to broaden the curriculum to include ‘Third World achievement’ (75). By doing so, supporters of the ‘multicultural curriculum’ resuscitated a form of cultural imperialism by substituting their own views for those whose voices have been occluded, and thereby hid ‘the basic difficulty’ with an ‘authentic non-Western curriculum’, namely that ‘non-Western cultures have no developed tradition of... equality’ (8).

For D’Souza, by implementing a form of ‘curricula affirmative action’, Stanford denied ‘the ability of scholarship to make meaningful distinctions between valid and invalid claims’. In his view, it is ‘possible to make distinctions on intellectual and aesthetic grounds between, say, *Othello* and the *The Color Purple*’, any arguments ‘to include or exclude a theory or a book [in a] literature course’ should be ‘made in terms of scholarly merit rather than on the basis of a political agenda.’ (85) Instead of ‘issuing peans to cultural diversity’, the university should be ‘courageous or openminded enough’ to allow for an exploration of the ‘highest values’ embodied in the (Western) cultural setting in which the university developed; in fact, it is ‘the teaching of

the classics that the cosmopolitan society is only possible when human beings acknowledge their differences and take them seriously' (91).

The dated liberal rationalism underpinning Bloom and D'Souza writing is accompanied by a crass bigotry that irked a number of students and academics at Stanford at the time of its publishing and has provoked a range of (rightly) acerbic repudiations in the years since.⁴³ That both have a shallow and derogatory understanding of, amongst other social determinants, race, gender and nationality is plain. Commentators as disparate as Angela Davis and Gerald Graff have moreover shown the extent to which Bloom and D'Souza have aided in upholding established discriminatory power structures within and outside the university, both through the direct use of their work by career politicians (notably Bush Sr-era US Education Secretary Allen Bennett), and their impact on institutions and organisations at Stanford.⁴⁴ The influential right-wing magazine *Stanford Review* for example regularly cited, interviewed and developed Bloom and D'Souza's writing. Both are also frequently mentioned in the campaign material of student organisations seeking to oppose CIV. The Stanford Cultural Association – at the time the second largest student group on campus – in fact used *The Closing of the American Mind* as the basis for the petition it launched in 1992 aimed at 'dismantling' CIV; a goal it eventually achieved to a considerable extent in Stanford's 1994 curricula reforms.

Bloom and D'Souza's multi-layered prejudice also impacts on how they write about evaluation. At Stanford, criticism collected around either their rationalist universalism, or their understanding of 'the West'. As Bill King, Chairperson of the SBSU at the time of the transition to CIV explains, the 'problem with [those like Bloom and D'Souza] was that they thought their "Western Culture" had all the important books – we ... thought there should be a list that

⁴³ See, for examples and discussion, in Eaton (1992) and the various responses in the 1994 Stanford student publication *Re-Ta(l)king the Rainbow Agenda*.

⁴⁴ See Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1993), and Angela Davis's *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (2012).

included our stuff because we [were] also part of that American history. We didn't think there were books that earned a place [on the core list] but we wanted to include stuff we recognised from our own part of the culture, our past' (King). For King, the primary problem was that Bloom and D'Souza interpreted history selectively, drawing the boundaries of culture in a way that privileged their own convictions and interests. In similar fashion, D'Souza's claims about *I, Rigoberta Menchu* were refuted in both Stanford student publications and in the wider American academy on the basis of their narrow 'Western-centric' prejudices, and because they failed to take into account the particularities of the book's production and reception. Opposition to the predecessor to CIV, *Western Culture*, was similarly premised on its failure to properly reflect a broader history of the United States.

In interviews, King and Lougee are also suspicious of 'universal ideas' of literary value 'plucked from air'. (Lougee Chapell interview) But, as Lougee explains – and straw voting in the Senate reflects – the majority of supporters of CIV continued to feel that the core list should be preserved in some form. (Lougee Chapell interview) Rather than opposing the idea of a generalised 'great books' course, Lougee argued for a reformed list that 'register[ed] more accurately the culture that produced it' (Lougee Chapell NAO 4). There was an increasing acceptance across the political spectrum that the fate of evaluative pronouncements, and of evaluation in general, depended on the cultural context from which both the evaluation and the text were 'produced'. (Stanford University AOC 14) All sides of the debate increasingly saw the justification for evaluation as to some extent dependent on contingent 'culture', although Bloom and D'Souza thought it to be simultaneously an objective practice.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ This is some distance from the approach to evaluation endorsed by Kermode in *The Classic*, for whom value is a feature of 'constitutive ambiguities' in the text itself. (Kermode TC 98) It more closely emulates his position in *History and Value*, where literary evaluation, in the form of the canon, is defended for its role in archiving and ordering 'the past' (Kermode HV 138). The kind of historicism that marks late-1980s Kermode is perceptibly different from that developed in the United States during the same period. The picture of literary value that emerges from senatorial and committee debates at Stanford, and out of writing about value in the American literary studies academy, and is even further detached from universalist notions of the good than that developing in segments of the United Kingdom academy.

This suggests that, at least with respect to conceptualising value, there was more in common across the ‘culture wars’ than is sometimes acknowledged. The next section uses several examples from archival documents relating to the emergence of CIV at Stanford to give further illustration of this common approach.⁴⁶ From the outset, and in contrast to the approach underpinning Western Culture, all parties to the CIV debate accept that choosing between texts is a contingent practice. As the discussions unfolds, the senate nevertheless comes to endorse the ‘core list approach’ on the grounds that evaluative pronouncements foster a ‘common language’ through which other cultural formations can be surveyed and explored. In this way, ‘commonality’ becomes the justification for evaluation, even as the senate continues to resist the authority of evaluative pronouncements. In the subsequent section, I connect this idea of commonality to neo-pragmatist writing of the time.

Senate Debates and Commonality

The text of the final senatorial legislation governing CIV is an instructive starting point. Divided into five sections, the legislation details the goals and requirements of all Area One courses. The first section sets out the place of CIV within the broader Stanford curriculum; the second the programme’s aims; the third the requirements that any prospective track must fulfil to form part of the programme; the fourth the role of Faculties and Departments in the teaching of CIV; and the fifth course administration. Immediately noticeable is how the peremptory, legalistic form of the ‘legislation’ (itself a legalistic moniker) contrasts throughout the text with diction that is softer and less definite. While the legalisation is for example divided into short paragraphs labelled by number and bullet point, the five aims of the programme are premised by words like ‘provide’, ‘engage’, ‘enable’, and ‘encourage’ (SU Senate 7). This creates a strikingly different tone

⁴⁶ The documents relating specifically to the ‘CIV debate’ are voluminous – the CIV task force met 40 times, received hundreds of pages of material, including letters from faculty and students, petitions, data, reports, articles, editorial and other documents. The Senate itself met to discuss the issue on six separate occasions – an unusually large number – taking extensive submissions on each occasion. The examples in this section are therefore intended as illustrative rather than as comprehensively representative.

to the Area One legislation governing Western Culture (CIV's predecessor), which uses authoritative wording in its aims section, requiring that the Course 'instruct', 'inculcate' and 'ingrain' (4). The overall impression is of a document that takes the form of binding law, but only as a kind of pageantry; the various 'provisions' are dressed up as judicial pronouncements but use words and grammatical structure that more closely resemble an exploratory scholarly article.

Different provisions of the CIV legislation also vary by register, with those dealing specifically with textual selection tending to be discernibly less formal. The provisions setting out the process for creating a core list moreover refer to one another across sections – a formal device absent from the rest of the text. Because the cross-referencing is circular (each of the sections referring to at least one other for semantic support), the discussion of the core list feels insular, and pulls away from external reference. This is different from much of the rest of the legislation, which actively refers to objectives and ideas outside of both the Area One course, and Stanford itself. At the same time, because each of the core list provisions cannot be read without cross-reference to others, knowledge of the process of textual selection is constantly deferred.

The result is that the process for textual evaluation inherent to CIV is formally presented as contained within the bounds of the legalisation, but not in a manner that is determinative or resolute. Especially in the sections dedicated to the process by which the core list is to be formed, rather than actively drawing on and replicating the congenital authority of the legislative form in order to give the evaluative decisions at the heart of CIV force of law, other formal elements of the text push against legislative conventions, parodying the text's perceived authority. The stark contrast between formal elements has the effect of highlighting the document's frailties, rather than buttressing its power. This is a notably equivocal formal structure for a course built around the idea of an introduction to what Stanford holds 'in common'.

The content of the provisions dealing with the core list supports this overall impression.

Provision 3(h) for example sets out as an ‘instructional objective’ ‘to include shared intellectual content through a selection of texts, authors, themes or issues that will be produced each year as specified in 5d’ (9). The emphasis on ‘shared intellectual content’ suggests a prioritising of commonality across the various CIV tracks, rather than an emphasis on any particular evaluative ideals. Provision 5(d) similarly requires that the Committee overseeing CIV supervise ‘an annual process’ by which ‘the regular faculty and course coordinators who will be teaching in the various tracks will meet to discuss their syllabuses for the following year and to agree on those common elements--texts, authors, themes, or issues--that will be taught by all the tracks’ (9). The legislation therefore encourages a reappraisal of the ‘texts, authors, themes, or issues’ that Stanford considers central to its identity on an annual basis (9). There is no expectation that the core list will be anything other than mutable depending on the changing views of academic staff.

This is replicated in the aims of the programme, the first of which is ‘to provide students with the common intellectual experience of broadening their understanding of ideas and values drawn from different strands of our own culture, and to increase their understanding of cultural diversity and the process of cultural interaction’ (7). Commonality is here sought through the ‘experience’ of engaging with ‘different strands’ of thought so as to ‘broaden’ understanding, rather than through the ‘imbibing’ (a word used in the Western Culture legislation) of the meaning or structure of the texts themselves (7, 8). Departing from Western Culture, the CIV legislation locates the value of a text in its ability to facilitate a process of cultural learning and integration, with plurality and diversity at the centre of this shared heritage. While bearing some of the hallmarks of Rawls-style liberalism, holding that culture can be ‘owned’, and that culturally representative texts can at all be chosen, suggests that the process of engagement and negotiation forms part of a more definitive evaluative framework. Keeping with the general character of the senatorial debates, the CIV legislation is both resistant to setting down definitive evaluative

pronouncements and committed to the process of forming evaluative judgements around a common understanding of the good. Justification for the evaluative project of selecting a core list came increasingly to be linked to the ‘commonality’ it generates.

By the end of the senatorial and committee discussions leading to the adoption of the CIV legislation, ‘commonality’ had become the most prominent reason for preserving the core list. The rationale first arises in an early submission by Robert Polhemus, an influential voice in the English department, who argued that the ‘radical revision’ (suggested by CUS) to eliminate the core list ‘will in a few years gut the common intellectual experience of the course and sap any intellectual coherence... the requirement and its tracks might have’ (17). Initially meeting resistance, especially from members of the Philosophy and Comparative Literature departments who saw ‘commonality’ as a proxy for ‘conservatism’, it was this emphasis on ‘coherence’ that eventually turned the senate away from abandoning the core list entirely. Over time, emphasis on commonality became typical of submissions both for and against CIV, taking on several meanings.

Central to this rise in the influence was the submission of Barbara Gelpi, another professor in the English Department. Gelpi’s intervention became a key justification for keeping the core list in the final CIV legislation and was used as a touchstone to bridge divisions in the committee handed responsibility for solving ‘the core list question’. At the heart of Gelpi’s submission was the idea that commonality should refer not to the content or themes of the texts selected to form part of a core list, but to the common language that they generate. As she explains,

The phrase “a common experience” arises often as part of the rationale for a core list. I think it imprecise; since each student comes to the course with a differing experience, the experience of the course will be at least slightly and often widely different for each. No, what the course should help to provide is a common language with which to understand and articulate one’s own experience, for that is the essence of genuine empowerment. Texts agreed upon as

revelatory, read and discussed in common, create a linguistic warp to be enlivened and modified in countless ways by the elan of each person's particular woof. (315)

For Gelpi, commonality is not a feature of 'experience', but instead of 'language' – a core list of texts creates a 'linguistic warp' that can be used as a shared tool for addressing divergent experience. The purpose of evaluative pronouncements is not to generate commonality of ideals or values, but a common structure of thought. This structuring should not happen at the level of ideas, but instead at the level of linguistic interpretation and textual engagement.

Accepting that language is not a neutral conveyer of meaning, Gelpi grounds her defence of 'linguistic commonality' in an analogy to the 'wounding' of Marie Curie as expressed in Adrienne Rich's poem 'Power' (314). The poem describes Curie's work with radioactive material, which she at the same time refused to see as the source of her illness. Rich's poem concludes, 'She died a famous woman denying/her wounds/denying/her wounds came from the same source as her power.' (Riche, 34) For Gelpi, 'there are two ways of denying one's wounds in the stand one takes regarding Western culture and its "core list"' (314). The first is to 'deny that these texts wound, to insist that they are purely empowering' (315). This is the position of Bloom and D'Souza, who think that the texts of the original core list can be objects of empowerment even when the history of their production and reception has been 'wounding'.

For Gelpi, however, those who opposed Bloom and D'Souza by proposing that the core list be abandoned were denying their wounds in a second way. By arguing for the list's abolition, they are also saying, 'It is wounding to read these texts, but a refusal to read them overcomes their capacity to wound. It rids us of them' (315). This is a 'seriously mistaken idea' because, '[t]hese texts exist within the culture; the wounding has already happened and is inescapable (315). Only knowledge of them can truly empower through laying bare the racist and sexist assumptions within the very foundations of Western culture.' Emulating the symptomatic reading of early Eagleton discussed in the previous chapter, Gelpi sees texts as evocative, in form and content, of

the ‘wounding’ caused by the society from which they were produced. As for Eagleton, ‘only knowledge’ of these texts ‘can truly empower by laying bare the racist and sexist assumptions within the very foundations of Western Culture’ (315).

With hindsight, Gelpi’s continued centring of a collection of texts that could just as easily be treated with indifference calls attention to the racism of even ‘progressive’ voices in the American literary studies academy at the time. The abiding focus on Western texts in attempts to diagnose and break Western hegemony has had the effect of occluding marginalised voices and upholding the binary underpinning the initial discriminatory differentiation. While Gelpi’s argument can be read as a closeted apologia for the evaluative choices propping up Western Culture, it also shows the extent to which she is willing to uphold and teach texts that she accepts are morally tainted in the interests of preserving ‘a common language’. Gelpi makes her argument not in defence of any particular texts, but instead in support of the idea of a core list – the goal of commonality in this way comes to legitimise and account for evaluation.

The outcome is that the justification of evaluation at Stanford is increasingly associated with building communal consensus. In addition to literal pronouncements to this effect – including in the final statement on the passing of CIV by Stanford President Donald Kennedy – the rise of the importance of linguistic commonality in the justification of evaluative acts can be seen in the evolution of the senate’s own language.⁴⁷ An illustrative example of this new approach to value is the shifting use of the idiom ‘to buy a pig in a poke’, which I discuss in further detail in the section below.

⁴⁷ Kennedy explains that ‘following extensive debate’ the core list has been preserved to ensure ‘a common language is available to Stanford undergraduates.’ (Donald Kennedy *BKD* 95)

A Pig in a Poke

The term ‘a pig in a poke’ – deployed with increasing frequency through the course of the senatorial debates – first appears in a comment on the CUS’s reform proposal suggesting the scrapping of the core list by Classics professor Marsh McCall. In his submission, McCall objects to the opacity of CUS’s proposed legislation, which he argues does not adequately ensure that ‘newly developed tracks share substantial overlap with existing Western Culture tracks’ (McCall 49). Defending commonality is therefore the reason for the submission which introduces the phrase’s first use, but the commonality McCall has in mind is one of ideas and cultural substance rather than language. As he explains, the purpose of Area One is ‘to have all Stanford students exposed to fundamental texts, ideas, and problems in the Western cultural tradition, and to have this experience structured in the several tracks in such a way that there should be a significant element of individuality in each track but also a very substantial overlap among all the tracks, a very substantial common intellectual exposure’ (51). It is the absence of the clarity that comes with connectedness and coherence that warrants a rejection of the new legislation, and the preservation of the old approach. In his view,

The Senate is being asked to vote into existence a vast and fundamental program, the new parts of which are at the moment a total unknown. This is a quintessential pig in a poke, and my daddy, who came from the proud poverty of Appalachian Virginia, told me to be wary of buying one of those. (50)

McCall here connects the phrase ‘pig in a poke’ to the mercantile practices of poor, white, agrarian Virginia. His use seems intended to ground the core list in white, masculine, southern ‘common-sense’. By employing the metaphor, McCall avoids a direct defence of the current list, while continuing to assert the levelheadedness of the cultural tradition of which it (and he) form part. It also conspicuously links McCall’s position on evaluation to the New Critics, who share the Southern heritage of his chosen idiom, and whom he praises elsewhere. McCall’s later

submissions to both the Core List Committee and the general Area One Taskforce indicate that he considers the texts valuable, and worth preservation, for their 'inarguable merits', but it is commonality that he argues justifies the continuation of the current core list, with some gradual augmentation where 'plainly necessary'.

The force of his use of the idiom is amplified by Stanford's position as a 'hybrid' university in the 'Eastern', Ivy league tradition, but geographically located in the 'West'. Throughout the history of the senate and committee discussions relating to the various instantiations of the Area One requirement, a special place is given to 'southern wisdom', partly because of the university's, and especially the humanities faculty's, open attempts to distance itself from the metropolitan 'East'. An internal report from the 1940s for example stresses the importance of being 'open to lost... intercessions... [from the South]'; a position amplified in another important 1956 Area One report (Stanford University, *Reform Committee Report*, 44). The minutes of the committee discussion leading to the reinstatement of Area One in the late 1970s also indicates 'general agreement' that Stanford ensure its approach to teaching core courses does not occlude the 'contribution' of voices outside of 'those inherited from Columbia, Chicago and the Eastern great works movement' (SU Area One Committee 12). In addition, there is a certain residual deference for Southern views evident in a humanities faculty made up mainly of 'Northerners'.

(14) Throughout the internal CIV debates, Southern 'wisdom' is treated with a certain folkloric reverence. (14)

Philologically, the referent underlying McCall's 'quintessential' pig in a poke is, in fact, relatively young. The idiom experienced a dramatic rise in usage in the 1860s and 1870s American south, where it was domesticated as American lore (Adam 469). While the reasons for the increase in use have not been fully mapped, there is some suggestion that it was linked to usage in bourgeois magazines, especially in Tennessee, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia and the city of New Orleans, during post-civil war 'reconstruction' (Ammer 354). In these publications, the term is

generally associated with non (or pre)-plantation rural living, and fairly often associated with ‘mountainous husbandry’; as reflected in McCall’s invocation of the Appalachians (354). Usage is generally unironic, harking back to the term’s employment in the late middle-ages, where it referred primarily to doing or buying something without first identifying the thing in question, as in the 1506-36 common-place book of London grocer Richard Hill who warns, ‘When ye proffer the pigge open the poke.’⁴⁸

McCall’s usage is some distance from the phrase’s other recurrent meaning – similarly present in the middle-ages – referring to a passionate, ‘unrefined’ sexual tryst, as in Sir Thomas More’s (1478-1535) ‘they fell doune both at last that on the grounde Togyder rounde / with many asdde stroke the roll and rumble they tourne & cumble / lyke pygges in a poke so longe above they heave and shove.’ By the late eighteenth century, this second meaning had become the idiom’s principle connotation, driven by a ‘poke’ coming to refer to a kind of long-peaked bonnet, in addition to its older meaning of a sack or bag. Much usage of ‘pig in a poke’ in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century, particularly in England, was bawdy and urban-centric, and so its redeployment in America as a sincere piece of rural good sense was a departure from the norm.

In the senatorial debates, this second meaning was rekindled by Dianne Middlebrook, another professor in the English Department. Middlebrook had initially supported the alternative proposal preserving the core list, but later withdrew her support, explaining that ‘while I continue to believe, with the framers of this document, that a common intellectual experience would most benefit Stanford undergraduates, I have come to believe that a vote in favor, now, of retaining a core list is a vote against the spirit of criticism in which the whole review of Western culture was undertaken.’ (Middlebrook 57) Unlike Gelpi and Polhemus, Middlebrook

⁴⁸ The term’s usage, Anglo-Norman and old Northern French in etymological origin, goes back to at least 1275, where *The Proverbs of Hendyng* warns ‘Wan man 3evit þe a pig, opin þe powch’.

therefore resists the idea that commonality, in linguistic or ideological form, trumps the ‘spirit of criticism’ that animated initial resistance to Western Culture. As she explains, the compromise legislation (eventually passed as CIV) does not sufficiently confront ‘the problem of contextualising’, noting that, ‘Not only the texts selected as “great,” but the circumstances of their privileging... are the inevitable arena of discussion’ (58). For Middlebrook, commonality is only an acceptable justification for evaluative choices if it encompasses criticism – the core list cannot be endorsed unless the hurdle of the context of its creation is frontally addressed.

In a submission to the second sitting of the Area One Task Force, Middlebrook supports her argument by noting that it is the alternative proposal championed by McCall which is the real ‘pig in the poke’. This because the pig in question is more ‘clearly shaped’ than McCall suggests, in fact ‘roll[ing] in the mud with any inamorato’, ‘consequences be damned’ (17, 18). McCall’s proposal ‘privileges common experience’ over ‘systemic criticism’ without acknowledging that ‘assumptions about gender’ ‘inhabit every book on the reading list’ to such an extent that ‘real and necessary changes can only come from a transformation of a critical understanding about the many ways gender functions in society’ (17). A critical re-reading of the existing texts or adding ‘a few more texts by women’ does not take equality seriously enough, while taking the goal of preservation of commonality too seriously (17). For Middlebrook, the process of forming a core list is ‘too focused on commonality, and not focused enough on ‘societal transformation’ (16). The alternative proposal rightly acknowledges that commonality is valuable, but at the same time fails to see that ‘equality’ ‘is also a pig’ (17). If encouraging commonality is basis enough for arguing *for* a core list, then equality should similarly be enough reason to argue *against*.

Like McCall, Middlebrook therefore uses ‘pig in a poke’ to critique proposed Area One legislation, but for her the problem is not opacity born of a lack of commonality across tracks, but a general and systemic intermingling of the idea of the core list and longstanding discriminations, including against women. Reflecting this difference, her use of ‘pig in a poke’ in

the term's second-sense highlights desire and sexual power rather than commerce. Her ironic use of 'inamorato' harks back to 'pig in a poke's' eighteenth-century use as a way to police the expression of sexual desire. At the same time, Middlebrook's invocation of the separate metaphor 'pig in the mud' suggests edacity and over-consumption, reversing the gendered critique to paint the defenders of the core list as the real gluttons in need of restraint. The result is that the mercantile connotation of 'a pig in a poke' used by the defenders of the core list come to be associated with common agreement in a contractual sense, while Middlebrook's appetitive usage is associated with structural forms of critique.

When Gelpi uses the phrase, it is deliberately cross-referential, intended to connect her argument to the submissions of McCall and Polhemus, who, like Gelpi, see commonality as the prime reason for preserving the core list. In doing so, she creates ideological 'commonality' through language, joining several together so as to support a single point:

So (and this is my version of the baby and the bath water, the pig in a poke) I consider the alternative proposal conservative only in the medical sense of that term. If an organ is malfunctioning, I trust those with the opinion that surgery is a last resort. Before suggesting such a radical procedure, the wise physician considers possible medications, monitors the functioning of the organ carefully, and--when appropriate--insists that the patient change lifestyle. All seem now to agree that the Western culture program, the Stanfordian organ here under scrutiny, needs treatment. At the same time, as student responses attest, this is a functioning organ and is likely to respond very well indeed to the "conservative" measures of the alternate proposal. I urge the Senators to endorse those rather than the radical surgery diagnosed as necessary in the task force's proposed legislation. (14)

Gelpi adds her ‘conservative’ doctor metaphor to McCall’s ‘pig in a poke’, and Polhemus’ ‘baby and the bath water’ to further support preserving the core list.⁴⁹ In doing so, she shows the extent to which language can be marshalled around an ideological point. Her choice of metaphor is deliberately professional, making a strong accompaniment to McCall’s invocation of ‘rural American’ values and Polhemus’ of domesticity. Where McCall evokes an imagined cultural heritage, and Polhemus family life – so central to the ‘American’ imagining of itself – Gelpi appeals to ‘good sense’ in a harder, more scientific sense. Her rejection of Middlebrook-style ‘radicalism’ is premised on representing a rejection of evaluation as an irresponsible medical practice – for Gelpi, taking steps to ensure commonality is achieved is reason enough to slow down the process of reform.

Gelpi’s submission also marks a turning point in how metaphor is used in the Senatorial debates. Up to this point, metaphors emerge from both oral and written submissions, and are contested and reinterpreted by those advocating for various positions on the question of the core list. In the debates and committee meetings following Gelpi’s redescription of commonality as referring to language rather than principles, metaphor comes increasingly to be deployed by those supporting the core list on grounds of commonality and eschewed by both those defending the core list on stronger objectivist grounds, and those disputing that a core list should be maintained at all. Not only do arguments for the core list premised on linguistic commonality gain ground on the senate floor, but figurative language itself comes to be associated with arguments for commonality.

⁴⁹ In similar fashion to McCall, Polhemus defends the core list on the basis of its commonality: ‘The area one requirement and a common curriculum can be and will be part of the solution, not the problem. We can meet positively and gratefully the spirit of criticism that prompted the formation of the task force by amending the current Area one requirement while preserving the structure of a common curriculum and intellectual experience for all students. It just doesn't make sense to chuck out the baby with the bath, to jeopardize students' chances – the only chance many of them will have – to begin to share in the community.’ (44)

Use of ‘pig in a poke’ is no exception in this regard. John Perry, a prominent supporter of Middlebrook, and a leading voice in the drafting of the Area One Task Force report that informed the CUS’s proposal, responded to those advocating for a core list on ‘linguistic commonality’ grounds through a question-and-answer pamphlet distributed just before the final Senatorial debates (which adopted the core list). Responding to the question ‘But what does [the CUS proposed legislation] call for? Isn’t the whole thing so vague and unspecific as to be totally vacuous?’, Perry responds, ‘the answer... will lie in one of Stanford’s great strengths, its faculty in the humanities and social sciences—particularly those who have indicated an interest in participating in a program with looser criteria. I’ve never been exactly sure what “pig in a poke” meant anyway, but I am sure it doesn’t capture my degree of confidence in this faculty’ (Perry 232). Instead of reinforcing Middlebrook’s attempts to reinterpret and engage with the metaphor so as to highlight the ambiguities and opacities of the McCall-Gelpi-Polhemus position, Perry abandons it altogether in favour of painting the metaphor as itself confused and overly complicated. In doing so, he relinquishes the metaphor entirely. This approach is then repeated by several others speaking in favour of abolishing the core list, including King, who notes that ‘a pig in a poke’ is ‘gamesmanship’ intended to ‘obfuscate’ the underlying issues of ‘racism, sexism and other... bias’ (King 31).

By the end of the senate debates and the commencement of CIV, both the CUS report proposing the replacement of the core list with a more fluid set of teaching tracks, and the Western Culture legislation with its underlying objectivist justifications for evaluative choices, had faded into the background. In their place was left an approach to selecting texts which appealed to commonality of ideas, but especially of language. The example of the shifting use of ‘a pig in a poke’ illustrates that this approach was not only the official position of the university, but also deeply ingrained in the debate itself. As Donald Kennedy explains in his final report on CIV, the committee given the task of selecting the texts to go on the core list were to select ‘on

the basis of what books, memoirs and essays' gave 'instructors [on the Area One Programme] the best opportunity to develop a common language for engaging with [American] culture'. The work of evaluation was one of understanding what texts 'give entry to [our] common language'. (Kennedy 47) In turn, 'commonality' was 'the justifications this university needs to continue a core course programme.' (52)

Notably, to argue for preserving the core list in the service of 'conserving' a common language is to make a value of commonality. Rather than adopting a comprehensive relativism, the Stanford Senate replaced the objectivism of Western Culture with a more limited but, still general, maxim. Commonality as a value is not semantically 'full' – instead, the Stanford Senate came to see it as the grease that lubricates the workings of meaningful agreement and divergence. The core list was no longer seen as a depository of intrinsic worth, but instead as a mechanism by which members of the Stanford community (broadly construed) could witness, narrate and delineate their own positions and conditions. Common agreement on a core list was seen as sufficient reason for its continuation, and evaluation itself was supported on grounds of commonality.

This normative commitment to commonality is what centrally links the Stanford senate's position to theoretical pragmatism. What makes pragmatism distinctive amongst contextualist theories of value and interpretation, is that it goes all the way down: not only is the value of text a feature of its place in (for example) ordering 'history', but truth claims about value are themselves contingent on historical phenomena – if a text is to be valuable it must be as a consequence of its contingent position. In the next section, I give further explanation of this approach, focusing in particular on the pre-eminent pragmatist of the 1980s, Richard Rorty. In addition to the theoretical congruency I see between the Senate's final position and his work, Rorty also wrote a submission to the Senate, and was in 'regular correspondence' with 'many' of those involved in the debate. In my discussion, I suggest that unlike some, later, pragmatists Rorty was not an objectivist about value. I next consider two thinkers writing directly on

questions of value, Barbara Herrnstein Smith and John Guillory, who I suggest were similarly committed to a pragmatist ethic. I end with a brief discussion of a second thread of pragmatism that leaves space for evaluative conclusions. While this thread was less closely connected to Stanford, it has subsequently been influential, and prefigures some of the approaches to value I discuss in the next chapter.

Pragmatism

In broad terms, pragmatism refers to a thread of genetically-American thought with roots in at least the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by writers including Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Pierce, Jane Addams, Alfred Whitehead, William James and Mary Parker Folett.⁵⁰ As is often noted in histories of pragmatism, there was considerable disagreement between its early proponents, driven by sometimes radical shifts in style and argument.⁵¹ ‘Pragmatism’ was also appropriated as an umbrella term for a diverse array of political, academic and social institutions, resulting in a widening application of its already uncertain core tenets. This uncertainty extended into pragmatism’s ‘middle period’, with considerable changes in emphasis and argument emerging through the work of, amongst others, John Dewey and C I Lewis during the 1930s and 1940s, and of Wilfred Sellars and W V O Quine in the 1950s and 1960s.

This pervasive ‘vagueness’ is of more than just historical interest. (Poirier 41) It points to a foundational attribute of pragmatist thought: its deep embeddedness in human activity and experience. As Cheryl Misak puts it, ‘The insight at the heart of pragmatism is that any domain of inquiry—science, ethics, mathematics, logic, aesthetics—is human inquiry, and that our

⁵⁰ Misak suggests that ‘pragmatism came into being in 1867 in Cambridge Massachusetts, in a discussion group that included philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, and lawyers,’ (1) though there are strong connections between pragmatism and elements of ‘indigenous’ American thought – see Pratt (2002).

⁵¹ Pragmatism’s emphasis on human inquiry has meant that pragmatists have generally chosen to localise their definitions of pragmatism, resulting in a profusion of accounts. Extracting a composite theory of pragmatism from early pragmatist writing is further hampered by difficulty in accessing archival material (only eight volumes of an intended 23 volume set of Pierce’s complete works have, for example, so far been properly curated and published).

philosophical accounts of truth and knowledge must start with that fact.’ (Misak ix) Rather than scrutinising propositional claims about the empirical world as true or false, pragmatism draws attention to the artefactual nature of the claims themselves.⁵² Pragmatists have accordingly tended to resist unifying ideational assertions, preferring to analyse concepts by recourse to their emergence and cultural position – their ‘human’ character.⁵³

Much energy has accordingly been spent disputing whether pragmatism can function in the absence of an objective truth correlate, with various competing theories emerging within pragmatist thought.⁵⁴ Either way, to be pragmatist, these theories have to start with experience; knowing the world is dependent on the workings of agency within it. Because of this positioning, justifications for truth can never be fully idealist – truth claims can only be established from the material of experience itself. In the context of debates over normative value, this means that pragmatism more readily tracks on to contingent or relativist accounts of the good. As the final section of this paper suggests, a version of objectivist pragmatism about value however also emerged in the early 1990s. This approach generally requires a collapsing of fact and value, rather than a defence of evaluation on factual grounds. The pragmatism that I associate with the Stanford Senate is however in the former tradition. Rather than attempting to support ‘aesthetic’,

⁵² While sharing a naturalist frame, pragmatists at heart reject (so-called) Cartesian or Kantian transcendental strategies associated with philosophical movements now collected under the rubric of ‘logical positivist’ or ‘analytic’ philosophy. Margolis claims that, ‘Pragmatism is nearly the only English language movement that did not, early in the twentieth century (for instance, under the direction of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore), turn against the post-Kantians.’ It is perhaps more historically accurate to see pragmatism as both anti-idealist and anti-analytic. Because of its strong basis in empiricism, pragmatism sets itself firmly against idealism, rejecting any platonic overtures. As Misak shows, the picture of pragmatism as antithetical to logical positivism is somewhat spoiled by the extent to which pragmatism impacted on the formation of corner-stone analytic propositions, including through Wittgenstein, and even through Russell. Pragmatism and logical positivism remain divided, however, by the emphasis they put on human inquiry as the mediating force through which knowledge should be viewed. Whereas the logical positivists see logic as firmly independent, pragmatists are unwilling to make claims that move beyond human experience. (Misak 35)

⁵³ Because of its diffuseness, Joseph Margolis prefers to see pragmatism as a ‘unifying temperament,’ (Margolis 10) reflecting an ‘attenuated’ commonality. This description chimes with Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse’s use of ‘idiom’; a word that picks out the emphasis on ‘shared expression’ at the heart of pragmatist thought. These terms have meanings analogous to states of subjective disposition (mental or linguistic) rather than disciplinary orientation. Whereas ‘paradigm’ suggests scientific configuration and ‘approach’ intellectual commonality, ‘temperament’ and ‘idiom’ point towards something closer to a feeling or a compulsion.

⁵⁴ See the discussion in Price (2013).

‘artistic’ or ‘literary’ evaluations by reference to the text itself, evaluative practices are justified with references to commonality within the community. As already suggested, this idolising of commonality is seen as in some way built into the functioning of contingency, rather than being the reassertion of objectivity.

Rorty

The most celebrated figure of the ‘neo-pragmatism’ that dominated pragmatist thought in the late 1980s, Richard Rorty, writes firmly in this tradition.⁵⁵ In his 1989 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (and subsequent 1982 *Consequences of Pragmatism*) Rorty vigorously attacked the idea that knowledge is constituted by an accurate ‘representation’ of the world, rooted in the metaphor of the mind as a ‘mirror of nature’. This erroneous picture gave rise to what Rorty calls ‘philosophy-as-epistemology’, incorporating a wide range of familiar philosophical questions – the mind body problem; empiricism versus idealism; the nature of truth; and so on.⁵⁶ Elaborating on the work of W V O Quine and Wilfrid Sellars in particular, Rorty argues that as the ‘representationalist thesis’ is groundless, these ‘problems’ are also illusionary. Having shown that the mental/physical; analytic/synthetic distinction is untenable, he argues that Quine retreats into the physical, while Sellars dispenses entirely with the sensory in favour of an idealised conceptual truth. For Rorty, the better approach is to abandon both, adopting instead an ‘epistemological behaviourism’ whereby ‘we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature.’ (171) It is this focus on ‘asking what we are doing by deploying mentalistic epistemological vocabulary’ rather than ‘asking about the nature of mind, knowledge, etc’ that marks Rorty’s approach as pragmatist. (xv)

⁵⁵ Rorty initially resisted the pragmatist label – describing the term as ‘a bit overladen’ in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – but later embraced it with increasing gusto – see *Contingency, Solidarity, Irony* and later works.

⁵⁶ In the first part of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty gives an abbreviated historicist account of the rise of the key distinctions of analytic philosophy (mind/body; analytic/synthetic, etc) in Descartes, Locke and Kant.

In the years following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty continued to move resolutely away from the idea of objective truth, including with respect to claims of objective normative, including aesthetic, value, and towards a focus on commonality. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, written from a series of lectures in the late 1980s and published in 1989 at the height of the CIV debates, is his most systemic effort at deposing – or ‘eclipsing’ – objective value on pragmatist grounds. Departing from the premise that as ‘languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities’, normative truth, for Rorty, must also be relative to human invention. Programmatically, ‘our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or “true” as a term that repays “analysis”.’ (7, 8) Instead, ‘intellectual progress’ is achieved by focusing on finding new ways to describe and construe our existing concepts, and to widen the ambit of awareness and agreement on these novel constructions. (44) Those who innovate within the confines of a language are like ‘toolmakers’ rather than Copernican ‘discoverers’, with the outcome of those tools’ use being ‘us – our conscience, our culture, our form of life.’ (56)

This method ‘works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like “try thinking of it this way” – or more specifically, “try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.”’ (9) Unlike traditional metaphysics which imagines language as conceivably correspondent to reality, Rorty’s methodology ‘does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way.’ (9) New conceptual schemes are useful not because they are closer to the truth but because they give us alternative vocabularies to describe topics of interest to users of the language. This approach ‘faces up to the *contingency* of the language we use’ – by recognising changes in language as valuable for the redescriptions they offer rather than for their revelation of underlying truth, Rorty sees his new method as avoiding the pitfalls of the representationalism his earlier work repudiated.

As can be seen, Rorty pays special attention to the workings of language in defending this position. Drawing on Donald Davidson, he argues that changes in how we do our conceptualising through language is fundamentally a question of ‘the history of metaphor’, rather than a story of how ‘the human mind, or human languages, [became] better and better suited to the purposes for which God or Nature designed them, for example, able to express more and more meanings or to represent more and more facts’. (16) By Rorty’s picturing, new ideas (including in science) are no more than, in Mary Hesse’s words, ‘metaphoric redescription.’ (16) The concepts which these redescriptions replace are themselves metaphors, albeit metaphors that have come to be accepted as ‘true’. Rorty explains that ‘in order to accept this picture, we need to see the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in the way Davidson sees it: not as a distinction between two sorts of meaning, nor as a distinction between two sorts of interpretation, but as distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks.’ (17). Advancement in how we form concepts is in this way dependent on the emergence, cultivation and acceptance of new metaphorical descriptions.

In place of the search for objective value, Rorty therefore argues that ‘we’ look internally to what we do, and can do, with existing structures of language. In a manner similar to late Kermode, this brings him to arguing that we should ‘try *not* to want something that stands beyond history and institutions’ when making evaluative assessments. (49) This does not, however, mean a full collapse into relativism or subjectivism. Instead, like the Stanford Senate, Rorty argues vigorously for promoting commonality as a basis for normative judgement. His position, ‘identifies “obligation” with “intersubjective validity”’. This intersubjective validity, he analyses in terms of what he calls ‘solidarity’, and sometimes ‘commonality’ – mutual agreement on what stipulates ‘the good’. (52) This position ‘urg[es] us to *create* a more substantive sense of solidarity than we currently have’. (196) It is through communal institutionally agreement that we come to justifiable grounds for evaluative practice.

With this theoretical background in mind, it is unsurprising that Rorty's contribution to the Stanford dispute is in favour of preserving the core list on grounds not that the texts in question were 'independently' valuable, but because of their ability to facilitate intra-institutional 'discussion', as well as the 'broadening' of a 'community' of 'discussants'. His contribution came in a formal (by Rorty's standards) submission to the second sitting of the 'core list' committee – seemingly on the invitation of the committee itself.⁵⁷ Rorty's submission argues that while reform of the list was 'owing', and that he was in support of a general 'disavowal' of any 'utopian barricading', seemingly on objectivist grounds, he still felt the list and course were worth preserving. (168) In his view, 'a belief can still regulate an action', and that there was justification for preserving it for reasons 'no deeper than historical circumstance'. (169) In fact, for Rorty, the debate provided a unique opportunity for the 'liberal work' of 'discussion', which should of itself be enough justification for keeping the list.

Despite his fastidious attempts to distance his project from conventional 'truth-seeking' objectivism, use of words like 'progress' suggest that Rorty sees changes in metaphors accepted into usage through institutional frameworks as to some degree normatively evaluable. (44) He similarly describes the 'genuine novelty' and 'emergent collectivity' brought about by creative redescription within a natural language as 'marvellous' (167). *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* and other of Rorty later works suggest that the evaluative good he has in mind has chiefly to do with an appreciation of self-creation sourced in Nietzsche, Freud and Harold Bloom. What makes these things (he gives the example of Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*) 'good' is not the genius of the act, nor that the insight is 'true', but that the redescription enables language users to navigate their world collectively in a manner that was not previously possible. He views his own intervention in the same light; any rapprochement of the idea of truth is not an assertion of a

⁵⁷ Rorty was at the time employed at the University of Virginia, but had longstanding connections with the university. In 1998, he moved to Stanford to take up a position in the Department of Comparative Literature.

new truth condition, but instead ‘a matter of redescribing other things, trying to outflank the objections by enlarging the scope of [one’s] favourite metaphors.’⁵⁸ (44)

Why this sort of linguistic ‘outflanking’ should be thought of as unfailingly valuable while also remaining contingent is never addressed in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, nor does Rorty properly justify his strong contention that a ‘self-realising’ form of liberal politics follows from pragmatism. His 1985 ‘Solidarity or Objectivity?’ comes closest to finding a work-around by differentiating between ‘objectivity’ and ‘solidarity’. For Rorty, the former involves ‘people describ[ing] themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality’, while the latter is socially orientated, requiring only that people ‘tell the story of their contribution to a community’ (3). Endorsing the second framing, Rorty argues that the kind of redescriptions he has in mind can be generally meaningful for the community in question – a kind of communal ‘solidarity’ rather than ‘truth’. In this way, his account remains contingent in that it denies objective truth while still providing a rigid framework for evaluative decision making.

One of the more sensitive writers on questions of literary value active at the time of the CIV debates, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, rightly describes this attempt as not only ‘unsatisfactory’ and ‘determinedly naïve’ but also ‘at odds with Rorty’s own more general conceptual tastes and political bents.’ (167) She points out that his picture of community encourages ‘the illusion, undesirable for political theory and dangerous for political practice, that there is some mode of thought or set of principles that would ultimately eliminate all difficult and disagreeable encounters with other people.’ (168) Citing Clifford Geertz, she concludes that Rorty’s view of culture lacks complexity – failing to take cognisance of the multiple and shifting identities

⁵⁸ Given this approach, it is unsurprising that Rorty links the ‘effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency’ to ‘poetry’, as historically opposed to ‘philosophy’, which aims to achieve ‘universality by the transcendence of contingency.’ (Rorty *CIS* 25) Rorty’s strongly relativist stance is thus grounded in a turn towards literature. Substantial segments of *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* are devoted to a defence of the literary, and the literary critical, as against the philosophical; ‘a general turn against theory and towards narrative’. (xvi) Because Rorty sees the creation of new vocabularies offering alternative ways of describing existing concepts as definitive of how new ideas have historically developed, he seeks out forms of thinking and writing that promote this creative redescribing. (17) He then endorses literature and the practice of literary criticism because they exemplify this kind of work.

contributing to a person's beliefs and behaviours. By encouraging the idea that there may be some form of cultural still-point at which communal agreement is total, Rorty collapses his position into objectivity, while simultaneously promoting a problematically homogenous conception of human society.

Herrnstein Smith

Herrnstein Smith's solution to Rorty's evaluative difficulties is not, however, a return to a form of objectivism. Instead, in her 1988 *Contingencies of Value* she suggests Rorty issue a '*prompt, sharp, total* and, as *necessary*, repeated dismissal' of the suggestion that a 'contingent' or 'relativist' understanding of value in any way requires the ethnocentric idea of 'community'. (9) In its place, and in line with pragmatism's original resistance to both objectivism and universalism, she argues that we maintain 'a state of acute scepticism with respect to all utopian-redemptionist invocations of "solidarity" and "community" coupled with... the recognition of the possibility or indeed inevitability of their conflict with each other and his conflict with them.' In this sense, Herrnstein Smith is, at least on the face of it, a more committed relativist than Rorty, repudiating all and any move towards static descriptors. In her view, literary value (like all other value) is radically 'contingent' in the sense that it is a 'changing function of multiple variables.' (11) Embedded in a refutation of Hume's 'natural standards of taste' and Kant's 'disinterested judgements', she argues for a view of evaluation as a function of interactions between 'various psychophysiological structures'; 'particulars of personal identity and history'; and 'innumerable social, cultural, institutional and contextual variables,' all of which are necessarily contingent. (38) What is 'valuable' at a given time is emergent not of any general principle or natural law, but instead of 'the states of numerous particular systems interacting at a particular time and place.'

(41)

With respect to literary value, Herrnstein Smith in this vein argues that the value of a text is dependent on the various persons, groupings and institutions who '[write], publish, purchase,

read, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and imitate it.' Contra both MacCabe and Kermode, Herrnstein Smith sees nothing significant in a text's survival or canonisation, other than that this reflects contingent reality. A text's persistence is a 'product neither of the objectively (in the Marxist sense) conspiratorial force of establishment institutions nor of the continuous appreciation of the timeless virtues of a fixed object'. (47) Instead, the value of a text (and indeed its character as 'text') is the consequence of a series of continuous interactions among variably constituted objects, emergent conditions, and mechanisms of cultural selection and transmission. (47) Instead of the phenomenon of survival and continued interaction being the 'sign' of a text's value, they are in fact its 'springs'. (52) The enduring 'value' of canonical texts is a consequence of their continued circulation, rather than the other way around. Herrnstein Smith acknowledges that the value of a text is likely to reflect 'cultural power', but sees no particular consequence of this fact for defining value.

At the heart of her model is a dismissal of what she describes as the longstanding distinction between the discourses of 'economic theory' – money, commerce, technology, industry, production and consumption, workers and consumers – and that of 'aesthetic axiology' – culture, art, genius, creation and appreciation, artists and connoisseurs. (127) Drawing on George Bataille's critique of use and expenditure (while resisting his attempts to fashion a 'true meaning of "utility"'), she argues that 'all human (and not only human activity) [can] be seen to consist of a continuous exchange or expenditure... of some... kind, whereby goods... are secured, enhanced, or produced.' (144) Rather than dividing evaluative claims into those that pick out universal entitlements or other 'ends' (for example, claims of aesthetic 'good') and those that are determined by the market based on, amongst other factors, scarcity and desire, Herrnstein Smith suggests that *all* forms of value should be seen as having 'neither *telos* nor *terminus*', and therefore as determined only in relation to 'a particular state of a particular agent's personal economy – that is, the nature, distribution, and trajectory of her desires and resources at some moment'. She

explains that ‘good’ operates within the discourse of value not as a descriptor of some definite state or property, but instead ‘as does money in the cash economy: good is the universal value-form of money’. As a result, our experience of the value of, inter alia, a work of ‘literature’, is ‘equivalent to *our experience of the work in relation to the total economy of our existence*’. (16, her italics) As she summarises, ‘All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the product of the dynamics of a system, specifically an *economic* system.’ (30)

Because the ‘personal economy’ of any given subject is in fact made up of many competing, shifting and sometimes contradictory ‘economies,’ what is ‘valuable’ or ‘good’ for a person or group is not ‘rational’ in either the economic or philosophical sense. Instead, our attempts to form irrevocable evaluations is marked by ‘irreducible *scrappiness*,’ resulting in inconsistencies and discords, but also sometimes relatively long-lasting moments of ‘local resolution’ and ‘provisional stability’ which can sometimes be mistaken for static ‘goods’ in the old axiological sense. There remains however ‘no single, particular, nonarbitrary specifiable domain that encloses all [of these] interactions;’ there is ‘no way to give a reckoning that is simultaneously total and final.’ (148). Our processes of evaluation are reflective of various contingent processes neither reflective of any greater truth nor moving towards a settled pattern through which some final axiological judgements may later be made.

At the same time, Herrnstein Smith is curiously – and vigorously – committed to distancing herself from the argument that contingency implies subjectivism or any endorsement of what she terms the ‘egalitarian fallacy’, namely the idea that ‘a denial of objective value commits one to the view that all judgements are “equal”, “equally good,” or “equally valid”.’ (98) As her refutation of Rorty shows, this is not because of any residual communitarianism. Instead, she argues that ‘[a]lthough the radical contingency of all value certainly does imply that no value

judgement can be more “valid” than another *in the sense of* an objectively truer statement of the objective value of an object... it does not follow that all judgements are equally valid’. She justifies this seemingly contradictory assertion by claiming that the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of a value judgement must instead be ‘understood, evaluated, and compared... as something other than “truth value” or “validity”.’ (100) This ‘something’ is a commodity given ‘currency’ within the broader ‘economic’ model outlined above – value judgements do not need truth or objective validity to support meaningful discussion and disagreement because they reflect, and have, other sorts of value within the context of societal (and other) interaction and exchange.

In the midst of the lead up to the Senatorial debates at Stanford in early 1987, just prior to the publication of *Contingencies of Value*, Herrnstein Smith was invited to make submissions to the Stanford CUS committee on reform to the Area One Requirement.⁵⁹ Her submission uses this same economically-inflected language, suggesting that while she could offer no input on ‘values’ that may be used as a ‘guide’ in reforming the core list, the university should acknowledge the particularities of its own history and context, focusing instead on the ‘economy’ of Stanford itself. She also made clear that this did not mean that any common ‘standards of exchange’ prevalent at Stanford should be taken as ‘what might be described as true’. Instead the kind of commonality she had in mind would do no more than reflect internal ‘struggle’, but that it was to the contours of this struggle that CUS should pay attention.

Rather than seeking normative foundations for her model (as an objectivist would) Herrnstein Smith invites us to instead assist in the ‘development and widespread appropriation of *alternative, nonobjectivist accounts of the dynamics of human choice and action.*’⁶⁰ As she explains, ‘If we recognise that

⁵⁹ The committee sent several letters to prominent thinkers in the humanities inviting input prior to their recommendation of the change from Western Culture to CIV.

⁶⁰ Having done away with ‘justification’ as a structure of objective/impersonal argumentation built on objective/empirical (or transcendental) foundations, Herrnstein Smith in this way develops an alternative understanding of justification built on contingent variables. Unlike Rorty she makes no attempt to stabilise evaluative judgements through ‘solidarity’ or any other device, accepting that contingency implies irresolution and constant change. The make-up of a ‘successful’ evaluation is instead dependent on the various biological, social, institutional and other variables that fill the ‘world’. Within, for example, the context of pedagogy and instruction, as

literary value is ‘relative’ in the sense of *contingent* (that is, a changing function of multiple variables) rather than *subjective* (that is, personally whimsical, locked into the consciousness of individual subjects and/or without interest or value for other people), then we may begin to investigate the dynamics of that relativity.’ (11) Doing so entails ‘paying attention to the innumerable, subtle, continuously operating, nonformalized unusually unrecognised... behavioural tendencies that emerge from individual and social practices themselves.’ (162) These ‘constraints’ are not outward forces that act on the agent, but instead the ‘*recurrent inclinations of the agents themselves*’ based on ‘corporeal inscribed’ traces of their own prior and ongoing actions and interactions (162, italics original). What is needed is not truth, but better description of existing ‘dynamics’ so that we can more fully understand the ‘feedback mechanisms’ that regulate our evaluative practices, keeping them ‘from being, as in “anything goes,” anything.’ (163)

There are therefore similarities in Herrnstein Smith and Rorty’s respective accounts of value, despite the former’s initial distancing. Both resist abandoning evaluation altogether, instead justifying evaluative practices on the ‘recurrent inclinations’ of a given community. In this respect, their position is also similar to that finally adopted by the Stanford Senate. Rather than embracing subjectivism, all take an inward-looking approach, grounding evaluative choices in what is already there, and seeing the restraints internal to a community as constitutive of worth. In practical terms, this amounts to giving special significance to what the community has, and does value, binding normative pronouncements to this structure. While commonality cannot give you an objective account of the good, evaluative judgements should still be tethered to the ‘dynamics’ of the (contingent) community.

in the case of a university, this might involve justifying a particular judgement to those whose welfare is one’s responsibility and over whom one has social, political and/or institutional power by ‘making as explicit as necessary to them the various considerations that produced that judgement... stopping not when the explication hits “object” rock bottom but when it turns the trick, that is, secures their acquiescence.’ (160) That this final position may be either (or both) morally dubious in an objectivist sense or brought about through, for example, violence rather than verbal persuasion is of no concern to Herrnstein Smith, who argues that ‘no particular moral positions or types of or modes of moral action’ follow from her position at all. (146)

It is for just this ‘cyclopean’ outlook that John Guillory upbraids Herrnstein Smith in his celebrated *Cultural Capital*. (284) His central disagreement is that it is only by postulating a domain of philosophical thought outside of everyday experience that her central premise of relativism can be grasped, and community defined as a ‘coincidence of contingencies’. (283) Herrnstein Smith effectively reinstates a concept of community as the basis of the discourse of value by ‘displacing consensus to a prior “coincidence of contingencies” – prior, that is, to conscious or decisional behaviour.’ (285) Alternatively, her view is locked into an ‘implicit subjectivism’ or ‘individualism’ (286) which ignores social reality. For Guillory, the point of departure for analysing value should instead be community itself – it is community that makes the experience of brute contingency ‘consequential.’ (288)

Guillory

Once it is acknowledged that ‘alienation in thought’ is impossible for a person already embedded in community, it must also be acknowledged that it is not only values and evaluations that are historically situated, but also ‘the *discourse* of value.’ (283) This leads Guillory to an analysis of the account of aesthetic value Herrnstein Smith provides; an account, as seen, based in the concept of ‘personal economy’. To begin with, Guillory rejects Herrnstein’s Smith identification of the aesthetic with a ‘function’ of the individual coextensive with a range of other (unclassifiable in a universal sense) functions that make up the personal economy of this or that individual. This is epitomised by her attempts to dissolve economic theory into aesthetic axiology – by identifying the aesthetic with what is functionally ‘useful’ Herrnstein Smith hopes to collapse the idealism of axiology into the utilitarianism of economics. For Guillory, by contrast, the ‘aesthetic function’ names ‘the predetermination of social function by a classificatory discourse’. (295) The aesthetic function is socially determined as the condition of an object’s production or reception rather than being a feature of personal utilitarian good along the lines of an imagined subjectively-internal market system.

To explain this difference, Guillory points out that Herrstein Smith makes no distinction between ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’, in fact collapsing the latter into the former, while still trying to rely on its utilitarian form. (299) By its very nature exchange value proscribes the idea of the ‘personal economy’, defined as it is by relations between players in the market. (301) This leads Guillory to the extraordinary argument that, ‘both aesthetics and economics were founded in contradistinction to the concept of use value.’ (302) More extraordinary still, these two processes were historically intertwined – systems of production and consumption inherent to the nascent field of political economy relied on and co-opted, ‘through the dialectical development of eighteenth-century moral philosophy’, aesthetic as a form of cultural capital.⁶¹ (315) Ironically, by collapsing use value into exchange value (in the act of collapsing axiology into aesthetics) Herrstein Smith therefore ‘forget[s]’ the economic in a manner that also occludes the status of aesthetic judgement as a form of cultural capital. (302) In reality, a concept of specifically aesthetic value could be formulated ‘only in the wake of political economy’s discourse of exchange value’. (316) Because, by the time of Herrstein Smith’s writing, ‘the “commensurability” or “commodification” of all objects [had become] the inescapable horizon of social life’ every discourse of judgement was compelled to ‘represent its object as the expression of a “value.”’ (322) In her championing of the plurality of values what is being celebrated is precisely this ‘commensurability of everything.’ (323) By introducing modern economics, Herrstein Smith in this way regrettably, for Guillory, hides its real socially pernicious effects.

In the final section of *Cultural Capital*, Guillory uses the work of Pierre Bourdieu to ‘translate the (false) philosophical problem of “aesthetic value” into the sociological problem of “cultural capital”.’

⁶¹ Guillory argues, through the work of Howard Caygill, that these bourgeois political economists found it necessary to both ‘discard aesthetics, in order to make sense of the system of production and exchange’ and recuperate it, ‘supposedly uncontaminated by economic considerations, in order to distinguish [the bourgeois classes] culturally from the class which produced what it consumed.’ This explains the double-discourse of value that Herrstein-Smith tries to close by collapsing the aesthetic into use-value. (316)

(327) Having previously demonstrated that the ‘elementary predicates’ of aesthetic discourse – disinterested consumption and autonomous production – are intertwined with the emergence of modern economics, he concludes that the ‘act of [aesthetic] judgement is the assignment, or even recognition, of cultural capital.’ (332) At the same time, Guillory is at pains to make clear that while ‘Bourdieu is certainly right that it is impossible to experience any cultural product apart from its status as cultural capital (high or low); and even more, that it is impossible to experience cultural capital as disarticulated from the system of class formation or commodity production’ this does not imply an ‘evaluative relativism.’ Instead, Guillory insists on the ‘specificity’ of aesthetic experience, even as he shows that aesthetic judgement is coextensive with cultural capital. (336) Moreover, in order to bring the aesthetic into the service of the economic, aesthetic judgement (as cultural capital) ‘must’, for Guillory, ‘deny, as a condition of its exercise, the ubiquity of aesthetic experience’. By making the ‘aesthetic disposition’ an expression of capital, the ‘reality’ of the aesthetic is not created, it is occluded.

Drawing on Marx, Guillory suggests as a solution the promotion of the dissolution of artistic autonomy – the radical dismantling of the division of labour that creates ‘the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals.’ (337) In Bourdieu’s terminology, this would take the form of the ‘universalisation’ of autonomous production currently restricted to the ‘artist’ by opening up ‘conditions of access.’ In a ‘culture of such universal access’ canonical works would not be experienced as proof of class distinction, but instead as instances of true aesthetic judgement. The point, Guillory explains, ‘is not to make judgement disappear but to reform the conditions of its practice,’ to make aesthetic judgement a part of a truly ‘aesthetic game’ – socialising the means of production and consumption would be ‘the condition of an aestheticism unbound, not its overcoming.’ (340)

I have recapitulated this argument to show the extent to which Guillory remains committed to aesthetic judgement, even as he strives to expose the complicity of its present practice. Despite

promises to ‘explod[e]... fictions of intrinsic, universal, or transcendent norms of judgement’ his approach is instead to delegitimise the (current) *discourse* of the aesthetic, exactly to create the conditions for an aesthetics unbound. (26) But this leaves open the question of what it means to assert the specificity of the aesthetic at all. Liberating the aesthetic from its social bounds is not enough to justify its continued practice, nor to explain why acts of judgement are more than brute subjective statement. For Guillory, the answer is in a recourse to ‘experience’ – the reality of our everyday capacity to (inter alia) witness, feel, and make. Taking this path however just reinstates the metaphysical realism that Herrnstein Smith and other committed relativists deny. To explain the discourse of value as it has been historically determined is not to dispute its *contingency* – instead it is to tell the story of how, and why, this discourse has played out as it has.

In short, in statements like, ‘It is time now to replace the philosophical notion of the contingency of value with a historical account of the determination of value’ Guillory confuses philosophical contingency with historical contingency. (22) To say that a state of affairs could not have been otherwise as a matter of historical fact is very different to showing that there is some underlying metaphysical (or other) basis upon which any aesthetic judgement can be, objectively, true. To universalise the means of artistic production is not to reassert objective aesthetic judgement so much as it is to create the conditions for universal participation in whatever social formations result of this universalisation. Nothing in Guillory’s approach clarifies why aesthetic judgement should be defended, or the nature and scope of this ‘specific’ and ‘incommensurable’ category. Throughout *Cultural Capital*, Guillory’s move from sociological analysis to metaphysical proposition is left largely unjustified.

Guillory’s overarching interest is in understanding, sociologically and historically, how the discourse of value and its associated practice has functioned, and does function. Implicit in his argument is the assumption that at some point after the unjust contortions of these conditions are reformed, the aesthetic will emerge. For Guillory, this connection is however more than just revelatory; it is also

constitutive. Aesthetic value still sits within human practice, and is a consequence of it. To think otherwise is to reassert the idealism that his methodological materialism principally resists. His methodological approach is to start with the conditions of aesthetic judgement's practice, and broaden out theoretically from that socially and institutionally determined point. It is this that brings Guillory into the theoretical remit of pragmatism. While his position takes a notably different relational stance towards culture and other empirical epiphenomena, he still finds his normative conditionals in the workings of the world. Like Rorty and Herrnstein Smith, Guillory is not willing to give up on objective judgement entirely, but his justifications for it connected to institutions and other cultural formations.

This is also evident in his direct engagement with Stanford. Guillory's primary response to the CIV debate, and to the senate's final position, is to critique arguments in favour of the core course not for their normative character (as was the case for the anti-canon 'left') but because of how the texts on the prescribed list came to be evaluated through the prism of their connection to both commonality and Western culture. In his words, [CIV] 'is not and cannot be a course on western culture'. (33) It is not the course's acts of judgement and evaluation that are the problem, but instead the 'misreading' that comes of construing the chosen texts as exemplars of a 'shared way of life'. (33-4) In fact, the 'obscuring' formation of 'western culture' is exactly what occludes the aesthetic (and other) properties of the texts. (33) Evaluation should conversely be grounded in the 'universalising' impulse to work back towards the texts; reading them for what they say about the world, rather than their representivity.⁶²

⁶² The specious unity brought about by strategically deploying the idea of Western culture is also what, for Guillory, comes to characterise 'the canon' within the discourse of the dispute, and what allows a slippage to occur between the list of texts to be taught and the broader, imaginary, idea of a canonicity. The process of deracinating and fetishizing the form of the list can also be seen as a central component of the nostalgic desire for commonality. Guillory's aim throughout his multiple engagements with the Stanford debates is both to re-establish connections between the list form and its actual material usage, and to liberate the contents of the list from misreading. (35)

This process is again constitutive rather than merely descriptive. For Guillory, an engagement with the processes by which the aesthetic is obscured is also the ‘only’ pathway to generating a properly rooted theory of value. Others in the literary studies tradition have taken up similar positions, and have given varying answers on what a ‘grounded’ theory of value would entail outside of a recourse to commonality or community. Of particular interest in this regard is Richard Poirier, who directly links his writing on the relationship between pragmatism, literature and pedagogy to the fallout from the Stanford dispute. In one interview he for instance describes how his repeated ‘musings [during the early 1990s] on... my undergraduate teaching at Harvard and its place in the American tradition’ were ‘provoked by the conversations [happening at] Stanford, both [in the] corridor and professional... The Stanford brouhaha and the “Killer Bs” [Bloom, Bennett, Bellow, etc] brought me back to Emerson and pragmatism. My book [*Poetry and Pragmatism*] consolidated what brought us to CIV... and away from... the usual culture antagonism.’ Poirier’s writing of the early 1990s is therefore linked to both the emergence of CIV, and the broader debates emanating from the dispute.

Poirier

The ‘undergraduate teaching’ Poirier mentions in the interview refers particularly to a course offered at Harvard from the mid-1950s, typically referred to as ‘Hum 6’. Hum 6 was, as Poirier describes, pragmatist in both ‘disposition’ and institutional culture. This ‘temperamental commitment’ extended from pedagogic methodologies to set texts and even to where the course was taught. As Poirier explains of himself and the other teachers of the course, ‘By describing our allegiance as “temperamental,” I mean that we were willing, indeed anxious to deny ourselves the embarrassing Big Talk promised by the titles of the other humanities courses, like “Ideas of Good and Evil” or “The Individual and Society.”’ (182) The strength of Hum 6 was in its emphasis on ‘locating a shared practice’ of teaching, learning and discussing. Pragmatism was a natural accompaniment to pedagogy because it resisted pronouncement and lent itself to praxis. In time, Poirier hoped that students would come to read and write in the manner they

were taught. Teaching in literature departments should emphasise the lessons of engaging with a text, rather than the lessons of the text itself. In Poirier's words, pragmatist 'reading/writing cannot occur in space; it occurs in time, word by word, sentence by sentence, responsive to opportunities as they open up.' (176) The point of teaching texts was to develop a mode of engagement that is similarly characterised by use.

These comments come in Poirier's celebrated *Poetry and Pragmatism*, expanded from a series of lectures given at the University of Kent in 1991; the same lecture series that formed the basis for Kermodé's *The Classic*. Unlike Herrnstein Smith and Guillory, Kermodé and Poirier preserve an allusive diction and tone, suggesting both generational commonality and a certain intellectual relatedness. At the moments Poirier discusses canonicity directly, he sounds especially early Kermodian, as for instance when declaring that 'A canonical text... is generally one that does not want to clarify itself; a journalistic text is generally one that does.' (140) On the whole, however, Poirier's thesis in *Poetry and Pragmatism* is much closer to the later Kermodé's emphasis on contingency and historicity than it is to the constitutive ambiguity of *The Classic*, and it is to *History and Value* and *An Appetite for Poetry* that he directly refers. When read side-by-side, commonalities between the later Kermodé and Poirier's 'Emersonian Pragmatism' are myriad; suggesting a mirroring of the kinds of value theories emergent out of Cambridge in the 1970s, and those coming out of elements of the American academy during the same period.

Poirier's book also shows the extent to which pragmatism has always been constitutively bound up with the idea of the literary. Conceptually, what makes literature especially crucial to understanding pragmatism is the way that it relates to language. As Poirier explains, 'If pragmatism works, then it works the way poetry does – by effecting a change of language, a change carried out entirely *within* language.' (132) For Poirier, pragmatism and the literary are therefore in some sense functionally related. Both see language as revelatory of 'insight', if not of truth. Pragmatism and poetry are in this way linked not only by their emergence through texts

that have been designated as literature, but also through a shared method of engagement; one that concentrates on ‘changing’ language rather than using it to access universal norms.

As his argument evolves, Poirier pushes against even the denotational value of linguistic constructs, arguing that ‘poetry eludes clarification; it exists in *sounds* that are right only for the occasion and are not to be abstracted into the service of other occasions.’ (56) The experience of literature is not a participation in a platonic good, it is a fleeting experience that draws on the reader or writer’s lived circumstances. In typically pragmatist fashion, Poirier strips literature of its transcendental force, localising its meaning, reducing words to their experiential components. Poirier finds his emphasis on sound in the poets he considers most quintessentially pragmatist. In the case of Frost, the regular use of ‘vague conjecturals’ – like the ‘Something’ that initiates ‘Mending Wall’, and the ‘perhaps’ in ‘Mowing’ – are at their most effective when their meaning is de-emphasised, and their sound played up. The ‘mysteries lurking in the vocabulary begin to get to you only when you let yourself listen closely, and yet you trust so much in the sound you barely listen at all.’ In similar fashion, Stein and Stevens play with colloquial American diction and casual forms of speech to produce ‘value in and by themselves.’ (151) Each has ‘made the value of sound explicitly the subject of their work, and explicitly a resource for eccentricity’.

(154)

Like the Stanford Senate, Poirier therefore sees form and language-shape rather than semantic content as the bedrock of evaluative claims. So as to develop this constitutively literary idea of pragmatism, Poirier reaches back especially to Emerson, who ‘lets his language reveal the pathos of discovering in his own sentences how words resist his efforts to represent what he believes to be the flow or stream of his experience... His writing dramatizes his agitations when confronted with the evidence that the words he is putting down on paper... are themselves products of “previous human thinking,” including his own.’ This emphasis on ‘dramatizing’ thought, as appose to expressing representational truth, is a recurrent component of Emersonian thought.

His writing ‘enacts’ reflections, rather than describing ‘a previous human experience that has peptonised and cooked.’ (27) For Poirier, the best way to approach Emerson is therefore by engaging less with the purported meaning of his words, and more with the quality of his language: ‘If you want to get to know him, you must stay as close as possible to his language, moment by moment, for at every moment there is a movement with no place to rest.’ (31)

Emerson’s pragmatism is in this way registered *in* language, rather than being expressed by it. Reflecting in 1900 on Emerson’s emphasis on the experience of language, George Santayana describes him as ‘at bottom having no doctrine at all’, only flashes of ‘inspiration’ embedded in writing (218). Seeing language as revelatory of moments of insight rather than communicative of knowledge recalls Ricks’s rejection of ‘theory’ in favour of ‘principles’ (discussed in the first chapter). Poirier construes Emerson as using language in a manner that is humanist and truth-directed without being truth-telling; a form of writing which Poirier, like Ricks, describes as ‘literary’. Literature is here conceptualised as directed inward towards its constitutive parts, rather than outward to what it ‘means’. The experience of language is a ‘momentary stay against confusion’ at both the time of writing and reading. (27) As Poirier explains, ‘Emerson never asks us to reclaim some heritage of civic or rational virtues as these have been embedded, so it is assumed, in works of the past; he wants us to instead discover traces of productive energy that pass through a text or a composition or an author, pointing always beyond any one of them.’ (38-9) Much of Emerson’s own work is indeterminate in just this way; its ‘superflousness’ an ‘effort to refloat the world, to make it less stationary and more transitional, to make descriptions of it correspondingly looser.’ (40)

While sometimes using the term ‘linguistic scepticism’ to designate what poetry and pragmatism hold in common, it is clear throughout *Poetry and Pragmatism* that Poirier views the uncertainties attendant on an internalist treatment of language as a source of ‘renewal’ – ‘a small gesture of freedom’ – even if not of salvation or ‘subversion.’ (11, 39, 192) This is nowhere clearer than in

the discussion of Emerson's 'Experience', which forms the bedrock of his emergent pragmatism. Poirier reads the essay as constant push against 'monumentalising'; a privileging of 'superfluity of spirit for new creation' in the face of 'the historical moment', that allows for a degree of transcendence. (63, 75) By committing fully to the mutability of our linguistic practices, 'it is possible to reveal, in the words and phrases that we use, linguistic resources that point beyond scepticism'. The products and production of literature are always merely – humanly – artefactual, but the doing of literature can generate both 'genius' and ethical insight. In Misak's words, this kind of pragmatism, 'weaves between the stony ground where an elementary language and logic are supposed to give us clarity and certainty, and the swamp where it is supposed that because that kind of language and logic cannot capture every legitimate human belief, there is nothing at all to say.' (286)

This position, which finds resources for defending a version of generalisable or even objectivist evaluation outside of recourse to 'community' or 'commonality' has distinct similarities with the 'prophetic pragmatism' of Cornel West. In the lead up to the publication of his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* in 1989, West had spent a period of time in San Francisco, and had facilitated various seminars for students involved in the Rainbow Coalition at Stanford and the SBSU. He also wrote two pieces for *The Stanford Daily* in 1987 and 1988, reflecting on the committee and Senate debates, as well as the dispute over the Western Culture debate more generally. On the prompting of Rorty, who was one of the first readers of the book, West further contributed a submission to the Core Course Committee, and his contribution is mentioned as influential in the report sent by that Committee to the CUS.

Across the range of his contributions, and in typically pragmatist fashion, West's main aim is to shift the tenor of the Stanford debate away from a focus on, as he puts it in one of his *Stanford Daily* articles, 'canons and anti-canons, truths and non-truths' and towards the 'distinctively American tradition of finding solutions through our descriptions of ourselves, to ourselves.'

(West *CNC* 14) This idea is echoed in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, where he describes the version of ‘prophetic pragmatism’ that he ascribes to as, ‘less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical tradition... and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself.’ (5) This for West means constantly ‘deciphering the is of culture’ in order to provide answers on what ‘ought to be’. (5)

At first blush, West’s pragmatism seems to correspond relatively neatly with the Stanford Senate’s position that the evaluation of texts can be justified both through and on grounds of commonality. Extending beyond traditional materialism, West finds the ‘ought’ supporting action in the ‘process’ of close ‘attendance’ to what is culturally ‘shared’. As he further explains, ‘the claim is that once one gives up on the search for foundations and the quest for certainty, human inquiry into truth and knowledge shifts to the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge.’ (213) In his submission to the Core Course Committee, he even uses the phrase ‘American commonality’ to describe ‘the source material’ from which arguments for the preservation of the core course should be made. Instead of looking to an external idea of ‘western’ norms, the process of textual selection should come out of shared ‘study.’

In the same submission, West’s version of commonality however shifts in a Poirier-like direction, arguing that by reading, interpreting and promoting these communal circumstances something ‘transcendent’, ‘in Emerson’s sense’, emerges. West, a committed (nominally Baptist) Christian, links political and religious goods to pragmatism’s thoroughgoing empiricism. It is in this sense that his ‘evasion of philosophy’ is ‘prophetic’. ‘The tradition of pragmatism’, for West, ‘is in need of an explicit political mode of cultural criticism.’ (West *AEP* 212) Responding directly to Bloom, West for instance argues that ‘[t]his situation is not a “closing of the American mind,”’ as nostalgically and tendentiously understood by Allan Bloom’s popular work, ‘Rather, it

is a complex configuration of the effects on American intellectual life of the decentering of Europe, the centering of the United States, and the decolonizing of Asia and Africa.’ (214) As for Poirier, this normative impulse comes from the ‘rhythm’ and ‘technique’ with which ‘anyone’ engages with culture and things. Drawing on Du Bois, West grounds the ‘universal power’ of prophetic pragmatism in the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’. (214) Rather than pinning the more generalisable elements of pragmatism exclusively on commonality and community, West therefore reaches also for the experiential ‘truths’ that come from the interaction between agents and their milieu.

This kind of relational account has strong pragmatist pedigree. W V O Quine, who throughout his career remained emphatically unconvinced that ‘productive energy’ or any similar normative value can be extracted from ‘community’, no matter the form of its presentation, nevertheless shares Emerson’s preoccupation with words as the products of ‘previous human thinking’. Like Poirier, Quine is committed to looking for explanations from within language and other social formations, rather than seeking to abandon ‘Neurath’s boat’ in search of epistemic stability.⁶³ The ‘necessary and salutary confusions’ that Poirier finds in Emerson, Quine sees in the ‘inherited world’, though he draws no evaluative conclusions from this position.

Quine thus primarily diverges from Poirier in particular at the juncture of value. Both are committed naturalists who deny the logical positivist distinction between the synthetic and the analytic (still defended at the time of Quine’s initial writing in the early 1950s by Rudolph Carnap

⁶³ Using sharp analytic diction that contrasts abruptly with West and Poirier’s gradualism, Quine asserts, in ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1951), that: ‘With Dewey I hold that knowledge, mind, and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science. There is no place for prior philosophy’. This holistic naturalism is a marker of pragmatist thought in general, incorporating both those who think evaluative claims can emerge from a naturalist starting point (like West and Poirier), and those (like Quine) who do not. For Quine, two of the implications of pragmatism’s naturalism are that analytic propositions should be explained by reference to empirical or behaviourist criteria rather than retaining the discrete explanatory power attributed to them by writers in the Humean tradition, and that we should abandon the belief that knowledge can be secured by splitting propositions into their components until the foundations of our belief are discovered. Quine instead advocates for operating ‘within the inherited world theory as a going concern’. The naturalist ‘tries to improve, clarify, and understand the system from within, He is the busy sailor adrift on Neurath’s boat.’ (203; 28)

and others at Princeton), but while Quine maintains a distinction between fact and value, Poirier sees language, and particularly literary language, as bridging the divide. Frost, Stevens, Stein and Emerson, ‘find in casual forms of speech a way to play against the power of concepts of epistemic formations, and yet each of them insists that the sounds thus produced have a value in and by themselves.’ (153) Sounds are sense data, but they are also value-directed. They ‘invite us to live with others in a space of expectation rather than deferral, the space of [Frost’s] “something, perhaps”’. (150) While literary language never escapes the superfluity that comes of its Emersonian artifactuality and its location in contingent experience, it can ‘simultaneously... create trust and reassurance instead of human separation.’ (150)

Poirier’s pragmatism, like that of West, is in this way resolutely evaluative. This contrasts with the writing of strong naturalist value-sceptics in the Quinean tradition writing at the time such as J L Mackie and Bernard Williams, who continued to reject – with the logical positivists – that values can be extracted from facts. In their view, West’s talk of ‘companionable mischief’ is just puffed-up subjective or communal ‘belief’, different in kind from truth, and thus no basis for objective evaluation. While Poirier may be right to treat poetic language as ‘little more than sound’, to conclude from this that literature thus ‘frustrates any excluding, incipiently deconstructive forces that lurk in the more obdurate... uses of words’ is an unsupported leap that conflates fact and value. (166) There is nothing in the ‘fact’ of literary language’s sonic qualities that justifies the humanistic ‘value’ judgements that litter *Poetry and Pragmatism*, even if these judgements are no more than ‘momentary stays against confusion’. (168) The Emersonian contention that the use of language is in some way momentarily value-generative is just as ‘mythological’ as any Kantian transcendentalism. Both ideas are premised on an imaginary transformation of the factual into the valuable.

Normative pragmatism

I want to end this chapter, however, with another line of thought in the Quinean tradition that has defended the Emersonian ‘conflation’ of ‘fact’ and ‘value’ as both metaphysically plausible and more faithfully pragmatist. Rather than attempting to justify how evaluation can emerge from factual pronouncements, this Poirier-style pragmatism resists the whole distinction between fact and value. A prominent defender of this approach is Hilary Putnam, who, after abandoning his early analyticity and adopting a pragmatist stance in the early-1980s, developed a far-reaching argument against the fact/value dichotomy, drawing on the work of Dewey and other earlier pragmatists.⁶⁴ For Putnam, ‘anti-scepticism’, including on normative questions is ‘one of the chief characteristics of American pragmatism’. Making evaluative judgements is not just compatible with pragmatism’s naturalism and fallibilism, it is an essential component of what it is to be a pragmatist, and the fusing of fact and value has long-standing pragmatist pedigree. For Putnam, it is not possible to be a pragmatist without accepting both that there are no truths beyond empiricist investigation, and that objective evaluation is possible.

At the heart of his pragmatist defence of evaluation is a call to recognise that the fact/value dichotomy is ‘not a *distinction* but a *thesis*,’ and that the thesis is wrong. (19) To make this point, Putnam picks up on Quine’s ‘demolition’ of the synthetic/analytic dichotomy. As Quine explains in ‘Carnap and Logical Truth’ (published two years after ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’), ‘the fabric of sentences’ that makes up ‘the lore of our fathers’ is ‘a pale grey lore, black with fact and white with convention... [and] I have found no substantial reasons for concluding that there are any quite black threads in it, or any white ones.’ (138) Putnam points out that Quine is not arguing for reducing the analytic to the synthetic, but instead for the proposition that the dichotomy between fact and conceptual scheme is wholly false. For Putnam, it is this rejection of

⁶⁴ Other more recent defenders of pragmatism as implying evaluative objectivism include Huw Price and Cheryl Misak. See esp. Cheryl Misak *The American Pragmatists* (2016) and Huw Price *Naturalism without Mirrors* (2011).

a conceptual separation of the analytic and the synthetic, and an amalgamation of the two in the human practice of language, that marks Quine out as a pragmatist.

Putnam's argument is that the composite of fact and value is a similarly 'pale grey lore.' In a series of interventions through the late 1980s and 1990s he argues against the hermeneutic divide between fact and value on essentially Quinean grounds. At the heart of his reasoning is the insight that the epistemic conventions central to empiricist work (ideas like coherence, plausibility, reasonableness, etc) are themselves values, and that the establishment of fact therefore requires evaluative work. The tools we use to do empirical work require that we assume certain evaluative parameters; there are no factual statements that are not 'always already' evaluative. Putnam's committed naturalism means that he does not take this as an argument for relativizing empirical claims. Instead he argues that it is time 'we stop equating *objectivity* with *description*'. To make a factual claim is also to make an evaluative claim, and we should recognise this when setting truth-parameters. Just as the concept/object, analytic/synthetic dichotomy collapses once we acknowledge that it is impossible to reach outside of our practice to give an account of the world, so the fact/value dichotomy disperses once we acknowledge that our factual pronouncements are necessarily evaluative.⁶⁵

Similar concordance shows up elsewhere, for instance in Putnam's various debates with Christine Korsgaard and Jurgen Habermas, and Poirier's discussion of Emerson's essay 'Circles'. Putnam is resistant to both Korsgaard and Habermas' deployment of higher-order 'maxims' (for

⁶⁵ In order to extend his claim outside of scientific presumptions, Putnam also considers 'thick' ethical concepts (such as 'cruel') which function as both description and evaluation. Because thick ethical terms cannot be 'factorised' into their evaluative and descriptive senses, they collapse the fact/value distinction, requiring that we treat our descriptors of behaviour as implicitly evaluative (31). Like Dewey, Putnam sees 'objective value' as arising 'not from a specific sense organ but from criticism of our valuations' (103). We can, for instance, establish whether an evaluation is warranted by relying on values and descriptions that 'are not in question in the inquiry at hand', drawing on the authority of other fields where possible. By keeping in mind that 'what we hold for inquiry in general also holds for value inquiry', namely that 'there are some things that we have learnt about the conduct of inquiry *from* inquiry,' we can see the pragmatism of evaluation itself. Our normative positions are established not by looking for properties of the factual world, or for universalising maxims, but by constantly scrutinising our idea of value, and recognising that this process of scrutiny is therefore implicit to the meaning of value. The pragmatist logic is as applicable to how we think about value, as it is to what value *is*.

Korsgaard) or 'norms' (for Habermas) that can be used to found value through autonomous reason. His view is that any such maxim or norm will presuppose the objectivity of at least some values. (4) To think otherwise is to preserve an artificial divide between what Iris Murdoch calls 'mental faculties'; a picture of the mind in which perception supplies 'neutral' facts and value is generated from the will. To avoid this troubling form of anti-empirical idealism, Putnam argues that values should instead be seen as intertwined with fact, and thus emergent only by pragmatically engaging with lived experience (118). In related fashion, Poirier reads 'Circles' as pulling away from a view of the 'soul' as independent of 'discursive formations'. The soul for Emerson is 'a function' rather than an entity – something which '*becomes*'; which is 'believed into an almost elusive existence.' (23-4) While writing is always circumscribed by 'circles' which 'actively create truths and systems of knowledge and then subtly enforce their distribution', 'individuals' have 'the freedom and power to break out of a circle'. This breaking out is, however, a result of working through the circle's contingency rather than by asserting the existence of an independent soul.

Poirier finds a corresponding attentiveness to working through contingency in James. The 'question at the very centre of William James's pragmatism' is 'how do we ever find ourselves except *in* metaphor, in the *making* of metaphor', even as the process of making is always metaphysically 'unavailing'. (49) Poirier links James' 'making' to Emerson's use of 'production' in 'Experience'. The 'making' or 'production' of the market is indistinguishable from poetic production or making; both Emerson and James have in mind "'production" whether by poets *or* millers' (51). The mode of exchange that marks both is capitalism, which Poirier describes as 'pre-eminently the economy of [Emersonian] superfluity'. The same logic is evident in James, for instance in *Pragmatism*, where he argues that, 'If you follow the pragmatist method... you must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it as work within the stream of your consciousness'. (92) This notion of labour as constitutive of meaning extends to James' picturing

of the past, which he describes as the place from where ‘new truth’ is ‘funded’. (99) For Poirier, the pragmatist methodology of employing the contingent ‘products’ of history in order to answer the questions (including metaphysical) of the present is no different from the market logic by which capital is used to employ wage labour for the purposes of generating exchangeable commodities.

One of the presumptive starting points of many of the value-theorists writing at the time of the Stanford Moment is that ‘value’ is a similarly bivalent term. The question of to what extent the economic sense of ‘value’ is constitutive or determinative of the literary is a key point of disagreement, as my earlier discussion of Herrnstein Smith illustrates. Poirier is convinced that the two are inextricable for Emerson. As I have suggested is true of Poirier’s pragmatism in general, this connecting of the poet and the miller is not an argument against poetic evaluation, including of the systems used to define evaluation itself. Emerson for instance associates ‘market speculation’ and ‘speculative genius’, describing both as ‘a madness of a few for the gain of the world. The projects are sacrificed, but the public is the gainer.’ (52) At the same time, Poirier reads Emerson as accepting the ‘artificiality’ of this arrangement – there is nothing which requires that Emerson’s idea of the superfluous or the speculative, embedded in their historic moment, continue to define the good, just as there is nothing necessary about the persistence of capitalist notions of economic value. His point is rather that the economic sense of evaluation and the poetic are inseparable: ‘the requirements of superfluity... makes the poet’s need as complicit as the miller’s with capitalist economy’. (51) This circularity, whereby poetic superfluity drives the complicity of the poetic with the economic, which in turn drives the superfluity of poetry, results in an entanglement of the economic and the literary senses of making and production.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Hilary Putnam develops the ‘entanglement’ of poetic (and other normative) denotations of ‘value’ with ‘factually’ economic denotations in his writing on Amartya Sen. Entangled terms, for Putnam, are words or phrases that function as both descriptive and evaluative. He notes that ‘just about every one’ of the terms developed by Sen in

As is evident from both their attack on the fact/value distinction, and their discussion of the economic facets of value, Putnam and Poirier's strand of pragmatism is consciously evaluative. I have moreover suggested that both are committed to an objectivist understanding of truth. For Poirier, objectivity manifests in the 'sound' of language, while for Putnam it is a facet of 'inquiry'. A truth-directed value-endorsing pragmatism has since been systemised by a group of twenty-first century writers led by Cheryl Misak and Huw Price. As Misak summarises, pragmatists in this vein 'think of pragmatism as rejecting an ahistorical, metaphysical or transcendental theory of truth, but are nevertheless committed to doing justice to the objective dimensions of human inquiry – to the fact that those engaged in deliberation and instigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories... the fact that our inquiries are historically situated does not entail that they lack objectivity'. (p. 3)

'Truth' plays the pragmatically important role of providing 'friction' between competing claims, rather than picking out value-independent 'facts'. The truth of evaluative claims is a norm of inquiry rather than a goal. As for Poirer and Putnam, and to some extent West, value and evaluation is a function of the practice of pedagogy and human inquiry.

At least two lines of thought in the pragmatist tradition can therefore be seen as connected to the Stanford dispute. Despite their strong empiricism, both think that evaluation is possible, with

his project opposing first-wave classical economics is an 'entangled term.' As suggested earlier, Putnam sees this doubling as an argument against the fact/value dichotomy. In the realm of economic theory, he diagnoses the dichotomy as a central premise of first wave classical economics (as set out in the work of William Stanley Jevons, Alfred Marshall and Cecil Pigou), who selectively read Smith, Ricardo and others to 'engineer' (in Sen's vocabulary) a distinction between ethical and purely economic terms, ostensibly to protect economics' empirical veracity. Sen's work however shows that the assumptions of the standard economic picture are riddled with ethical judgements, even as the picture of value that they promote claims 'factual' validity. Putnam reads Sen as arguing that entangled terms should instead form the bedrock of economic modelling. The determination of 'factual' economic value is 'always already' intertwined with normative evaluation, and the two realms should therefore be thought of as mutually constitutive rather than categorically separable. Herrnstein Smith's closing of the gap between economic theory and aesthetic axiology has obvious parallels with the 'entangled terms' that Putnam finds in Sen. In typical pragmatist fashion, both see 'factual' disciplines and modes of inquiry as indistinguishable from those traditionally seen as evaluative – in Putnam's case the ethical, and in Herrnstein Smith's the aesthetic. Where Putnam however reads the enmeshing of the ethical and the economic as no threat to objectivity, Herrnstein Smith doubles-down on contingency. This is reflected in their respective approaches, with Putnam emphasising the evaluative components of factual (in Sen's case, economic) claims, and Herrnstein Smith conversely describing aesthetic value in economic language. Both nevertheless see factual and evaluative discourses as fundamentally inseparable.

one grounding this position in community or commonality, and the other in properties of a world where fact and value are permitted to intersect. Both positions can be seen as alternatives to Kermode's assertion that history comes of value, with all three fundamentally rejecting objectivist versions of value that extend beyond 'history'. Pragmatism moreover gives fertile theoretical ground for understanding Kermode's approach. In the next chapter, I look at a dispute at the London Consortium that returns more openly to objectivist accounts of value, preferring to see value as aporetically hanging between *a posteriori* historicism and *a priori* idealism.

Chapter Three: The London Consortium

Introduction

The London Consortium (Consortium) was founded in 1993, and registered its first students – initially for a taught Masters programme and then for doctoral study – in October 1995. Its first prospectus describes an ‘educative institute’ of a ‘new kind’, offering ‘virtual’ learning and access to teachers and resources from some of London’s ‘premier arts and sciences institutions’.⁶⁷

(‘Consortium Prospectus’ 3) The institute’s methodology and the content of its courses are described as ‘multidisciplinary’, aimed at fostering ‘broad analysis of culture and the world’ aided by ‘diverse’ institutional ‘foundations’. (Consortium Prospectus 1994, 2, 3, 4) Intending to attract postgraduate students from ‘heterogenous disciplinary backgrounds,’ the Consortium’s first intake included architects, physicists and literary scholars. (‘Consortium Prospectus’ 3; MacCabe CC 4) Early versions of the Masters programme included courses titled ‘Whiteness’, ‘Kant and Aesthetics,’ ‘Judgement,’ and ‘Shit and Civilisation’. (‘Consortium Prospectus’ 1994; 1995; 1996)

As its name suggests, the Consortium brought together the resources and institutional cultures of existing institutions.⁶⁸ At the point of its first accepting students, these institutions were the British Film Institute (BFI), the Architecture Institute (AI), the Tate Gallery (Tate), and Birkbeck

⁶⁷ It is interesting to compare the use of ‘virtual learning’ in the Consortium’s prospectus to its current meaning, linked to ‘online’ interactions. In early Consortium documents, virtual refers particularly to the Consortium’s having no designated *institutional* base, instead ‘using’ or ‘employing’ other organisation’s physical and digital resources. By contrast, virtual education in its current sense is often intra-institutional, signifying instead the absence of face-to-face interaction. The etymological background of virtual in the idea of lacking virility or ontological substance refracts differently in the two cases – for the Consortium, the ‘lack’ comes of its institutional insecurity, which in turn becomes both a key weakness and one of its animating forces, allowing for the possibility of, in Philip Dodd’s words, ‘novelty, creativity and freedom’. (Dodd interview)

⁶⁸ The Consortium was not however established with the express purpose of bringing together different London institutions. Mark Cousins, one of the Consortium’s three founding members with Paul Hirst and Colin MacCabe, instead describes the initial impetus as coming from a shared interest in a certain kind of ‘aesthetic education’ opposed to the prevailing approach to ‘learning about... culture’. (Cousins LC 9) That Cousins, Hirst and MacCabe happened to be working ‘across the way’ from each other at separate ‘large London institutions’ was the ‘accidental fact’ that allowed these concerns to take the institutional form that it did. (Cousins PH 1) For Cousins, pursuing a joint educative aim ‘through the vehicle of a consortium’ was therefore a ‘felicitous consequence’ of their setting, rather than being the ‘driver’ for its formation. (Cousins LC 7) Over time, the Consortium’s place as at the apex of different institutions became central to its identity. Important Consortium members – particularly Richard Humphreys, at the time working for the Tate – were invited expressly ‘to build on and broaden’ the Consortium’s institutional base. (Humphreys interview)

College (Birkbeck).⁶⁹ While its degree-conferring powers came from Birkbeck, much of the Consortium's administration was done through the BFI. This reflects the centrality of the BFI in the Consortium's everyday work. Much of its intellectual heritage, including approaches to evaluation, came through debates and contestations within that organisation. The 'dispute' I explore in this chapter, resulting in the BFI's withdrawal from the Consortium in the late 1990s, was for this reason of particular 'existential' consequence ('Humphreys interview'). In brief, the clash was prompted by changes in governance structure and personnel following the election of a new Labour government, led by Tony Blair. The person at the heart of the BFI's connection to the Consortium was, again, Colin MacCabe, and this chapter continues the first chapter's use of MacCabe's life and career as one heuristic through which to consider some important value discussions in the latter half of the twentieth century.

My main interest in the Consortium comes, however, from the centrality of questions of value in its establishment and teaching practices. As the discussion below shows, the nature and cogency of value were a central interest of many members of the Consortium's faculty, and there was a concerted effort to make both the 'discussion' and 'performance' of evaluation a central tenet of teaching and assessment requirements for students. (Consortium notes) It also took an explicit, institutionally-endorsed position in favour of the practice (and analysis) of evaluation. It did so in contrast to the kinds of 'historicist' or 'pragmatist' accounts of value seen in the previous two chapters, but also, importantly, in opposition to exclusive objectivism.⁷⁰

The importance of value considerations to the Consortium's work is strongly evident in the content of the conference that marked its founding. Held on 3 February 1994, the conference was titled 'Decisions', and the newly-formed Consortium invited speakers – including the artist

⁶⁹ Administrative records show that each of its original constitutive members contributed 2 000 pounds to its initial establishment. The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) joined the Consortium in 1999, and the Science Museum in 2007.

⁷⁰ I have tried to argue in both previous chapters that there were strains of 'objectivist' evaluation built into Kermode's 'historicism' and the Stanford Senate's 'pragmatism'.

Paula Rego, the writer A. S. Byatt, the judge Lord Browne-Wilkinson, the architect Jeff Kipnis, the film producer Steve Wooley and the philosopher Bernard Williams – to submit contributions that contested the ‘epistemological, ethical and aesthetic relativism which is ever more dominant in contemporary thought,’ or to give reasons for its continuation. In his opening address, Colin MacCabe explains that this focus would continue into the Consortium’s work: ‘Unlike almost all study of contemporary culture, evaluation will be at the centre of the Consortium’s teaching.’ (MacCabe *CC* 4) ‘In talking of value’, MacCabe argues, ‘I and the Consortium are setting our faces against much of the orthodoxy of the past twenty-five years in which evaluation has increasingly vanished from the academic study of art and culture.’ Value questions were a ‘fundamental part of the rationale of the London Consortium’ itself. (4)

When writing about the Consortium’s administrative arrangements, Mark Cousins uses the language of states and statehood. He describes it as a ‘federation’, ‘established by a sort of treaty signed in 1993’ (Cousins *PH* 3). At other times, he writes of a ‘multistate’ organisation, ‘collaborating’ around ‘shared objectives.’ (Cousins *LC* 7) Particularly in the period before 2000, this sense of the Consortium’s dependence on separate, more securely rooted institutions is evident in a wide range of personal correspondence and formal documents. Rather than coalescing around the idea of ‘consortium’ as a relationship of mutual sharing (Latin - *com* + *sors*); marital bond (‘consort’); or commercial partnership, its identity is imagined as a more distant, ‘Westphalian’, assemblage. (Cousins *LC* 7) This analogy gives a feeling of fragility and tenuousness; a marker the Consortium maintained throughout its twenty-year existence. Even at times of genuine financial security, it operated as if on insecure foundations.

Once established, the Consortium however operated with considerable independence from its original ‘constitutive nations. So much so that students from its early intakes did not ‘feel they [were] part of a particular institution and by extension an academic community of postgrads.’ (Reed 2) During its early years, internal notes show that the Consortium carefully constructed

pedagogic and resource processes outside of the organisations that formed and funded it, establishing a clear and ‘direct’ philosophy and programme. While constantly stressing reliance and dependence on other institutions, the Consortium’s daily operations were notably disconnected from them. Students describe this distance as extending to a sense of physical estrangement – tutorials often took place ‘on the run’ or even ‘in taxis.’ (Reed 2) In interviews, both students and lecturers describe London itself as the Consortium’s primary physical site.

There was therefore a contradictory sense of the Consortium as dependent and relatively autonomous – an ‘anxious’ and ‘constructive condition’ that Dodd describes as key to its identity from the outset. (‘Dodd interview’).⁷¹ Similarly, for Humphreys, the Consortium was in general both ‘sure-footed’ and ‘unsteady’, and this ‘antinomy’ defined its ‘character’ from ‘start to finish’ (‘Humphreys interview’). Available meeting notes from the Consortium’s early years similarly depict an organisation that is both assured of its position and convinced of its own non-permanence. This constitutive ‘biformity’ was a feature not only of how the institution operated, but also at the heart of its pedagogic and theoretical positioning. (‘Dodd interview’)

In this chapter, I argue that the return to value that MacCabe describes as so central to the Consortium’s work took the form of a parallel and correlated commitment to ‘paradox’ – a position that held relativist and objectivist accounts of value together. The Consortium and its affiliates actively recuperated evaluation, but saw its foundation as paradoxically *both* relativist and objectivist – a position that members presented and justified in different ways. The dispute over the BFI’s withdrawal both sharpened this position and showed what made it distinct. To start the chapter, I therefore look at the contours of this dispute, illustrating some of the ways in

⁷¹ This careful cultivation of the idea of the Consortium as in some way outside and opposed to prevailing institutional conditions, able to corral and utilise its direct material conditions to strategic ends, emulates the description of the relationship between cultural superstructures and economic base in writers like Althusser – a thinker whose work informed the Consortium’s project. Notably, as previous and subsequent chapters illustrate, the aesthetic and aesthetic criticism have similarly been cast as especially well equipped to claim this sort of autonomy. While the implications of that homology require their own study, the Consortium’s pulling away from its institutional setting (while constantly cultivating fear of it) suggests a particular need to consider its historical development, and the organisations that facilitated its genesis.

which value was depicted within it. In the next section, I turn to the history of the Consortium, arguing that its institutional shape was marked by an awareness of its own ‘belatedness’ or ‘haunting’, and that this temporal doubling helped produce the Consortium’s position on value. To give direction to this argument, I focus in particular on the BFI – the Consortium’s most direct institutional forebearer – and especially on the writing of Peter Wollen and MacCabe during the 1970s and 1980s.

Following on from this discussion, I subsequently consider theoretical writing on value produced by Consortium members at the time of its emergence and consolidation. During the period I focus on – from the beginnings of the formation of the Consortium in 1991 to the exit of the BFI in 1999 – associates of the Consortium wrote numerous books, articles and papers on the question. I focus, in particular, on three: Laura Mulvey’s *Curiosity and Fetishism* (1996), Jacqueline Rose’s *States of Fantasy* (1996) and Steven Connor’s *Theory and Cultural Value* (1992), arguing that in each case a paradoxical account of value emerges.⁷² I conclude by linking these institutional and theoretical currents to the 1999 withdrawal of the BFI.

The Dispute

In May 1997 the Labour Party was elected to UK national government. One of its first acts was to create a Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and film was brought under its departmental scope.⁷³ Led by Chris Smith, the DCMS inaugurated a comprehensive revamp of film administration and funding, structured around its four ‘guiding principles’ of ‘excellence’, ‘access’, ‘education’ and ‘the creative economy’ (DCMS 1998). By late 1999, these reforms

⁷² All four were core members of the Consortium from its inception, and their contributions were key to its pedagogic choices.

⁷³ The DMCS replaced the previous Conservative Government’s Heritage Department, which the BFI had not fallen under, though some other aspects of film administration had.

resulted in the centralising of all government film-related activity, including the publicly-funded BFI, under the UK Film Council (UFC).⁷⁴

As the behest of the DCMS, the BFI also went through a ‘streamlining’ ‘restructuring operation’.⁷⁵ Meeting resistance from the outset, Smith replaced the Chairman of the BFI’s board, Jeremy Thomas, in January 1998, appointing his preferred candidate, the film director and producer Alan Parker, to the role. This change in chairmanship prompted the BFI’s longstanding Director, Wilf Stevenson, to resign, and he was replaced in February 1998 by John Woodward, previously a ‘creative industry’ management consultant.⁷⁶

One of the first internal memos sent by Parker to Woodward asks that he look into ‘areas of business overreach... including the BFI’s involvement in tertiary education.’ In the same memo, Parker states that he sees the BFI’s core role as ‘stimulating’ the UK film industry through education, and that ‘complex questions of elite taste’ did not fall under the institutions ambit. In an email, Woodward responded by suggesting the commissioning of a ‘comprehensive external report’ on the functioning of the BFI, and urged that the Research Division should be ‘rethought’, or even ‘brought within’ another section of the BFI’s operation.

Since 1989, the Head of this Research Division had been Colin MacCabe. In the month following the appointment of Parker, MacCabe wrote to Paul Hirst, expressing his belief that the ‘DMCS myrmidon’ would likely ‘curtail’ the BFI’s involvement in the Consortium. In a Consortium governance meeting the same month, MacCabe similarly expressed the sense that despite the Consortium bringing in substantial income to the BFI, there was a strong likelihood

⁷⁴ The UKC lasted until March 2011 – see further Gillian Doyle, Philip Schlesinger, Raymond Boyle and Lisa Kelly *The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council* (2015).

⁷⁵ In the section to follow, information is largely drawn from the BFI’s records including internal memorandums and emails from 1997 and 1998. Where page numbers exist they have been included.

⁷⁶ Throughout the period of my focus, the BFI was led by a Chairman, who headed the BFI’s Board of Governors, and a Director, who looked after the day-to-day running of the organisation. Prior to the restructuring discussed below, the chairman was appointed by the Minister for Culture, and the Director by the Board. When the UKC was formed, both Parker and Woodward left the BFI to take up positions as the UKC’s Chair and CEO respectively.

that connections would be cut, despite strong internal resistance to the idea.⁷⁷ As the section below details, the Consortium had largely emerged out of BFI processes, and the BFI Research Division was its de facto administrative headquarters. The possibility of the BFI's withdrawal was therefore significant for the Consortium's future functioning.

The next four months involved many acrimonious exchanges between MacCabe and Woodward. Most relevant for present purposes is an exchange over the purpose of film education.

Expressing a desire to 'get away' from functions external to the BFI's 'historically fundamental' work, Woodward wrote in an April 1998 memo to MacCabe that the teaching approach of the Consortium was largely 'extraneous' to the BFI's mandate. In his response, MacCabe notes that the Consortium in fact 'represents the continuation' of the BFI's 'longstanding' engagement with how film should be 'encountered'. In fact, notes MacCabe, the Consortium had been at the forefront of bringing 'evaluation and judgement' back into UK film discourse. In his view, the Consortium had made 'novel'... contributions to the question of what 'film and other artistic evaluation' 'mean[s]'.

While Woodward largely ignored the substance of MacCabe's long memo, MacCabe was moved by the exchange to continue his exploration of the Consortium's position on value. He does so through an email to the members of his own division. Expressing his 'strong opposition' to Woodward's attack on the Consortium, MacCabe writes that it had brought to the fore exactly what made the Consortium's work consequential. In his view, the Consortium had developed a 'contradictory sense of judgement', which resisted the 'evacuation of enjoyment with film' promoted by the Labour government's focus on 'creative industry'. The point was that the difficulties that attend to evaluation were being 'held together' rather than dismissed. There was

⁷⁷ Accounting records show that the Consortium was financially independent almost from the outset, in fact bringing in income to, inter alia, the BFI's Research Division, cross-funding over projects, including a series of talks and fellowships. The Consortium did have its own administrative staff, but core payments and other administrative duties were still handled by the BFI.

space for ‘decisions and judgement’ in the Consortium’s teaching, even if value itself was constantly ‘self-opposing’.

Emails and meeting minutes available from the BFI archive show a rapid uptick in the regularity of mentions of the Consortium during the period between July 1997 and July 1998.⁷⁸ One of the noticeable trends in these mentions is an increase in description of the Consortium as an educative institute of the ‘old BFI’, which one meeting note describes as ‘the BFI of the 1970s’. (Meeting note(?), 1997) Over time, the name ‘the Consortium’ starts to stand in as proxy for the BFI’s ‘1970s’ position and politics, including its affiliation with *Screen* (discussed further below). That position is seen in contrast to the ‘new Labour’ approach of the (then) current government, which, despite its apparent opposition, is seen by some as a continuation of the Thatcherite reforms of the 1980s. I argue later that this sense of the Consortium as a reincarnation of the 1970s BFI was also present in its own formative years.

Over the 12 months between July 1997 and July 1998, ‘The Consortium position’ comes to act as short-hand for resistance to the ‘marketisation’ of the BFI’s core functions. For example, in an email sent by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (at the time affiliated with the BFI’s publishing division, and previously a Senior Research Fellow in the Research Division) to MacCabe, Nowell-Smith writes of how ‘*The Consortium position* has some support in books [referring to the Publishing Department]...’ (italics original, email correspondence May 1998) In meeting minutes, on three separate occasions, when the idea of the ‘value of film’ (as opposed to the value of films on the market) is raised, the Consortium is immediately mentioned as a site for the cultivation of ‘film appreciation’, which one Board Member even describes as ‘decadent’ in meeting notes. Within the discourse of the BFI, the Consortium increasingly becomes a proxy for arguments in favour of the aesthetic value of cinema.

⁷⁸ These mentions are spread across the BFI’s Departments, and include emails by independent producers, editors and publishers funded by the BFI, middle and upper management employees, as well as the Board.

That trend is further illustrated through MacCabe's often acrimonious interactions with Woodward and Parker, leading to MacCabe's dismissal in June 1998.⁷⁹ In an email to MacCabe dated 15 May 1998, Woodward describes the Consortium as an 'elitist academy', suggesting that despite its financial success, it no longer fell within the 'accepted remit of the BFI as a promoter of British film.'⁸⁰ In a strongly worded reply, MacCabe writes back describing 'elitism' as a 'new Labour boo word', seeking to 'level' any consideration of what made film 'culturally valuable'. He moreover accuses Woodward of replacing 'all goods, artistic, cultural and other' with the pursuit of "money"⁸¹ In separate email correspondence between MacCabe and Jon Teckman (who would later replace Woodward as BFI Director), MacCabe similarly protests that the Consortium's work in 'reigniting the discourse over the processes of evaluation for and in the cinema' was being 'demolished' in the services of profit.

Solidifying this sense of the importance of aesthetic evaluation to the Consortium project, MacCabe often draws links between Parker's attempts to 'streamline' the BFI's work, including by withdrawing from the Consortium, and asserting the quality of his work as a film director; for instance in the following valuation: 'Parker, a director whose visual flair was routinely flawed by an imagination wedded to the most banal stereotypes, had loathed the British Film Institute with a public passion for over twenty years'. (MacCabe, blog post, 1999) This appraisal shows the

⁷⁹ As discussed later, MacCabe had joined the BFI in 1985, and had become head of research in 1989. This is MacCabe's blog-post account of the moment of his 'sacking': "It's not working", said the new Director of the British Film Institute brandishing the papers in his hand. That was all the explanation I ever received. "So I've examined your contract and we can terminate at three month's notice. I will write the formal letter today. You will leave the building forthwith." As my mouth opened and shut silently I must have resembled a particularly dim goldfish.' (MacCabe blog, Sep 3 2009)

⁸⁰ Letter dated 15 May 1998. Similarly in the BFI's 1998-99 annual report, Woodward wrote, '[Q]uickly after my appointment in 1998, and with the full support of the BFI's Governors and Chairman, I initiated a review of every single BFI activity in order to understand where we were strong and where we were weak. It soon became clear that the BFI had been drawn towards 'super-serving' a small group of committed cinephiles and academics and that a large proportion of our limited resources was being used on activities too distant from our prime area of work - informal and formal education.'

⁸¹ Or as MacCabe puts it in a separate blog-post also responding to charges of elitism, 'Nobody dared to put this ridiculous charge in public because the simple truth was that they had no interest in education, a fact which any public debate would have made all too evident... Questions of social justice; a crusade for a better society; the political or spiritual role of education weren't dismissed - they weren't even discussed. Education for New Labour was about making more money - end of story.'

extent to which MacCabe saw the Consortium's work in recuperating aesthetic evaluation as in some ways essential to the core project of the BFI. It also shows the extent to which forms of normative evaluation traditionally seen as distinct (aesthetic, political, ethical, etc) were brought together and collectively defended under the Consortium's banner.

The dichotomy that this suggests – on the one side 'new' Labour and its affiliates, interested in film education and production only to the extent that they are popular or profitable; and on the other the Consortium, bastion of 'art-for-arts sake' and other anti-market normativity – breaks down, however, in other correspondence. For instance, in emails between Philip Dodd, who edited *Sight and Sound* between 1991 and late 1997 and regularly taught on Consortium Courses, and Adrian Wootton, a member at the time of the BFI's executive. Both complain of the Consortium's 'co-option' as 'a sort of Leavis monster', and suggest that it is actually new Labour 'who moralise'. (Dodd and Wootton emails, Nov 1997) While noting the effect on the Consortium of the BFI's 'subsiding' into bureaucratic functionalism, Dodd also points to how the Consortium involvement of 'writers, painters, movie-makers' in its everyday working, gives it a strong sense of art's 'contingency'.⁸² This, for Wootton, was always a key 'mannerism' of the Consortium's work – it was 'all for value and all for no value'. (Wootton, 1997)

Through the course of MacCabe's correspondence with Woodward, this impression of the Consortium as resistant to strong evaluative claims similarly appears. The main point of contention between MacCabe and Woodward was a report, commissioned by the BFI from the consulting firm, KPMG, with the brief of 'holistically' assessing the workings of the institution. In June 1998, MacCabe sent a lengthy memo to Woodward commenting on the report, memorably describing it as a 'masterpiece of incompetence'. As well as suggesting that Woodward should have consulted staff rather hire an external management consultant, and that

⁸² In my interview with Dodd, losing this connection to artists was identified by him as one of the big failures of the Consortium post-1998.

the tender process was in any event legally flawed, MacCabe comments that the report fails to 'recognise [that] cinematic proficiency' comes out of 'the study of culture'. He argues strongly that not only has Woodward substituted 'management consultant speak' for the value of 'education and film', but he had 'misunderstood' film education, which is a window into 'culture', not just 'film [itself]'. In a manner closer to late Kermode than Leavis, throughout the memo, MacCabe construes Woodward and the BFI leadership as failing to properly take into account the importance of film education as a mechanism for understanding culture, from which 'film evaluation' is drawn.

As a result of this final exchange, MacCabe, was dismissed. A month later, the BFI withdrew as an affiliate of the Consortium. Unlike at Stanford, where a relatively clear approach to evaluation emerges, the exchanges leading to the BFI's withdrawal paint a picture of an approach to evaluation marked by tension, but strongly in favour of evaluation itself. In the section which follows, I trace the history and work of the Consortium in the period leading up to the BFI's withdrawal to make sense of this position.

Background

If the Consortium has a direct institutional forebearer, it is the Masters in Film and Television established and run by Colin MacCabe at the British Film Institute from 1992. In 1990, MacCabe had moved, with the help of new BFI Director Wilf Stevenson, from running the BFI's production unit to a newly established post as Head of Research. This included oversight of the Education Department. While the BFI had a longstanding interest in education, it had only run disparate programmes for adults, including short courses and summer schools, up until that point.⁸³ During the 1980s, the institute had focussed almost exclusively on developing secondary

⁸³ The BFI had been founded in the 1930s to facilitate education around film, but its engagement with adult education had been patchy during the 1950s and 1960s. See further the various discussions in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Christophe Dupin (eds), *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000*.

school teaching materials and support. From the outset, MacCabe moreover found collaboration with existing tertiary institutes difficult, describing how, ‘It would be more than economical with the truth to claim that the BFI’s decision to engage directly with postgraduate education was greeted with enthusiasm by the universities.’ (MacCabe *LT* 2) Eventually, the BFI entered a partnership with Birkbeck, with whom it had some existing relationship, leading to the Masters establishment.

The course’s first director was John O. Thompson, but he was replaced after two years by Laura Mulvey. As a BFI board memorandum from the time notes, Mulvey and MacCabe were the ‘central’ figures in determining the curriculum and content of the course. (BFI Board Memo, n.p.) While stressing the importance of incorporating a practical element focused on film production and editing, the Masters in Film and Television examination papers and course outlines show that the pedagogical direction of the programme derived heavily from theoretical work done in the 1970s, and in particular through the pages of the journal *Screen*; a theoretical foundation acknowledged in the personal reflections of both Mulvey and MacCabe. This is unsurprising as both were involved in *Screen*’s production, and contributed several articles, chiefly in the period between 1973 and 1980. The work of the 1970s *Screen* has since come to be seen as, ‘one of the most, if not the most, influential contributions to film studies in the United Kingdom.’ (Hollows et al 16) While, as many note, the term ‘*Screen* Theory’ is overused and overdetermined, there is, in Terry Bolas’s words, ‘general consensus as to the identity of *Screen*’s key theoreticians: Colin MacCabe (on realism), Stephen Heath (on narrative space) and Mulvey (on visual pleasure).’ (Bolas 235)

Screen has a complicated history.⁸⁴ The important period for present purposes began in the late 1960s with a series of seminars run by the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT)

⁸⁴ *Screen* has its origins in the workings of the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), previously the Society of Film Teachers (SFT); founded in 1950 as a voluntary subscription body aimed at facilitating the teaching of film appreciation to various age groups. In 1959, SEFT began publishing a printed journal titled *Screen Education*,

and the BFI. These seminars were convened by Peter Wollen, who, during the 1970s, would go on to co-direct, with Mulvey, a series of influential films (including *Riddle of the Sphinx*, discussed below).⁸⁵ It was Wollen who most actively '[sought] to promote an academic atmosphere' within the BFI, and laid much of the groundwork for *Screen's* emergence as a space for film theory.

(Bolas 166) Following an editorial shake-up in 1971, Sam Rohdie was appointed *Screen* editor-in-chief, and began recruiting, in remarkably unsystematic fashion, a new editorial board. His intention, as he describes, was to put together a group 'willing to build on' the theoretical debates that had emerged through the BFI's seminars (Rohdie 6). After initially enlisting Ben Brewster (who would subsequently replace Rohdie at editor-in-chief in 1974) and Paul Willemen, Rohdie recruited, in 1973, during an informal lunch, MacCabe and Heath, both of whom he had discovered through their 1971 publication *Signs of the Times*.⁸⁶ Wollen, already an employee of the BFI, joined the editorial board in an official capacity later that year.

While some of MacCabe's theoretical commitments can be gleaned from my discussion of *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1978) in chapter 1, his position in the late 1960s and early-

producing forty-six editions. By January 1968, SEFT had become a 'grant-in-aid' body of the BFI (with offices in the BFI's Education Department in Soho) and relaunched as *Screen*. From this point, under the direction of BFI head of education Paddy Whannel, *Screen* began to take on a more academic approach. There remained, however, clear institutional differences between SEFT and the BFI – the former keeping its original focus on encouraging film appreciation. Following the 1971 publication of a controversial 'Report on the BFI Education Department' by the BFI Governors under the Chairmanship of Asa Briggs, SEFT became more independent, despite receiving much of its funding through BFI structures. Paddy Whannel resigned from his position as a result of the report, and in a strange institutional inversion, the BFI shifted its focus to secondary school film teacher training, while it was SEFT and its journal, *Screen*, which became increasingly theoretical. In part to compensate for this shift, the BFI launched a second journal, *Screen Education Notes* in 1971, with a focus on encouraging broader interest in films. This journal continued until 1974, when it was renamed *Screen Education* (again), finally ceasing publication in 1982. At the time of MacCabe and Mulvey's involvement in *Screen*, it was therefore running concurrently with *Screen Education*.

⁸⁵ Wollen was given a post at the BFI by Whannel in 1967. He had published extensively on film in the nascent *New Left Review* during the 1960s, often under the pseudonym 'Lee Russell'. Up until 1968, his writing in *NLR* (generally reviews of contemporary Hollywood directors) is influenced heavily by the kind of 'New Wave' thought evident in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

⁸⁶ Unsurprising in the context of his Cambridge travails, MacCabe had struggled to get the volume released, in the end paying for its publication himself. *Signs of the Times* includes an article by MacCabe trying to place 'textual semiotics' within the English literary critical tradition, particularly in work done by Richards, Leavis and Williams. It also has an article by Kristeva interpreting Saussure's 'semiology' through Barthes and early Derrida. This early engagement with her writing prefigures MacCabe's central use of her interpretation of Lacan in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. In the period between 1971 and 1973 when MacCabe and Heath joined the journal, *Screen* engaged little with semiotics, instead dedicating issues to earlier 'theoretical' movements including Russian Formalism and Futurism.

1970s drew more heavily on the 1960s ‘semiotics’ of, amongst others, Barthes, Claude Bremond, Tzvetan Todorov and Louis Hjelmslev. It was only later, particularly through his personal and theoretical contact with Kristeva (who wrote the opening chapter of *Signs of the Times*), that his psychoanalytically-infused position of the late 1970s emerged. In my view, one of the keys to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the Consortium, including its return to value, is a recognition that many of these early semiotic ideas entered the institutional culture of the BFI, through *Screen*, before MacCabe’s (and *Screen* in general’s) mid-1970s turn towards psychoanalysis.⁸⁷ In particular, *Screen*’s repeated engagement with the pre-1975 work of Barthes-acolyte Christian Metz shaped the BFI’s institutional understanding of how film should be ‘decoded’ and taught.⁸⁸ As I suggest later, the MacCabe of the late 1980s and early 1990s builds on this institutionally-embedded current of thought, drawing on his post-Cambridge interest in the history and structure of language and its relationship with literature, cultivated while employed at the University of Strathclyde.⁸⁹

This is not to say that the Lacanian-associated psychoanalysis so central to later *Screen* was not core to the theoretical substructure of the BFI Education Department at the time that the Consortium emerged. From 1974, the pages of *Screen* are saturated with articles linking psychoanalysis to film semiotics – exemplified by Metz’s own psychoanalytic turn in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ – which no doubt had consequences for broader institutional identity. As I see it, by the late 1970s, the BFI’s approach to aesthetic education was however overlaid by a particular variant of psychoanalytically-informed feminism. This work drew on work by Metz,

⁸⁷ Exploring the relationship between early semiotics (in the special sense used at the time) and film was central to many of *Screen*’s articles between 1973 and 1976. In 1974, it published an ‘introductory semiotics bibliography’ put together by Kari Hanet. See Hanet (1975).

⁸⁸ For a snapshot of the kinds of ideas often collected under the moniker ‘French semiotics’, see the 1964 issue of the French journal *Communications* titled ‘Recherches sémiologiques’, published by the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études. The edition includes the first publication of Barthes’s ‘Eléments de sémiologie,’ a text Peter Wollen states ‘swept me off my feet’ (Wollen *SMC* 223). Barthes’s text was translated into English in 1967, and formed the basis of one of the BFI’s 1968 seminars, it later also functioned as the core text for an influential 1974 BFI/SEFT seminar series run by Brewster.

⁸⁹ As I show later, drawing a marked line in the sand post the Cambridge affair, MacCabe shifts significantly from the theoretical ideas defended in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*.

Heath and others, but took a path distinct from MacCabe's engagement with Kristeva. As it relates to the functioning of the BFI, this set of ideas was most influentially developed in the writing of Mulvey and Rose. While their ideas belatedly sat alongside, and mingled with, MacCabe's 'stricter' semiotics of the 1980s, part of the reason why an attention to value re-emerged in the BFI's institutional culture at the time of the Consortium's creation was the relative independence of the two streams of thought.

Getting to grips with *Screen* pre-psychoanalytic theory is aided by noting that Metz's semiotics was brought into the BFI ecosystem not by MacCabe or Heath, but by Peter Wollen. Having spent time living in Paris in the mid-1960s, Wollen presented a paper on Metz titled 'Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact' to a BFI Education Department Seminar in 1968.⁹⁰ This paper and its subsequent fall-out became crucial to the BFI and British film more broadly. As Mulvey describes, since the end of the Second World War, the British film industry 'had been desperate for theoretical grounding', and it was Wollen's interpretation of semiotics that was first able to play this role. (Mulvey and Clayton 9)⁹¹

Interestingly, Wollen's interpretation of Metz in his celebrated 1969 *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* comes through the work of Charles Saunders Peirce. In his utilisation of Peirce, Wollen, sometimes too fiercely, distances himself from any discussion of pragmatism. Noting that Peirce's reputation 'rest principally on his... teaching on pragmatism', Wollen argues that

⁹⁰ Wollen built on these ideas in the chapter 'The semiology of cinema' in his celebrated 1969 *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*. His original BFI paper was published in the magazine *Forms*. Wollen's engagement came before Metz published his doctoral thesis, titled 'Language and Cinema', in 1971.

⁹¹ Throughout this chapter, I focus almost exclusively on *Screen's* interaction with semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This may seem to neglect *Screen's* connections – often trumpeted in its own editorials – to Marxist and other materialist traditions, particularly the work of Althusser. My approach in this regard has however been influenced by Kevin Robins 'Althusserian Marxism and media studies: the case of *Screen*' which I see as very successfully showing the extent to which *Screen's* engagement with class analysis was based on a shallow 'essentialised and hypostatised Althusser,' rather than being a serious engagement with the Marxist tradition. (357) While the loosely related journal *Economy and Society* might be seen as doing some of this heavy-lifting on *Screen's* behalf, it is notable that outside of a cursory engagement with Brecht in the early 1970s, very little actual discussion of class takes place. This sustained lack of engagement with class extends into the Consortium's own teaching, which, despite having Paul Hirst as its key administrator, largely adopted *Screen's* and the BFI's approach to the analysis of class.

Peirce's 'separate' 'semiology' has, by contrast, 'been sadly neglected.' (Wollen 102) This move is clearly in part intended to dissociate Wollen from the behaviourism at the time associated with Peirce, but it is also patently clear that he is uncomfortable with pragmatism's rooting of truth in practice. Even a cursory reading of the two Peirce papers Wollen relies on most heavily – *Speculative Grammar* and *Existential Graphs* – shows that it is not possible to separate Peirce's semiotics from his pragmatism. This spotlights the question of how Wollen conceptualises truth, and the relationship between truth and cultural concepts.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, these concerns are present even as they are ignored. In discussing Peirce's 'trichotomy of signs' – the icon, the index and the symbol – Wollen's key argument is that Metz's semiotics, like that of Barthes and Andre Bazin – neglects to recognise that cinema signifies in all three ways.⁹² Historically, Wollen argues, 'What has always happened is that theorists of the cinema have seized on one or other of these dimensions and used it as the ground for an aesthetic firman.' (Wollen 104) In Metz's case (as in Roger Scruton's) cinema is purely iconic. (Wollen 104) This omission of cinema's symbolic and indexical aspects results in him adopting the strange view that cinema is not a *langue* (in Saussure's sense), and therefore undecodable.

The other danger, for Wollen, is that by focusing solely on the iconic dimensions of cinema, Metz slips into relativism. This is because, 'the presence of the symbolic – hence conceptual – dimension of cinema... is a necessary guarantee of objective cinema.' (Wollen 130) The iconic, by contrast, is 'shifting and illusive; it defies capture by the critic' – it is the symbolic dimension of a film which allows for aesthetic evaluation. This does not mean that the symbolic should be the sum-total of cinematic signification. The best films are those like Jean-Luc Godard's, for whom 'cinema has become an almost equal amalgam of the symbolic, the iconic and the

⁹² An icon is 'a sign which represents its object mainly by its similarity to it; the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but is one of resemblances or likeness;' an index is 'a sign by virtue of an existential bond between itself and its object'; and a symbol 'corresponds to Saussure's arbitrary sign.' (102-3)

indexical'. (Wollen 132) These categories are moreover overlapping and interdependent; 'there is no pure cinema, grounded on a single essence, hermetically sealed from contamination.' (Wollen 132) In fact, it is this 'overdetermination', not just at the symbolic level but across signification, that marks out the value of a text. (Wollen 132)

This end-point leaves unresolved questions related to the ontological foundations of the symbolic – exactly the concern Peirce takes up through his pragmatism.⁹³ It is also this work of justifying or accounting for 'objective' judgement that the Stanford senate confronts, or avoids, through recourse to pragmatist commonality. Equally striking is how redolent Wollen's language is of Kermode's *The Classic*, which I previously argued stands in contrast to both his later historicism and the Stanford pragmatism. The rejection of an 'hermetically sealed' 'single essence,' and a defence of objectivate evaluation through the championing of 'contamination' and 'amalgam' are the hallmarks of Kermode's shift from the imperial to the modern classic. Prior to 1973 and *Screen*'s introduction of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the BFI's key philosophical ideologue (Wollen) was therefore committed to aesthetic evaluation in a much more direct fashion than is sometimes recognised. Notably, there was almost no internal resistance to his ideas at the BFI – instead, institutional tension, when it existed, was between a focus on 'common pedagogy' and a focus on 'academic speculation', resulting in a widening gulf between *Screen* and the newly reformed *Screen Education*. (Bolas 265) As a result, many of Wollen's ideas were taken up by the BFI, as is evident both from the BFI's own publications and from question papers and other material for short courses offered to adults during the period.⁹⁴ This was vastly

⁹³ See especially his two celebrated papers 'The Fixation of Belief' (1877) and 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' (1878), in which Peirce connects his proto-sociological understanding of 'signs' with the anti-realist interpretation of Hegel he uses to ground pragmatism.

⁹⁴ One 1971 'Course Directions' document in the BFI archive, relating to a part-time course offered at the BFI Education Department's office in Dean Street Office, for instance, asks specifically about the importance of 'symbolic' readings of film in evaluating and 'appraising' cinema.

different to the situation at Cambridge, where the pro-evaluative components of the emergent ‘theory’ were shut out with as much vigour as those that brought the idea of value into doubt.

In my view, it was this relative institutional inscription that enabled pro-evaluative views to resurface within the BFI during the early 1990s. The homology between Kermode and Wollen’s work, and its connection to the Consortium’s founding philosophy, is confirmed through a piece Wollen wrote in 1993, at the time of the Consortium’s founding, and published in the BFI’s magazine *Sight and Sound* – at the time edited by Philip Dodd. Titled ‘The Canon’, Wollen had written the piece in preparation for a conference on what the BFI’s 1993-1994 annual report describes as ‘art and value’ called ‘What Should We Preserve?’. (‘BFI Annual Report 1993-94’ 31) Organised by the BFI in association with the Tate and The Independent, it was this conference, as MacCabe explains, that lit the fire for the emergence of the Consortium. (MacCabe *RLC* 35)

In ‘The Canon’, Wollen makes clear that he ‘remain[s] deeply sceptical about “relativistic” theories of taste, which tend to deny any intersubjective sense to words liked ‘good’ or ‘better’ (let alone ‘best’).’ (Wollen, *TC* 217) These convictions about the importance of ‘aesthetic value’ are rooted in his artistic practice as a film maker; the aesthetic evaluations of those involved in making any film are reciprocally a driver to its production, and themselves made evident through the practice of the film’s making. (Wollen *TC* 217) With this commitment to evaluation in mind, Wollen notes ruefully that ‘the last major and explicit attempt to rewrite the film canon’ was the ‘auterism’ of the early 1960s, especially through the pages of journals like *Cahiers du Cinéma* (presumably after the removal of Eric Rohmer as editor in 1963). Notably, *Cahiers* under Jacques Rivette was almost immoderately focused on the marrying of semiotics and cinema, and published much of Metz’s early work.⁹⁵ There is therefore a clear connection in Wollen’s mind

⁹⁵ It also had a strong working relationship with *Screen* during the 1970s, for instance translating and reproducing in full the *Cahiers* editors’ John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln* in a 1972 edition. This article is in many ways a forerunner for

between the semiotic analysis of films and the practice of evaluation. This is not to say that Wollen saw semiotic methodologies as core to evaluation itself, but rather that the work of semiotics allowed the importance of evaluation to emerge.

This is much the same position he comes to through his use of Peirce in ‘The Semiology of Cinema’. What Peirce’s typology allows, contra Metz, is an awareness of the symbolic facets of a film – the ‘guarantor’ of aesthetic judgement. In addition, Wollen returns to the emphasis he puts on amalgamation and overdetermination to ground his vindication of value. He notes, for instance that the success of *Citizen Kane* and *The Rules of the Game* in ‘greatest film’ lists is premised on their ability to invite ‘multiple and even contradictory readings and rereadings.’ (Wollen, 2002, 228).⁹⁶ The best films are those ‘sufficiently rich and open to be available to critics of different outlook, in different periods and in different cultural situations.’ (Wollen *TC* 230). Wollen then connects his view directly to Kermode. As he explains, Kermode rightly argues in *The Classic* ‘permanence (as a classic, within a canon) means that a work is “timeless” not because its meaning or value is frozen permanently across time, but precisely because it proves itself susceptible to a range of different readings and evaluations.’ (Wollen *TC* 230) Wollen in this way links his own semiotics-inspired defense of the canon to Kermode’s, who in turn had rooted the argument of *The Classic* in Barthes’s semiotic reading of *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*.

Wollen’s final sentences then set the stage for the emergence of the Consortium as a platform for debates over aesthetic value: ‘I think aesthetics is central to film study and that since aesthetic inquiry necessarily involves judgements of quality, this must lead to debates over value and taste which will in turn lead to reassessments of the existing canon. I think the time has come for just

the use of psychoanalysis in film theory. It also allowed Stephen Heath to prefigure Metz’s 1975 ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ in his reading of *Touch of Evil*, ‘Film System: Terms of Analysis’, published by *Screen* later in 1972.

⁹⁶ Wollen’s approach to ‘great films’ lists can be interestingly contrasted to that of Guillory. For Wollen, great works lists ‘seem trivial, but in fact they are crucial symptomatic indices of underlying struggles over taste, evaluation and the construction of the canon.’ For Guillory, by contrast, the list is a form of fetishistic false consciousness, operating as an ‘imaginary signifier’ ‘organising social life as something beyond the satisfaction of material needs or functions, and positing the unity of “society” in the face of social division’. (Wollen *TC* 217; Guillory *CC* 35)

such a debate.’ (Wollen *TC* 232) Encouraged by the willingness of BFI Director Wilf Stevenson to ‘build on the institution’s own historical theory,’ MacCabe drew up budgetary plans and canvassed the BFI board to start a new postgraduate programme extending beyond a narrow focus on film, and with this ‘focus on value’ at its heart. (MacCabe *RDC* 12) Because the conference was already cross-institutional, and because of the BFI Masters programme’s existing connections with Birkbeck, there was early momentum, evident in BFI board discussions, for any new institution to be supported by multiple organisations.⁹⁷ MacCabe simultaneously liaised with other contributors to the conference, notably Hirst, Cousins, Mulvey, Humphreys and Dodd, creating a pool of lecturers and administrative leads from which to draw.

Tracing the transfer of these ideas into the Consortium is not straightforward, though it can be seen through the work of those closely related to the institutional function of the BFI itself, including Wollen. While the BFI’s internal archives of the 1980s are difficult to access and poorly retained, what is available – including material from summer school courses – also shows the BFI’s influence; three examination papers have questions on the relationship between semiotics and the film canon, in 1982, 1983 and 1985. Part of the reason for its perpetuation has also to do with how the ‘Lacanian post-structuralism’ of later *Screen* was being put under theoretical and political pressure at just the point the BFI ‘moved out of an activist phase into... something more simply scholarly or appreciation based.’ (Thompson 529)⁹⁸ This meant that the theory that ossified and was preserved within BFI structures during the 1980s was that of *Screen* before its psychoanalytic turn. As David Francis, who remained as curator of the National Film archive put it, ‘[Wollen’s semiotics] was the stable dogma, Peter Sainsbury [head of production until 1985]

⁹⁷ The minutes also show a budgetary incentive for collaboration. On the whole, the Consortium in fact largely funded itself, especially from the moment of the BFI’s exit in 1998.

⁹⁸ This moment came with the appointment of Anthony Smith to the directorship of the BFI in November 1979. The BFI leadership took an intentionally less academic stance, suggesting through the funding prerogatives it set that *Screen* do the same. This resulted in MacCabe, amongst many others, leaving the editorial board in 1982, and a general shift away from theoretical work.

encouraged films... [that] took it on board, and it was... a mainstay of the Education Department... It... [also] informed our Department.’ (Francis 164)

The strong connection between theoretical work from the 1970s and the conceptual foundations of the Consortium nevertheless invites questions over why the 1980s provided so little stimulus.⁹⁹ One answer is to follow Simon Blanchard and Claire Holdworth in broadening the periodisation – in their words a ‘long 1970s’ developed in British film theory, with a relatively static conceptual thrust. (Blanchard and Holdworth 265) While there was clearly some continuation of the intellectual trends emanating from *Screen*, my own interviews however suggest that there was a clear break; even that events of the 1980s created a ‘block’ on earlier energies and ideas. (‘Humphries interview’) This same impression is evident in a 2004 reflection-piece written by Mulvey in the long-running feminist journal *Signs*.¹⁰⁰ As she puts it, ‘a break or fissure in the continuities of history has come to separate a “then” of the 1970s, the moment of origin, at least in Britain, of feminist film theory and practice, from a “now.”’ (Mulvey *LP* 1286) If this is the case, then the Consortium should instead be seen as part of a dialectical return to an earlier set of ideas, rather than their continuation or solidification.

The Consortium

How, then, should the 1980s be construed with respect to the ideas that informed the consortium? As well as highlighting the importance of feminist thought in the development of 1970s film theory (discussed further below), Mulvey characterises the early 1980s as a ‘death’.¹⁰¹ In her words, ‘any sense that... utopian aspiration could be realized as a political program and have a transformative effect within the social world came to an end quite suddenly in the early

⁹⁹ This trend was confirmed in my interviews with various people involved in the early years of the Consortium (Dodd, Humphreys, Mulvey and Connor) who all noted the Consortium’s connection to the 1970s.

¹⁰⁰ *Signs* itself emerged in the mid-1970s, with early contributions from both film practitioners and critics including Mulvey and Sue Clayton.

¹⁰¹ See also Mulvey’s introduction to *Visual and Other Pleasures*: ‘the coming changes would increasingly leave earlier principles and aspiration behind and bring about a definitive end of an era.’ (xi)

1980s.’ (Mulvey *LP* 1287) Her diagnosis is therefore rooted in the changing political landscape of the time – suggesting that the theoretical vibrancy of the 1970s is partly attributable to a sense of the possibility of political effect. As ‘events on a world scale marked the point at which the traditions of progressive politics could no longer struggle against the changing balance between left and right,’ the significance of the work done in the 1970s began to wane. (1288) In addition, like Wollen, Mulvey sees the conditions for the emergence and influence of journals like *Screen* as in part attributable to their connection with film-making and its distribution. (1287) With the fall-off in number of films produced in Britain as a result of the rapid funding cuts following Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979, the impetus and material for creative theoretical thought declined.¹⁰²

In my view, the eschatological language Mulvey uses when discussing the 1980s – ‘death’, ‘catastrophe’, ‘end’, ‘mourning’ – in turn helps characterise the Consortium’s project during the 1990s. Critical of her own disinterest (at least before the publication of *Fetishism and Curiosity* in 1996) in the effect of material politics on how films are viewed and assessed, the Mulvey of the 2000s argues that the end of Thatcher’s period of administration in 1990 brought about another important ideational and structural shift – one she had not properly recognised in the moment. The truth of this characterisation can be seen in how much of her writing during the early 1990s is aimed at students and others interested in rebuilding following an always unspecified change. Notably, however, her work of this period is also often reflective, returning repeatedly to the 1970s. As she later summarises, the reasons for this were not solely a process of grieving, but also ‘a critical engagement with the threads that might keep [the past] alive.’ Equivalently, for Philip Dodd, the making of the Consortium was the construction of a ‘mausoleum’ – a building where 1970s theory could more securely lodge. (‘Dodd interview’) At the same time, by its very

¹⁰² While in the 1980s the emergence of Channel 4 took up some of the funding slack, there was a notable collapse in the production of films in the UK, along with film viewership numbers. In 1980, for example, there were only 30 films produced in the UK – a thirty per cent drop from the previous year. This number dropped to 24 the following year.

nature as an educative organisation, this new institution was also a site for the continuation and development of ideas through learning. It was thus not only a place for mourning, but also for the perpetuation of the past.

Nearly all of those involved in the early years of the Consortium with whom I had interviews were at pains to point out that their relationship with '1970s theory' was not, however, straightforward. Humphreys for example describes the period as 'influential... [but also] fraught.' ('Humphreys interview') When asked about the idea of the Consortium as a mausoleum, he agreed that the 1970s was the institution's central 'affectual influence', but described the reasons for the period being 'kept alive' as 'opaque,' even to 'those involved'. Correspondence between Hirst and MacCabe from the period builds on that impression – Hirst for instance writes that the 'sharpness' of 'some of those ideas' (referring both to *Screen* and his own early Maoist-inspired democratic theories), was 'underarticulated,' and even part of their 'undoing' in the late 1980s. (Hirst n.p.) The injunction of Thatcherism had, however, left many of its 'mischiefs' 'unexpressed'. (n.p.)

As I see it, the forms of thought that coalesced around the Consortium can therefore be usefully construed as a kind of haunting.¹⁰³ The propulsive force behind its materialisation was sourced in a collective (and institutional) desire to revive and perpetuate a lost past. Notably, however, the metaphor of haunting (as opposed to those more closely related to nostalgia or melancholia), suggests that there was a violence or dystopia not just in the enforced end of the '*Screen* era' but in 1970s theory itself. Running against its own expressed self-presentation as an attempt to revivify those shoots of 'progress' starting to emerge pre-1980, the Consortium was, at least in

¹⁰³ 'Hauntology' (with its associations to Mark Fisher and Jacques Derrida) has taken on a theoretical life of its own, and there are material relations to the emergence of this movement and early 1990s Britain. It is also interesting to note the rise of discussion of ghosts and haunting in Victorian studies at the time. See the various dimensions of this research summarised in the introduction to Julian Wolfreys' *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002). This writing takes a particular interest in the relationship between ethical responsibility and knowledge of past events.

part, fuelled by a desire to reanimate certain forms of internal harm. The structural violence meted out by Thatcher was not enough to prompt and sustain its emergence – there was also, in my view, a strong desire to enforce an alternative order that events of the 1980s had inadvertently halted.

Mulvey provides a useful analogic illustration of this shape in her 2006 *Death 24x a Second*. In that book, Mulvey argues that film's centenary in 1995 (the same year the Consortium was inaugurated) was a 'transitional period' for cinema in general, prompted in part by a move away from analogue forms of filmmaking, and in part by the passing of many of its key early stars. (32) Her central point is that this moment also brought with it cinema's first sustained reckoning with its own death. This existential focus resulted in 'cinema... becoming increasingly about what is past, it becomes a mausoleum as much as a palace of dreams.' (Mulvey *LP* 17; quoting Chris Petit in *Negative Space* (1999)). The focus of both film-making and theorising about film became increasingly historically self-referential. As 'time passes, these ghosts crowd around the cinema as if its own life lies in question.' (Mulvey *LP* 17) For Mulvey, this shift in emphasis resulted in cinema becoming increasingly interested in stasis rather than movement or flux. Film became about representing what had previously occurred. As she explains, 'Stillness intrudes into movement, the image freezes into the "stop of death", taking the aesthetics of cinema that leads back to pre-cinema.' (Mulvey *LP* 32) Cinema's denotative semantic mark becomes the photograph rather than the moving image. While this always brings it into tension with its own functioning – a film is still a film – the cinema is marked by a 'shudder' in which stillness, certainty and objectivity are given renewed life.¹⁰⁴ In this way, it repeats and seeks to emulate the form (photography) against which it had historically been defined. It does so out of desire rather

¹⁰⁴ Like Kermode's reading of Eliot (discussed in the first chapter) the 'shudder' for Mulvey is an 'experiences one would rather not have', and which intrudes on the ordinary function of film. The shudder, for Mulvey, is a return to an older time, linking it to the psychoanalytic frameworks for film she develops in the 1970s.

than compulsion: in order to reconcile itself to the idea of its own demise; film asserts the same forms of order that the moving image so fundamentally undermines.

Like film as a medium, the Consortium is similarly turned into a site of haunting, constantly confronted by both its own vulnerability and the return of old desires and ideas, even as its ordinary processes of propagation continue. What is produced during this period of self-reckoning is similarly possessed by the ghosts of the past. Importantly, film's priorities at the level of form are geared towards both stasis and self-harm. Film, for Mulvey, cuts against itself, using this oppositional position to 'grasp at death and its compensatory capacity to imagine an afterlife.' (17) The Consortium's return to the exactitudes of early 1970s theory can analogously be read as not only a response to (or recovery from) Thatcherite governance, but also as a destructive internal desire aimed at destabilising its own thrust towards freedom and disorder.

Read narrowly through the prism of the Consortium's interest in value, one of the aims of the Consortium can along these lines be explained as an attempt to restore the order and violence of objective judgement. As the previous chapter suggested, the diagnosis of evaluation as violent came both from the 'right wing' flattening of racial, gender and class experiences, and the interpretation-centred forms of analysis linked to liberal pluralism's championing of these characterisations. This latter component helps explain why the Consortium's founders were reluctant to use the hegemonic forms of left-thought from the 1980s in their constructive work. The 1980s was not a 'death' for theory in general, but it was a death for pro-evaluative theorising. All of the Consortium's key persona, as well as the content of its course and its administrative structure, pushed against both (to use reductive terms) interpretative constructivism and Thatcherism. Drawing on, inter alia, the forms of a pro-evaluative semiotic theory discussed above and a very particular form of Lacanian feminism discussed below, the Consortium set about to restore objective evaluation in the face of both of these trends.

As my discussions of Dodd and Connor show, this return to objective value did not, however, take the form of Leavisite ‘elitism’. Instead its key characteristic was a commitment to *both* pragmatism and relativism, idealism and objectivism, and the resulting paradoxes that this entails. These two opposing ideas were defined as entailing each other – objectivism came to be imagined as living uncomfortably and oppositionally in relativism, and vice versa. When during the late 1990s following changes at the BFI the Consortium encountered institutional pressures that at moments sought to take relativist and at times objectivist positions, it was therefore disposed to take up opposing positions to both. Out of this confrontation emerged a version of the Consortium less interested in value questions, because more assuredly commitment to this aporetic approach – a commitment visible in its teaching prerogatives. The exiting of the BFI also resulted in a changing of institutional influence – I suggest that it was only by moving away from the BFI, and towards Birkbeck, that this paradoxical but relatively stable position could gain ascendancy.

The initial impulse of the Consortium was, however, away from a perceived ‘collapse into relativism’ and towards objectivism. I suggested earlier that one of the foundations of this turn towards objectivism was the pre-1973 semiotic theory taken from *Screen*, and transferred through the BFI’s internal operations. These ideas had nevertheless to be actively reanimated, and this was the work of, inter alia, MacCabe, Hirst and Cousins. In particular it was MacCabe – head of production at the BFI from 1985, and therefore closely imbricated in its processes at the time the Consortium was founded – who facilitated its re-emergence.

MacCabe

As I see it, his interests in championing aesthetic evaluation during the late 1980s and early 1990s were conditioned to a considerable extent by his experience and research after being pushed out of Cambridge in 1981. Later that same year, MacCabe took up a position at the university of Strathclyde, where he would remain until 1986. Partly because of the celebrity he had accrued

from the Cambridge affair, he was given considerable autonomy and financial support to pursue his own interests. Notably, however, he did not take this opportunity to continue the work he had been doing for *Screen* and in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. Instead, his work shows a near total abandonment of questions relating to the relationship between psychoanalysis and textual representation.

In its place, MacCabe describes himself as ‘returning’ to an earlier interest in the evolution of structures of meaning in the English language. Describing the intellectual impetus for this change, MacCabe names in particular the work of Raymond Williams. His aim was to go back to Williams’s project of exploring, in social and historical terms, the relationship between literature and language – to exploring the ‘particularity of the literary’ as a part of the story of language as a whole. The seeds of an interest in the distinctiveness of the aesthetic, and the particularity that underpins judgement, are therefore present right from the beginning of MacCabe’s post-Cambridge period. The textual examples in his academic work from these years are nearly always literary, and his developing interest in questions of value, as well as his positive commitment to acts of evaluation, comes primarily out of engagements with the English Studies disciplinary milieu.

That this shift occurred so abruptly at exactly the point he left Cambridge draws attention to the centrality of that dispute in setting the direction of his future research. It seems likely (though not inevitable) that if there had been less or no opposition to his work on psychoanalysis and semiotics, he would have continued to explore, or at least built off, this area of work. The intensity of his shift away from the influence of Kristeva and Metz (as well as others crucial to his thinking during the mid-1970s), and therefore also his later return to an earlier way of thinking about value, was primed by the dispute. Moreover, his return to Williams – the accepted antagonist of the Cambridge Department’s ‘traditionalists’ – shows the extent to which his Strathclyde period was in some sense a return to, or at least synthesis with, some of the position

that his 'theory' position opposed. While he never took on Ricks's advocacy of principles, MacCabe's work of the 1980s was at least within the same paradigm.

While at Strathclyde, MacCabe's main project was to develop a set of postgraduate courses to be taught through a relatively independent unit, the Programme in Literary Linguistics. His curriculum design and research output during this time led to the convening of a large conference in 1985, titled 'The Linguistics of Writing'. This conference is of interest because it shows MacCabe's (sometimes problematic) engagement with the race, gender and postcolonial critiques influential in the 1980s, as well as with the various debates over the 'divide' between structuralism and poststructuralism. On the whole, the MacCabe of this period dedicates his energies to disabusing ideas of linguistic stability and a stable canon, but it is also the period where his interest in the practice of aesthetic judgement is revitalised through engagement with contemporary ideas.

The Linguistic of Writing Conference itself was marked by rupture. During a general discussion at the beginning of the second day, many of the conference delegates made clear their dissatisfaction with the conference's agenda and approach, arguing that it did not 'allow their specific situation and voices to be heard' (MacCabe *LU* 287). Some of the concerns had to do with a perceived lack of engagement with Marxist positions on language, while others, including the input of Pratap Rughani, 'deplored the Eurocentric bias of the conference.' (287) MacCabe by his own admission responded poorly to the concerns, and a ballot was subsequently taken on whether he should be allowed to deliver his paper. After a vote in favour of continuing, MacCabe describes himself giving a 'hurried abridgment' of what he had originally written. (287) Subsequently admitting the conference's culpability with respect to at least the charges of eurocentrism, MacCabe rewrote his paper as a conclusion to the book collecting the conference proceedings. Through a discussion of various contemporary sociolinguists (notably Mary Louise Pratt and Noam Chomsky), he concludes that English as a discipline should premise its future

study of the language on a 'linguistics of conflict.' (207) This would reflect, 'The most important development of English in this [twentieth] century: how a whole variety of peoples subjected to the language of the imperial master have reappropriated it for their own uses.' (288). From a practical perspective, this would mean that 'national standard' English should be taught only as a 'variety', and that bi- and multi-lingualism would be encouraged in general, and within the study of English.¹⁰⁵ (303)

This advocacy of linguistic pluralism is to a degree homologous with arguments for the opening of the literary canon, and in this way associated with the relativist constructivism that North and others identify with the period. It is interesting, however, to read it alongside Derek Attridge's contribution to the same conference. Attridge, who like MacCabe attended Cambridge as a postgraduate student, was himself involved with the Programme in Literary Linguistics, and employed by Strathclyde at the time.¹⁰⁶ In his article, Attridge confronts Roman Jakobson's identification of the 'poetic function'; loosely, Jakobson's attempt to delineate what makes the poetic distinct in structuralist terms. After laying out its content, Attridge characterises Jakobson's understanding of poetry as, 'technical in its vocabulary, assured in its rhetoric, and free of any interference from the messy world of judgements, values, and power-relations... it offers an objective and purely linguistic method of identifying what counts as poetry and what doesn't.'¹⁰⁷ (Attridge *CS* 17) He then sets about dismantling Jakobson's approach – which he associates with the discipline of Linguistics since Saussure – on grounds including that it neglects to take into consideration the readers (instead of just the writers) of poetry. Attridge argues that

¹⁰⁵ MacCabe also links his support of a 'linguistics of conflict' and multilectalism to a broadening of media, arguing that 'the chauvinist connotations of English and the class connotations of literature must be abandoned in favour of a commitment to cultural studies.' (MacCabe *LU* 302)

¹⁰⁶ Attridge was employed by Strathclyde between 1984 and 1988. In the book version of the conference proceedings, Attridge's contribution is the first chapter, and MacCabe's the last.

¹⁰⁷ After setting out his general system, Jakobson formulates his definition of the poetic in this way: 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.' (Quoted in Attridge *CS* 17) See further Jakobson's 'Closing Statement, From the viewpoint of linguistics' (1958).

once readers are brought back into the picture, it is impossible to define literature except with reference to a wider ‘culturally produced value system’. (23)

Interestingly for present purposes, the common ground that Attridge finds with Jakobson is a mutual commitment to poetic evaluation – and it is in Jakobson’s delineation of evaluative practices that Attridge sees broader societal values implicit.¹⁰⁸ He ends the article by identifying literature with the ambiguities of culture, suggesting that rather than linguistics being a subspecies of literature, the reverse is true. Attridge comes to a similar conclusion in an article published two years later on the writing of Saussure. There, he argues that Saussure himself can be read both as a strict structuralist committed to synchronic accounts of language, and as a ‘story-teller’ who sees even in etymological disciplinary practices narrative as well as fact. (Attridge 24) This reading presents language as ‘*inherently* unstable’, and supports a literary approach to the idea of history; again arguing that it may be the literary that encompasses the linguistic, rather than the other way around. (Attridge 26)

For the reading of MacCabe, what is helpful in Attridge’s work is the extent to which arguments against formalism are used as a way of broadening and supporting normativity. This is different to what was occurring in debates over the literary canon, where literature departments often felt compelled to abandon aesthetic evaluation and other considerations of form exactly because of the press of normative considerations.¹⁰⁹ Part of the force of Attridge’s work is in showing how a commitment to allowing broader social factors to enter definitions of the literary can promote the idea of literary value, rather than deaden it. As I later suggest was the case for Mulvey and Rose, it was a return to definite positions of ethical and political normativity that opened the way for other forms of normative claim, including aesthetic.

¹⁰⁸ Attridge’s own idea of value proceeds from a social-materialist reading of society, to pleasure, and then to judgement (23).

¹⁰⁹ Attridge’s work of this period prefigures his later definition of the literary through its ethical function.

This idea is picked up in MacCabe's introduction to an edited collection, *Futures for English*, published in 1988. The introduction is also MacCabe's most sustained engagement with pragmatism. From the first paragraph, he describes the collection as part of a process of institutionalising the 1970s 'theoretical re-evaluation of the role of language and discourse which recast the relation between the individual and history', and his focus throughout is on how that 'institutional process' should occur. (MacCabe *LU* 3) His main concern is to ward off the tendency to use this 'cultural analysis' as way to assert a kind of linguistic communalism, where the meaning of text is understandable only through the paradigms of belief and desire encoded in language.¹¹⁰ (3) He finds the most influential enunciation of this idea in pragmatism, and especially in Rorty, who, as discussed in the previous chapter, develops relative truth conditionals within a given 'ethnos' or 'culture'. (7-11) MacCabe attacks this position by arguing that there is no 'transparent series of links between utterances, behaviour and attitudes' within a language or culture. (9) Instead, 'within the interior of any given culture there is always a series of struggles about the articulation of these three aspects, most crucially around questions of work, sexuality and race.' (9) His preference is thus for stressing more ambiguity and difference in the transmission of culture, rather than a constructed unity.

Within the literary context, he sees Joyce's writing as doing just this sort of culturally-engaged splintering. Joyce's work was a 'prolonged interrogation of [an] alien language which was both mother-tongue and imperial oppressor.' (11-12). Such an endpoint is similar to MacCabe's earlier injunction that the analysis of English as a linguistic construct should draw on the 'postcolonial question' of how to write in, and on, a language that is both yours and that of the imperial subjugator. What is different in this introduction, however, is the extent to which MacCabe sees this approach as the only way to sustain the 'radical confrontation with difference' that evaluation requires. (10) His aim is to dispute literary homogeneity and the idea of a shared

¹¹⁰ MacCabe sees this idea as equally present in Thomas Macaulay's justifications for imperialism, and Donald Davidson's language philosophy. (4-6)

literary culture in order to allow for meaningful dispute. While the patterns of community – if there are patterns – can no longer be said to be clear in the ways Rorty or Leavis would like, paying attention to the ‘enormous varieties of cultural forms,’ is the only possible route to a ‘complementary moment of totalisation’. (13-14) While still unwilling to commit wholly to the practice of evaluation, the MacCabe of the late 1980s is feeling his way towards a pro-evaluative position that is embedded in broader social realities.

This direction of movement is a reversal of Kermode’s drift away from the structuralist idealism of *The Classic* and towards the historicity of *History and Value*. There is, however, a sense in which the two find common ground in the late 1980s. For both, the fallout from the Cambridge Affair set a course different to what might have been expected if that rupture had not occurred. The mirroring of their views on value suggests that something of the thrust of that moment also allowed for later theoretical accord. As I suggested in the first chapter, it was MacCabe’s occlusion of his own history which prevented him doing the kind of materialist theorising called for by his position on Kermode. In some ways, it was only by returning to a Raymond Williams-style interest in the cultural history of language that he was able to again raise questions of the relationship between processes of judgement and social living.

I noted earlier that MacCabe’s work of this Strathclyde period is only very incidentally interested in the Lacanian psychoanalytic theories that had animated nearly all of his writing during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Attention to these sorts of theories however reemerges prominently in the early curricula documents and exam papers of the Consortium. Across all four of the modules taught in the first two years of the Consortium’s Masters, readings on the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and textuality feature, notably especially in the reading lists of topics dealing with the evaluation of texts. In the course on ‘Judgement’, five of the nine weeks involve some required reading on semiotics and psychoanalysis – appearing even more frequently than Kantian texts, around which the course is ostensibly arranged. Equally notable is how in four of

the five weeks this material relates to the relationship between psychoanalysis, semiotics and feminism. That connection is also evident in the Consortium's founding proposal to the Birkbeck board, which mentions that the course will build on 'the critique of the seeming naturalness of representation, largely of women, mounted by a combination of feminist, semiotic and psychoanalytic theory... in the 1970s' ('Consortium Proposal' 18).

Feminism, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis

In my interviews with Consortium members, the frequency of prescribed set texts and exam questions relating to the nexus between psychoanalysis, semiotics and feminism was attributed to the influence of Laura Mulvey in particular, but also, for both, to Jacqueline Rose.¹¹¹ It is tempting in this light to view the Consortium's pedagogic and theoretical position as a revival of the strand of feminist theory influenced by the amalgam of semiotics and psychoanalysis inaugurated, *inter alia*, by Mulvey's celebrated 1975 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.¹¹² This body of work became increasingly orthodox within the humanities during the mid-1980s, forming the base material for several newly formed 'feminist studies' programmes across the UK

¹¹¹ This is not to suggest that there was no interest on the part of MacCabe, Humphreys, Cousins or others in incorporating feminist readings, but it is clear from my interviews that the push for inclusion of texts relating to the nexus between psychoanalysis and textuality came from Mulvey and Rose, and it was mainly Mulvey who taught these segments of the courses.

Rose was never on the official teaching staff of the Consortium, but was involved in a large number of the preparatory meetings, contributed to the development of its curriculum, and taught sporadically on various courses.

¹¹² As Shohini Chaudhuri explains, British feminist film theorists in the 1970s 'swerved away from the US trend [towards sociology] by using... French structuralism, and semiotics... to understand how films produced their meanings and how they addressed spectators.' (Chaudhuri 8) While consideration of the position of women in various forms of art as a product of their placement and self-imagining within patriarchal structures had previously been undertaken, Mulvey in particular sought to systemise this intuition by connecting it to the semiotics of the literary and filmic image outlined by Barthes and (early) Metz. The semiotics that she drew on was a version that had recently been tied to psychoanalysis, and in particular to Lacan. These ideas had come to the United Kingdom in various sporadic forms – appearing in a disparate series of comments and journals. Their importance for thinking about texts and textuality can be traced centrally to the pages of *Screen*. Building on *Signs of the Times*, MacCabe, Heath and Metz wrote influential articles on the connection between semiotics and psychoanalysis between 1974 and 1976. Mulvey's orientation was always political, and found its impetus in the UK feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her own words, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is an attempt to, 'examin[e] patriarchy with the tools it provides.' (15) Mulvey is always at pains to point out that because of her background her essays of the 1970s were decidedly outside the academy, but texts including Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex* (1970), and Robin Morgan's edited collection *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) are at different times cited as influential on her work. As Patrice Petro notes, the forms of analysis that came out of that essay became 'if not paramount, pivotal' to the feminist study of visual and written texts during the 1980s. (Petro 165)

– programmes often preoccupied with textual analysis, even when institutionally situated outside of film or literary studies departments.¹¹³

Questions from Consortium exam and term papers however suggest that there is an intentional complication of those approaches by the mid-1990s. Most noticeably, questions set between 1995 and 1997 on the psychoanalysis-feminism-semiotics nexus nearly always have a strong emphasis on political theory, historicity and material politics.¹¹⁴ In particular, the questions show an interest in linking Freudian and Marxist terminology and forms of textual analysis, as well as in connecting ‘feminist semiotics’ to contemporary political contexts, concepts and claims. This shift mirrors, and sometimes prefigures, Mulvey’s and Rose’s theoretical writings from the period, which take on a similarly historico-political aspect. For both, the purpose of developing their analysis in this direction was not solely to provide materialist grounding to their previous work, but also to give cogency and urgency to their normative claims about, in particular, the social position of women. Congruent with Dodd’s description of the Consortium as a Mausoleum, Rose describes her work of the early 1990s as an ‘exhumation’ of elements of the 1970s feminist movement important to her own intellectual (and other) development.¹¹⁵

To my eyes, the interest in question of aesthetic judgement and evaluation evident in Consortium position papers and pedagogic decisions is closely related to this turn. Mulvey’s and

¹¹³ Mulvey and Rose collected their large body of work from this period in, respectively, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) and *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986). The increasing institutionalisation and ‘academicization’ of the ‘feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis triad’ during the 1980s has been criticised repeatedly – see for example B. Ruby Riche’s *Chick Flicks*.

¹¹⁴ One question asks students to analyse King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* in the context of ‘David O. Selznick’s social position in Hollywood’ – the primary text in the associated course reading list is Mulvey’s use of the same film in her 1989 reappraisal of ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”’), a reappraisal decidedly Lacanian subjectivist in its approach, and notably detached from social or institutional histories. This shift in emphasis suggests Mulvey had begun to be interested in the material basis of her own use of psychoanalysis in approaching texts. Another question asks about the relationship between ‘feminist semiotics’ and ‘social movements’, while a third, in the Judgement course, uses a quote from Rose’s ‘Hamlet – the Mona Lisa of Literature’ to set up a question about Eliot’s portrayal of *Hamlet*’s Gertrude as ‘not good enough aesthetically’, and the class and gender politics of 1910s and 1920s London. A fourth asks directly about ‘feminist semiotics’ ‘political foundations’, and a fifth about the relationship between Metz use of ‘fantasy’ in *The Imaginary Signifier* and Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism as developed in the first section of *Capital*. This last example is an interesting amalgam of Mulvey’s and Rose’s theoretical interests at the time, as the two sections below illustrate.

¹¹⁵ She is referring here particularly to *States of Fantasy*, discussed below. (‘Rose interview’)

Rose's drawing together of material examples (and materialist analysis) with the psychoanalytic-feminist-semiotic nexus is what enables them to make increasingly direct political and ethical claims. This in turn laid the groundwork for arguments in favour of aesthetic judgement, both because conclusions on aesthetic value emerged from the connections they were drawing (often when addressing form), and because their arguments for ethical and political normativity opened up space for aesthetic equivalents.¹¹⁶ Put otherwise, the Consortium's revitalisation of aesthetic value came out of a turn towards other forms of normativity, and towards normativity in general.¹¹⁷ For this reason, the way aesthetic evaluation was justified and discussed within Consortium structures became increasingly closely linked to the question of value as a whole, rather than to that of literary, cinematic, or aesthetic evaluation discretely. The last section of this chapter illustrates how, under institutional pressures, this affirmative value holism shifted into a more limited defence of evaluation as an aporetic rather than objective practice. What enabled this later position to emerge was, however, the initial revitalisation of the possibility of normative evaluation more generally.

The two key texts illustrating this shift towards a materialist politicisation of Mulvey's and Rose's earlier 'psychoanalytically-infused feminism', as well as towards a positive case for aesthetic judgement, are, respectively, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) and *States of Fantasy* (1996). Both were published in 1996, and draw from essays and lectures given in the period between 1990 and 1995. Mulvey and Rose had extensive social and professional contact over this period, including through the BFI and Birkbeck. Between 1993 and 1995, both also attended several preparatory meetings for the Consortium. While minutes from these meetings are now only fragmentally

¹¹⁶ The final sentences of the first introduction to *Visual and Other Pleasures* on which Mulvey is commenting in this quote read: 'It also seems appropriate to look back to the lost tradition of Marxist psychoanalysis that failed to survive the traumatic events of Fascism in the 1930s, the war in the 1940s and the cold war in the 1950s. The juxtaposition "politics and psychoanalysis" must now be added to the juxtapositions "art and politics" and "psychoanalysis and representation". Feminism gave these juxtapositions new relevance in the 1970s and it is still central today.' (xv)

¹¹⁷ Modern defences of aesthetic value and aesthetic formalism have consequently continued to carry this ethical trace – nearly all arguments for new formalism and 'new evaluation' are grounded in ethical norms.

available, minutes from a meeting held in January 1994 shows that the two agreed to ‘develop’ course material arising ‘out of’ their recent work, which is described as having some ‘close[ness].’¹¹⁸ The discussion below, drawn from select elements of their writing from this period, suggests that Mulvey’s work focused more on the theoretical link between materialist politics and psychoanalytic interpretation of texts, while Rose turned to grounding the psychoanalytic approaches to textual reading she had developed in the 1980s to address specific macropolitical scenarios.¹¹⁹ For both, the position and depiction of women is always a key site of analysis. Unlike in the Stanford example, both Mulvey’s and Rose’s turns towards history shifted their approaches towards a positive case for aesthetic evaluation, and away from pragmatist or relativist alternatives in a manner that accorded with MacCabe’s approach.

Mulvey

To start with Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) collects essays written between 1990 and 1995. In her acknowledgments, she explicitly mentions the contribution of the BFI discussion groups to the essays’ formation, and thanks MacCabe for contributing to shaping the essays into a coherent book. In interviews, she however also describes the essays as ‘written... partly to move away’ from BFI ‘orthodoxy’. She considers *Fetishism and Curiosity* to be a return to unresolved questions emanating from the ‘originary’ politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s that prompted her original interest in psychoanalysis; a backward-looking approach I previously argued is evident in much of the Consortium’s work. The original 1995 *Foreword* explains further that the essays ‘tried to bring together questions of history with the theories that [previously] formed my way of thinking,’ so as to have clearer bearing on the lived realities of women.¹²⁰ In particular, the

¹¹⁸ Minutes and other administrative documents from the Consortium’s early years proved difficult to find – some few documents have been kept in personal archives, and others by the BFI and Birkbeck. The quoted meeting minutes are kept in the Birkbeck archives (dated Friday 21 January 1994).

¹¹⁹ As for MacCabe, a turn to social questions renews Mulvey’s and Rose’s interest in the place of normative judgement in textual analysis.

¹²⁰ Mulvey points out in a 2002 reflection piece that, ‘the juxtaposition of “psychoanalytic theory” and “semiotic” with “economics and politics” in her original 1989 introduction to *Visual and Other Pleasures* had already begun to recognise ‘if only implicitly, the need to rethink the relation between Freud and Marx.’ The time of the Consortium’s

collection brings together Marx and Freud's differing conceptions of fetishism, so as to enhance and complicate Mulvey's earlier (essentially Freudian) understanding of the link between desire, the female body, and cinematic form.

In brief, Fetishism in the Marxist's sense is the process by which the place of labour in constituting economic value is obscured, while Fetishism for Freud describes the anxiety prompted by the perception of the maternal body as castrated.¹²¹ For Mulvey, both are 'an attempt to explain a refusal, or blockage, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche, to understand a symbolic system of value'. Both also 'inscribe' an 'image' to effect this concealment. (Mulvey *FC* 18) While the two processes have radically different (and incommensurable) forms of inscription, together they generate a spectacle that diverts away from 'inquiry or curiosity'. Unlike the pragmatist position the Stanford Senate reached at the end of the CIV debates, Mulvey sees inquiry and curiosity as tools for uncovering reasons for moral and political judgement and action, and much of the purpose of her argument is aimed at showing how they function (through textual interpretation) to allow for the criticism of, and response to, political and ethical harms. (18)

Linking that claim to aesthetics, Mulvey describes 'competent' filmmaking as demystifying built-up fetishism, often by disavowing realism and foregrounding the artifactuality of the film. (18, 174) From this it would seem as though she defines aesthetic value as the artistic realisation of psycho-political ends, specifically, the demystification of the two forms of fetishism identified. Her analysis of individual films complicates this position, however. It does so especially through her repeated return to the relationship between films and their criticism. In the process of her reflections on this relationship, she shows up the limitation of any reductionist use of art and

genesis in the early 1990s is the moment of this 'rethinking'. In this respect, Mulvey's work has some similarity with that of MacCabe at the same time, though in shape Mulvey's intellectual drift is closer to Kermode's.

¹²¹ The most theoretical of the essays in *Fetishism and Curiosity*, titled 'Fetishisms', gives a full account of these links, and is also used as the introduction to the collection.

preserves the specificity of the aesthetic, even as her justifications for claims about aesthetic value remain closely linked to her Marxist-Freudian outlook. Notably, both in the practice and content of her essays, Mulvey centres the role of form in this complication.

A useful and relatively representative example is Mulvey's discussion of Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*. Early in the essay, Mulvey states plainly that the 'interest of the film [*Xala*] lies in its inextricable intermeshing of Freudian and Marxist forms of analysis,' and describes Sembene as creating a 'poetics of politics'; a 'cinema of what cannot be said.' (Mulvey *FC* 164, 183) She also spends much of the chapter describing how the film interlaces psychic and political injury, and then, through formal cinematic devices, forces the audience to confront the fetishism that upholds these connected orders, even describing the film's 'aesthetic [as] depend[ent on] making visible those aspects of economic and political structure that are either invisible or repressed in articulated language.' (164) In a noticeable turn, Mulvey however also uses the film's invocation of a fetishist object to begin a general exploration of the history of the idea of fetishism in general. This etymological interlude is unnaturally wedged between her close reading of various elements of the film, and takes on a noticeably more formal register and uses longer paragraph lengths – a manoeuvre that perceptibly foregrounds the essay's previous formal choices. In the same section, Mulvey furthers this sense of the section's estrangement by directly describing her use of *Xala*'s deployment of the idea of fetishism as an 'excuse' for entering into historical 'tracking'. Jettisoning the careful material-grounding evident in the essay up until this point, and utilising a methodology decidedly un-psychoanalytic in shape, she premises her discussion of the history of the idea of fetishism on the film's conscious and deliberate invocation and engagement with it. Rather than drawing insights from the film's modes of signification, she opts for a strangely forced and decidedly anti-materialist emphasis on what *Xala* 'actually says'.

Doing so gives Mulvey's analysis the flavour of what in disciplinarily psychological terminology might be described as behaviourist rationalism – an attempt to extract meaning from the surface-

level content of a behaviour or idea. This is an approach she attacked regularly throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even drawing connections between behaviourism and the claims to narrative realism MacCabe attacked in 'Realism and the Cinema'. It is therefore unsurprising that Mulvey goes on to describe her almost philological discussion of the historical usage of the word 'fetishism' as 'rais[ing]... ghosts'. (Mulvey *FC* 134)¹²² In my view, Mulvey is here formally illustrating the pitfalls of reductively diagnostic types of analysis, even as the initial thrust of her argument pushes in the other direction.

In the course of her subsequent discussion, the flow of argument itself begins to switch. It becomes clear that the 'ghosts' she has in mind do not materialise only from the facts of the history of fetishism she is telling, but also from the fetishistic elements of the practice of Freudian/Marxist demystification, and of criticism in the literary studies tradition. Replicating the formal deracination of the chapter's discussion of the history of the idea of fetishism, Mulvey introduces, in the content of the text itself, the spectre of criticism central to her own methodology as both a 'threat' to established hierarchies of meaning making, and a type of interpretative orthodoxy obscuring other goods.¹²³ By the end of the chapter, both through the jarring formal choices she makes in introducing her discussion of the history of fetishism, and through the content of the latter parts of her essay, the limits of rationalist forms of interpretation are brought squarely to the reader's attention. While the general thrust of her argument in *Fetishism and Curiosity* is towards closer identification of aesthetic value with the processes by which psycho-political realities are 'delivered' into conscious knowledge, she also shows how that process is itself historically 'limited'.

¹²² Using an approach decidedly un-psychoanalytic in shape, Mulvey premises her discussion of fetishism on the film's own consciousness and deliberate engagement with the idea.

¹²³ It is also helpful to note that, at a biographical level, Mulvey's understanding of the criticism 'haunting' her analysis refers back to that version popular in the 1960s and 1970s. As she explains in her second introduction to *Fetishism and Curiosity*, '1995 pivots backwards to my earlier cinephilia of the 1960s and 70s' and 'my own' 'disruption' thereof. As was the case for the Consortium more broadly, Mulvey is haunted by the unresolved contradictions of the period before the political and other changes of the 1980s.

By foregrounding the artifactuality and historical limits of her own (critical) practice, Mulvey therefore illustrates the extent to which she is unable to holistically reduce artistic artefacts to their economic base. She construes Sembene's 'artmaking' as in direct contrast to criticism's determinism. Both through the chapter's form and content, Mulvey in this way reintroduces 'mystification' into *Xala*; no longer seeing its aesthetic value as found only in its de-fetishising qualities. The aesthetic 'value' of the film is instead in both its ability to elucidate, and its ability to remain in some ways in 'excess' of its own critical function – an excess linked in important ways to formal presentation. Mulvey herself often praises characteristics of the film on both grounds, stressing that the film's value *qua* film is dependent on a combination of the two.

Notably, however, her identification of the aesthetic with uncertainty is primarily the thesis against which her return to Marx and Freud is the antithesis (rather than the other way around). While it cannot be said to depict 'art' as essentially analogous to 'criticism' (of a 'text' composed of everyday politics and psychic life), *Fetishism and Curiosity* is principally an argument in favour of 'knowledge' and against 'belief'. As Mulvey explains, 'In the early 1990s, I was increasingly concerned about the contemporary tendency to dismiss the Enlightenment and its tenets of rationality... it seemed to me as though belief was seeping back into political and social life.' (Mulvey *LP* xviii) This 'concern' prompted an interest in the connection between her previous approaches to interpreting texts and analytic materialism, which in turn prompted a revitalisation of the same political – including feminist – commitments that had led to her devising a Freudian analysis of cinematic depiction in the first place. When writing about aesthetic value, it is this political drive that animates Mulvey's (generally implicit) position in favour of aesthetic value. While the form of her writing sometimes creates distance from the modes of evaluation linked to 'criticism', she still encourages the practice of judgement, principally as a way out of fetishistic mystification. At the same time, *Fetishism and Curiosity* opens up the question of how aesthetic

evaluation interacts with Mulvey's use of Marx and Freud, rather than reducing evaluative questions to criticism in the broad sense.

Rose

The same can be said of *States of Fantasy*, a collection constructed around Rose's 1994 Clarendon Lectures, and augmented by a selection of other essays written between 1991 and 1995. Where Mulvey uses materialist and psychoanalytic concepts to analyse elements of visual representation, Rose ties her earlier (1980s) interest in the relationship between textuality and psychoanalytic theories of sexuality to the political concept of the 'state', and to specific state examples, namely Palestine/Israel, South Africa and the United Kingdom.¹²⁴ Each of the book's first three chapters centres on writing from one of these states, and all reappear through the rest of the book. Like Mulvey, Rose is concerned with thinking through how Freudian ideas link to the meaning, construction and perpetuation of political formations. Her use of psychoanalytic tools is aimed at destabilising political constructions, particularly the state. As she puts, 'the terrifying fragility and intransigence of modern statehood can be illuminated by placing it into dialogue with Freud.' (10)

Because the focus of her exploration – the object of her analysis – is the written text, and particularly the literary text, Rose's work is imbricated, as she recognises, in the institutional debates surrounding literary studies and literary criticism contemporary to her writing. This includes contemporary debates over the canon. She builds her case in *States of Fantasy* in opposition to what she describes as a fixation in English studies with the 'vertical transmission of cultural inheritance across time.' (23) The process of explaining how this transmission occurs, has, she notes, become intertwined with Freudian concepts and methods. More specifically, her use of the phrase 'agon of writers' suggests the work of Harold Bloom, who, from *Yeats* (1970)

¹²⁴ See for instance Rose's 1986 *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* for a synopsis of her earlier approach.

and *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) onwards, developed an approach to literary identity and creative production premised on (largely) unconscious conflict between generations of writers.¹²⁵

(23) While acknowledging that this idea brought the question of the unconscious to the centre of the discipline, it is ‘striking’, to Rose, ‘how absent [the unconscious] has been as a concept from debates about the contemporary redrawing of the literary globe.’ (23) In an inversion of the hegemony of diachronic post-structuralism, Rose sees the deployment of the unconscious in literary studies as lacking a synchronic, even structuralist, imaginary.

As the Clarendon lectures underpinning *States of Fantasy* were delivered in the same year as the publication of Bloom’s *The Western Canon* – his argument against ‘school of resentment’ claims in favour of reading texts for their representativity or social purpose – it is difficult to avoid noting the contrast between Rose and Bloom’s approaches. Notably, Bloom’s argument is a deliberate narrowing of the physical world in the service of defending aesthetic value within the context of a specific (Western) inter-generational tradition of conflict. Rose, by contrast, takes as her subject ‘states’ marginal to the centre, as well as the very concept of the (psychic and political) state. For her, the idea of an homogenous tradition, like that of a state, is premised on fantasy, and while the practice of fantasy underpins the possibility of all group identity, it also confirms its impossibility. Fantasy is the ‘precondition or psychic glue’ of both literary traditions and the state. The ‘unconscious dreams of nations’ have real force, even as their existence, as fantasy, is necessarily fictitious.

This analysis leads Rose to offering a novel route into the question of culture and identity. Agreeing with Bloom (and Guillory) that the liberal pluralist politics of cultural identity – including with the respect to the processes of canon formation – is self-absorbed, politically-unmoored, and necessarily ineffective as a form of genuine structural reform, she suggests that the theoretical concepts ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ be replaced with those of ‘states’ and ‘fantasy’.

¹²⁵ See further Bloom’s 1983 *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, in which he expands on this same case.

(14) Her preference for the term ‘state’ over ‘culture’ is rooted in its ‘always hold[ing]... reference to the founding political condition of the modern world.’ (16) The idea of a state is manacled to the complexity of material fact, different to the notion of ‘politics as culture and nothing else.’ (14) ‘Fantasy’ maintains the connotation of ‘construction’ so central to modern ideas of ‘identity’, but also threatens the subject with its own dissolution, thereby preventing any assertion of a particular way of being as a form of ‘counter-identity’ (for instance through a counter-canon), rhetorically mirroring the ‘forms of unswerving conviction’ that the very idea of identity began to destabilise. (14) Bringing together, the ideas of ‘state’ and ‘fantasy’ can, for Rose, have the politically efficacious consequence of allowing the subject to begin to destabilise the (political) state, even as the processes of fantasy are given a securer tethering.

While this argument, and the examples Rose uses to support it, show clearly ‘the dangers of certainty’, what is most striking about *States of Fantasy* is the extent to which it is also an attack on any acceptance of irresolution. As she puts it in her discussion of Palestine/Israel and its fictional representations, ‘If certainty is belligerent and panicked, you cannot in this political context just make a virtue of its opposite, not in a world where the trauma of national identification – lack of a nation, yearning to be a nation – is what seems historically, and so dramatically, to engender the most ruthless of psychic and political states.’ (Rose, 30) Because of her turn to extant political circumstances, Rose is compelled to reject full dispossession in both the Freudian and political senses. The politics of the state show the ‘limit ... [of] provisional forms of identity which for many have become the hallmark of the postmodern world.’ (31) Like for Mulvey, the force of political normativity compels Rose away from positions of irresolution.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Considering that Rose was writing at a moment when the political hegemony of the state was in relative retreat, increasingly losing control to the practices and conceptual ephemera of ‘global corporations’, Rose’s reduction of the political to the statist seems both strange and in contradiction to the thrust of her general analysis. In an inversion of her own criticism of Stanley Fish for too neatly circumscribing the ‘claims’ of literary studies so as to argue against the politicisation of the discipline, Rose circumscribes the political in her attempt to bring out the

Her conclusion is that, ‘In relation to Israel/Palestine, we are left with two halves of a theoretical paradigm which do not add up.’ (30) The idea of the state is premised on the fantasy of certainty and action, but to embrace its opposite, uncertainty and inaction, is to belie the lived political reality of Palestinians. In reading a text, this amounts to unpacking the points of uncertainty in its language and other features, while recognising that this unsettling is not constitutive – it merely invigorates the theoretical and psychic pull towards finite experience. As I suggest later, the shape of this paradoxical endpoint, at the same time relativist and objectivist, is a hallmark of thinking about value within Consortium structures. Rose notes that what connects the two positions, or more accurately what ‘runs the join’, is ‘trauma’ – an uncomfortable and unwanted sense of the political, psychological and theoretical existence of the other; an ‘unwilling presence’ that is shared across the divide. For Rose (in an echo of Judith Butler), it is not possible to be without the other.

In the context of higher-order debates about how normative value is to be conceived, these two poles take the form of various versions of objectivism and relativism. On Rose’s schema, each is exclusive of, but unconsciously present to, the other. Where objectivism resists, or at least struggles to contain, the specificities of everyday life, relativism often gestures towards objective truth as a way out of scepticism. The conceptualisation of value itself is dependent on characterisations that are mutually exclusive and dependent. Importantly, this position has been reached because of their historical imbrication with one another, rather than by *a priori* fact.

Rose’s position is further clarified in her South African chapter, titled ‘Black Hamlet’ (after the 1937 psychoanalytic tract by Sachs Wulf) which focuses on the body and its representation.

Prefiguring the debates over Afropessimism that I discuss in the last chapter of this thesis, Rose

uncertainty that its literary connections denote. (23) This leads her to concluding that ‘the politics of literature is not something to be calculated or computed in terms of measurable effect’. (23) What is made less clear is the extent to which the realities of the state go the other way, compelling forms of stasis and calculability onto the literary.

starts with a reading of a Sieneese renaissance painting depicting the ‘transporting’ of ‘the leg of a negro into a white patient.’ (38). By one interpretation – the interpretation given by the attendants at the museum where Rose views the piece – the restoring of the white man’s body to completeness is what enables his miraculous resurrection (no incomplete body can rise to heaven). As Rose notes, this narrative can ‘only make sense if [the black man] is already outside the category of the human’ – a spiritual enabler rather than a corporeal form. To hold otherwise would leave another body (the body of the black man) without a leg, and undermine the painting’s narrative of restored completeness. A problem however follows, for ‘if the Negro is inhuman... then how can the transplanting of one of his bodily organs in any sense be said to *complete* the white man?’ (38, italics original).¹²⁷ This raises questions of what it means to ‘own’ a body, in both the psychoanalytic and political senses; a question Rose links also to the proprietorship of land, and the idea of a state.

One way to read the painting is ‘as internally undoing or “deconstructing” itself; showing the limits of bodily and proprietary ownership.’¹²⁸ Much of the rest of the chapter however is aimed at demonstrating that this methodology is insufficient in the absence of its affirmative opposite. Grounding her discussion in the literary productions of Apartheid South Africa, Rose shows repeatedly that invocations of bodily terms – the heart, blood, legs – function at literal levels even as they are deployed metaphorically. In her words, ‘blood [like the heart] figures in the language of the body as the site of true, non-metaphorical possession.’ (41) This applies as much in personal and family settings as it does in narratives of, for instance, national bloodline and its connection to the land.

¹²⁷ Conversely, ‘if he is human, then surely the miracle is a double, human and divine, affront?’ (38) Whereas (analogously) transubstantiation can allow an object to relinquish its object-ness and take on spiritual embodiment, the black man’s leg must remain human, but to be human is to undermine the painting’s general thrust towards completeness.

¹²⁸ In humanist fashion, Rose assumes that this undoing is a pathway to ‘loosening’ racial convictions; the possibility of which is opposed by Afropessimist thought. See further my discussion in chapter four.

Affirming the literal leads Rose into a consideration of what she describes as, ‘One of the central issues that has vexed and stimulated literary study in the last several years’, namely ‘the question of how the map should be drawn. What does English literature *include*? Where or how do you draw the lines?’ (41, *Italics original*) At core, these are classical (in the Eliotic sense) questions of canon formation – what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’. In line with her previous conclusions, Rose resists attacking the idea of the classic or the canon on grounds that they are ‘unstable or divided’ (42). Instead, she sees the value of texts as synchronically stable, though ‘mutating and inverting themselves through the passage of time.’ (42) This is a close replication of the position Kermode (one of Rose’s early mentors) reaches at the end of *History and Value*. For both, a text has a value at a given point, but only as a contingent historical fact.

What Rose adds to the Kermodian position is a perception of the extent to which the historical trajectory that dictates the value of a text is not accessible through solely conscious means. As a result, canon-formation is never merely a matter of selection. In her words, ‘the argument about the canon will get nowhere as long as its language is restricted to exclusion and inclusion... The debate can only makes sense... if it is seen as part of the uncovering and redrawing of literary-political history. But this history cannot know its parameters in advance. We need to find a place inside these discussions for a concept of the historically unseen.’ (42) Rose associates this ‘unseen’, through a contextual study of South African and Palestinian/Israeli examples, with ‘trauma’, the ‘precarious’ and the politically ‘excluded’. While acts of historical recuperation can begin to ground evaluative practices, any act of determining the value of a text requires that the always unknown historical position of the politically ‘excluded’ be brought into the picture, even as the content of this material remains for the most part inaccessible.

Interestingly for present purposes, Rose uses the metaphor of ‘haunting’ to represent this relationship between the ‘historically unseen’ and the canonical centre. Drawing on a 1974 Yasar Arafat speech identifying Palestinians as the ‘ghosts’ of ‘the Israeli psyche’ and political

discourse, Rose describes the Palestinian position as one of ‘exile and historical deprivation.’ (44) She stresses, however, that haunting signifies ‘not only... loss but [also] uncanny persistence’.

(44) Drawing on literary examples (the work of Amos Oz primarily), she argues that the excluded other is always in the head of the metropolitan ‘oppressor’. This psychological return is an historically initiated process, but cannot be consciously acknowledged; obscured, in part, by the fantasies built into ideas like ‘national literature’. Conversely, the multifactorial presence of the oppressor is only able to present itself in partial form to the mind of the oppressed, even as they are unable, often bodily, to extricate themselves from their position of oppression.

I suggested earlier that one implication of imagining the Consortium through the metaphor of haunting is that the perpetuation of repressed (but also desired) violence, including through the imposition of objective judgement, is implicit in the figuration. Rose’s own discussion however identifies haunting with the uncanny persistence of what has previously been excluded, rather than the self-censoring of a person or institution’s own violent desires. A return to the kind of ‘open political work’ that Mulvey and others suggest was central to the kinds of late 1970s theory prefiguring the Consortium, can in this vein be seen as a form of either convalescence or melancholy; a recuperation following the relative decline of Thatcherism. Such an analysis however also invites questions over where Rose imagines the violent impulse in those resisting oppressive force (as opposed to being subject to it) goes in her work. As for Mulvey, I want to suggest that it is sublimated, at least in part, into a strong, and relatively rigid, defence of normativity. Unlike her writing in the 1980s, the Rose of the 1990s aims at prescription rather than description.

One example of this trend that reappears throughout *States of Fantasy* is a rigorous reassertion of the connection between ethics and literature. In her England chapter, Rose for instance strongly resists the ‘recent’ trend away from assessing literature on ethical grounds, or seeing it as a site

for discussion of ethical questions.¹²⁹ She suggests that by abandoning all consideration of ethics in literary studies because of its historical connections, through Leavis and others, to ‘Western logocentrism’, we have ‘done to ethics what Julia Kristeva suggested one moment of feminism did to motherhood – mistaken the offensive, universalizing, ideological hype for what it might, if we worked at and struggled for it, be allowed to be.’ (73) In essence, the turn against thinking about literature and ethics together in favour of historicism has inadvertently ‘behaved ahistorically’, confusing one wrong conception of the relationship between ethics and literature for all possible conceptions. (73) This leads Rose to counsel for an intermingling of the historical and the ethical – a constant historical grounding that is also openly theoretical. Instead of shying away from the conflict that this entails, or suggesting that it leads to semantic collapse, she insists that it is exactly by constantly highlighting the conflict, including the ‘perverse’ elements internal to each, that evaluative statements can be (provisionally) articulated and justified. (92)

Connor

As suggested earlier, in my view, the endorsement of this kind of constitutive paradox is a key feature of many of the Consortium’s affiliates thinking on value, and is evident in its own processes and pedagogic choices. No book exemplifies the position more clearly than Steven Connor’s 1992 *Theory and Cultural Value*. Connor, who would go on to direct the Consortium between 2003 and 2012, was also a core member of the Consortium’s early planning group. As an internal Consortium ‘reflective note’ from February 1995 indicates, he was in the process of ‘publishing *Theory and Cultural Value*’ at the same time as the Consortium’s first syllabus was being discussed in 1993, and agreed to contribute to Consortium courses on ‘evaluation and

¹²⁹ Rose later expands her understanding (and rejection) of this injunction against ethical normativity to a wider set of normative evaluations, summarizing the problematic position as requiring ‘Above all’ that ‘when you read a piece of literary writing, do not judge’. (79)

judgement' based on this work.¹³⁰ He taught sections of the 'Judgement' and 'Kant and Aesthetic courses' between 1995 and 1999.

Connor had taken up a position at Birkbeck in 1979, and it was from a Birkbeck conference titled 'Cultural Value' that his 'interest in the question of value in contemporary theory' emerged. (Connor *TCV* fn 7) Notable in the papers emanating from that conference is an ambiguity over the meaning of 'cultural value'. Broadly speaking, about half the papers see the term as referring to what is generally good within culture, viewed as a monolithic entity ('the renewal of the question of the aesthetic in contemporary theory'), while the other half see it as an anthropological statement inviting empirical exploration of the assumptions propping up the idea of culture itself ('the competing political and ethical values of culture and cultures as such') (fn 7). For Connor, what is 'striking' and 'symptomatic' in this divergence is the extent to which the two senses of cultural value 'could no more be separated than they could be adequately brought together' (fn 7).

The recognition of this mutual opposition and dependence leads him to arguing, in *Theory and Cultural Value*, for a position that 'paradoxically' asserts the 'necessity' of both objectivist and relativist standpoints on the nature of value. (2) As he puts it, 'The structure of value is... paradoxical, involving the simultaneous desire and necessity to affirm unconditional values and the desire and necessity to subject such values to continuous, corrosive scrutiny.' (17) Despite being directly antagonistic, neither position can properly account for the structure of 'value', but nor can either be discounted. (2) In Connor's words, 'The account of value that I offer, simply, is that one should refuse to surrender either the orientation towards universal, absolute and transcendental value, or the commitment to plurality, relativity and contingency' (1) This argument implies that relativist and objectivist positions are in some way mutual semantically

¹³⁰ Collected in Consortium administrative papers, it is unclear who wrote this three-page 'note'. The most likely possibility is Hirst, in whose papers held by the Birkbeck archive the piece is kept.

constitutive as well as mutually contradictory.¹³¹ There is no reconciliation of objectivism and relativism, but nor is there a rejection of either. The first half of this claim requires ‘the difficult feat of thinking absolutism and relativism together rather than as apart and antagonistic’, while the second maintains their absolute distinctiveness. (1)

Because of the inherent resistance of paradox to representation, Connor often reaches for representative metaphor to illustrate his approach. To compensate for metaphor itself being a form of relativistic ‘play’, Connor regularly uses scientific exemplars, interestingly often drawn from genetics. He speaks for instance of a ‘complex helix’ of issues, and of relativism and objectivism as ‘genes’ ‘coiled’ together.¹³² (32, 256) Prefiguring later versions of new formalism, Connor resists the idea of form as empty by regularly illustrating its dependence on content, while conversely illustrating the extent to which content can be used, in Anna Kornbluhs’ words, to ‘balance’ meaning. While there are shades of a resistance to the fact/value distinction central to pragmatism, Connor’s argument is never for the dissolving of the form/content distinction, or that of relativism and objectivism. What marks his and other members of the Consortium’s position on value is exactly that it asserts the cogency of value, rather than arguing for its dissolution as a function of internal semantic collapse.

Using genetic (and sometimes more broadly biological) metaphors brings to the fore Connor’s understanding of value and evaluation as in some sense ‘essential’ to life. Perhaps even more than *Theory and Cultural Value* being a case for one account of the structure of value, the purpose of the book is to argue for value’s necessity. As Connor puts it: “The argument of this book will be that we should acknowledge that value and evaluation are necessary as a kind of law of human nature and being, such that we cannot help but enter the play of value, even when we would

¹³¹ In Connor’s words ‘as well as contradicting each other, each side of the argument also requires, confirms and regenerates the other.’ (1)

¹³² This is an interesting prefiguring of Connor’s later work on interpretation, drawing on Peter Sloterdijk and others, which uses biological processes as a basis for understanding how meaning ‘unfolds’ from a text. See for example *Spelling Things Out* (2016).

wish to withdraw from or suspend it. The necessity of value is in this sense more like the necessity of breathing than, say, the necessity of earning one's living. There are ways of continuing to exist as a human being without the latter, but not without the former.' The purpose of illustrating the structure of value is not to elucidate value's shape, but exactly to show that the project of elucidation is possible and of itself necessary. The paradoxical structure of value is what 'enables and requires' us to have the idea and practice of value at all. (33) Neither side of the paradox, the side of risk or the side of realisation, is definitive, but nor can they diminish the necessity of the other.

What makes this approach different from the pragmatism associated with the CIV dispute at Stanford is the extent to which it focuses on 'the complex processes of resistance and transaction between negative value and positive value, in the interval between negotiation and the positive return of value'. (60, 91) Later, Connor similarly describes value as 'produced in the rhythm of delay, the delay of rhythm'. (98) That is, rather than rejecting any negation of a value as the assertion of just one more alternative value claim, Connor sees the opposite of value 'positivity' as indeterminacy. Resisting Herrnstein Smith's view of 'good' as the universal equivalent of value (the 'money' of the value economy), he argues that any assertion against value is not either just the further assertion of another positive claim or an acceptance of a pragmatic positionality, but instead the constitutive tension between relativism and objectivism – the paradox itself upholds the possibility of objectivity, even as it resists resolution.

From this position, Connor is able to narrow his scope and say something about what might make literature valuable, as well as what might be marked out as valuable in the literary. Namely, that what is valuable in literary discourse (and marks out valuable literature) is that it 'permits and promotes the analytic appraisal of the very distinction between valid and invalid discourse which traditionally had constituted it.' (126-7, italics removed) In other words, valuable literature is able to dwell in, and appraise, the position of all language as paradoxically 'relativist/objectivist'.

(127) In the case of, for example, Joyce, *Ulysses* seems to both create the vision of a common linguistic horizon and refute it. The text ‘consists simultaneously of a demonstration of the incommensurability of languages and a claim to have made them commensurate.’ (127)

Literature is exactly that kind of language which permits and provokes the question of what constitutes the distinction between ‘valuable’ and ‘non-valuable’ linguistic constructs. (127)

Conclusion

This understanding of valuable literature (and of the value of literature) as defined not by what is predicated of it, but by its ability to turn itself in on itself; to show how language holds relativist and objectivist perspectives together, helps crystallise the Consortium’s approach to value more generally. What this chapter has shown is the extent to which the Consortium’s work epitomises a drift away from the relativist accounts of value popular in the 1980s, and back towards a positive case for evaluation. This drift, however, was not a repetition or iteration of the value absolutism of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Instead, it was a conscious, and self-conscious attempt to hold both relativism and objectivism in sight.

The dispute at the BFI over its place in the Consortium is able to show in MacCabe in particular, but the Consortium as a whole, the extent to which this paradoxical pattern of thought is their defining stance with respect to value. In the final chapter, focusing on the Rhodes must Fall Movement at UCT, I want to suggest that this paradoxical position starts to come apart. Attempts to see value as both determined by the vagaries of material condition and mutually objectively determined have a quietist effect. Under the sustained pressure of the RhodesMustFall movement, both Fallists and their humanist counterparts took clear positions on the value questions, and abandoned the relative comforts of paradox.

Chapter Four: UCT

Introduction

On March 12, 2015, graduate student Chumani Maxwele threw human faeces at a statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the University of Cape Town's (UCT) upper campus.¹³³ In videos from the day, Maxwele can be seen dressed in a hard hat, dancing and blowing a whistle, invoking the labour and artistic traditions of the black migrant mine workers through whose exploitation Rhodes accumulated his wealth. By attacking a physical symbol of that legacy, Maxwele hoped 'to force the university [of Cape Town] to recognise' that 'the disenfranchisement... [and] oppression' characteristic of Apartheid and colonialism persisted into the 'new' South Africa.¹³⁴ ('Maxwele Interview') Exemplifying a growing resentment towards the ruling African National Congress (ANC) over its failure to combat the legacies of South Africa's discriminatory past, Maxwele's action struck a nerve with students, resulting in widespread demonstrations and the eventual removal of the statue in what came to be known as the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement.¹³⁵

In her study of the genesis of RMF, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, an anthropologist and key chronicler of the movement, asks why images and videos of Maxwele – distributed widely in the days following the protest – 'hit home' with students and other members of the university

¹³³ Set on the slopes of Table Mountain, with 'the great Jameson Hall and Devil's peak behind it, and the expansive flatlands of Cape Town suburbs, council estates, and townships before it', the statue commemorated Rhodes' donation of a portion of his estate for the building of the university in the late 1920s. (Jansen 49) Having previously been positioned lower-down the mountain in a commemorative rose garden, it had been moved to its place of prominence in 1962 to accommodate the building of a freeway – one of Apartheid's many infrastructure projects intended for use only by whites. By 2015, the statue was positioned on the university's 'central axis', 'glowering northwards across Africa... [a] representative of British Colonial power.' (Barnes 135) Two of Rhodes' business associates (both linked to the De Beer's Mining Company) gave GBP 500 000 to the relatively unknown SA College in exchange for its moving to the site, previously a portion of Rhodes' Groote Schuur Estate. The move took place in 1928-29, and the statue was erected in 1931, despite some resistance from college executives. (Schmahmann 96)

¹³⁴ Apartheid began with the election of the Afrikaner-nationalist Nationalist Party (NP) in 1948, ending in 1994 with South Africa's first democratic elections. Maxwele describes the episode as his 'shit protest', arguing that this description brings out the visceral intensity of the protest while also serving as a reminder of its relative lack of efficacy in bringing structural change to UCT. ('Maxwele interview') The date and place of interviews referred to in this chapter can be found in the list of cited works.

¹³⁵ In addition to this movement, the term 'RhodesMustFall' (RMF) came to refer to the group of students and other participants who promoted the movement's aims, as well as the loose collection of ideas that developed following Maxwele's protest.

community. (Naidoo 154) While the statue's political iconography and figurative significance were crucial factors, Naidoo argues that what made Maxwele's protest so immediately incendiary was its 'visceral form'. (155) In the protest, students recognised their own 'physical experience' of studying and working at the university. ('Masimbe Interview') Maxwele's action was 'more a material recognition than... an ideological demonstration'. (Naidoo 155) 'Transcending rhetoric', the 'shit protest' went to the 'body of students, and not just the student body'. (155)

In this chapter, I suggest that focus on bodily abjection was at the heart of RMF, dictating its organisational strategies and informing its intellectual commitments, including about value. In particular, the movement coalesced around the corporeal experience of blackness within the spatial and conceptual setting of UCT, describing the experience through bodily terminology, most centrally 'black pain'. Intertwining with black consciousness and, in particular, Afropessimist thought, this resulted in a conceptualisation of value rooted in the experience of abjection and suffering. The RMF position was largely dismissive of any programme that sought to emphasise describing and addressing the historical circumstances underpinning current ideas of value. It conceptualised evaluation, including aesthetic evaluation, through the experience of blackness, rather than through historical configuration.

Within the narrow context of the UCT English Department, I argue that this position clashed with a powerful strand of materialist humanism which had become central to the Department's ethos during the late 1980s. That strand carried with it much of the emphasis on 'history' (both with respect to the practice of evaluation and the concept of value), evident in the first two chapters of this thesis. Rather than encouraging an acceptance of aporia in the manner of the Consortium, the clash shows up the difficulties of trying to hold the two positions together, suggesting the need for further theoretical refinement.

Having focused on debates in the broader humanities in the previous two chapters, I return here to the specific institutional context of the English Department. In particular, I concentrate on

the Departmental rifts at UCT that led to comprehensive curriculum and personnel changes in English between 2015 and 2018. I use as my primary archival site the second-year curriculum; a scene of especial contestation in the Department, and one which garnered attention from both students and academic staff. While the historical and political background of UCT is different to that of the three previous case studies, the English Department is connected to each by archival material, intellectual traditions and staff. These conjunctions help both complicate and solidify the approaches to value that I argue were at the core of RMF.

In seeking to understand and explain the two sides of the dispute, and their respective positions on value, I have adopted differing methodological techniques in each case. The first half of this chapter – focusing on the RMF position – draws mainly on the methodologies of social history, including interviews, archival analysis, and social theorising. While some people and institutions reappear, my emphasis in this section is on the thrust of the movement's ideas, and their importation into the English Department's milieu. The second half – focusing on positions embedded within the English Department – takes a much narrower, 'intellectual histories' approach. I focus especially on the work of the two academics in the Department most rigorously opposed by RMF – John Higgins and Kelwyn Sole, showing how they developed a shared position in opposition to an earlier instantiation of UCT English. In both cases, I look to tease out shared viewpoints on 'literary' and 'aesthetic' value.

Since its emergence, RhodesMustFall, and 'MustFall' politics more generally, has had many afterlives, including at Oxford, where activism in favour of the removal of another statue of Rhodes has had modest success. My focus in this chapter is however on UCT. In historical terms, the 'original' RhodesMustFall is generally seen to have extended from March 2015 until October of the same year, when it began to intermingle with FeesMustFall (FMF) – a related movement that had emerged at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. While attempts to draw a distinction between the two movements will necessarily prove artificial,

in general RhodesMustFall is seen to be invested in questions of decolonisation and cultural change to a greater degree than FeesMustFall, which focused more on economic transformation, including through its key demand of a zero per cent fee increase for the 2015 academic year, and long-term goal of free tertiary education.

‘Fallists’ – the loose umbrella term used to describe those actively committed to the goals of RhodesMustFall, FeesMustFall and related ‘MustFall’ movements – were united in many respects, though differences were sometimes stark.¹³⁶ At UCT, RMF’s focus on ‘cultural transfiguration’ remained throughout the period of my research (from 2015 until 2018), even as elements of other Fallist movements were integrated. (Jansen 46) In particular, questions around the relationship between aesthetic value and other forms of normative evaluation, especially political and the ethical, regularly arose.¹³⁷ It was also at UCT that theorising around the consequence of bodily abjection most closely intertwined with questions of evaluation.

Structurally, I begin this chapter by giving historical background to RMF, showing how the Fallist position on race, and relatedly value, emerged out of those circumstances. I next show how this position clashed with the views of other members of UCT, including that of the university’s vice-chancellor. Turning to the particular context of the English Department, I

¹³⁶ As epitomised by the large demonstration outside the office of the national President in Pretoria during November 2015, where the student leadership of different tertiary institutions took markedly different approaches to the question of what demands to make, and what approach to adopt, based on their own intuitional cultures and visions for the movement.

¹³⁷ Maxwele describes his original ‘shit protest’ as deliberately ‘curatorial’ both in conceptualisation and factual background. (‘Maxwele interview’). For Maxwele, ‘what the statue stood for [politically] is not something that I could see without also seeing [it as] a sculpture, and I wanted to disrupt both together.’ This intermingling of the political and the aesthetic is supported by the lead up to his action. In discussions with me, Maxwele explained that it had been the City of Cape Town’s flagship annual arts festival ‘Infecting the City’ that had prompted the shit protest. Having been given a small amount of money by the City to develop an artwork, and in a riff on ‘infecting’, Maxwele collected several buckets of sewerage left exposed as a result of the Council’s failed township ablation system, bringing them to UCT’s campus by taxi. He explains both ‘using... the artistic value’ of his act as ‘cover’ for his political objectives, and wanting to ‘intervene artistically’ with Rhodes’ statue. (‘Maxwele interview’) With the latter in mind, he had invited a video-artist to capture the moment, and had partly modelled his protest on the Yellowists who had painted over a Mark Rothko at the Tate Modern in 2012. In general across my interviews with students it was notable that when questions of ‘aesthetic’ value were raised there was a tendency to see the aesthetic as closely linked or even indistinguishable from the political. Even more than in the Stanford example, the close association between the political, ethical and aesthetic is a marked feature of thinking about value during RMF.

subsequently illustrate how this clash took narrower institutional shape, including with respect to questions of literary value and curriculum choice. I also show how the ‘materialist humanist’ position of two key members of the department (Higgins and Sole) was in fact itself emergent out of an earlier Departmental dispute, suggesting that the two disputes should be read in concert. I conclude by arguing that the shape of the UCT dispute, and especially the Fallist position, resists the kind of aporetic approach to value evident in the work of the Consortium.

Background

While taking on broader importance as it spread across the country (and world), RMF remained at core a campus dispute – taking shape at the University of Cape Town, and then moving to other tertiary institutions. Understanding the broader position of higher education in South Africa is therefore helpful to understanding the movement, and the value debates that took place in the UCT English Department during the time. Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State (UFS), describes South African higher education as in ‘serious distress’ at the moment of RMF’s emergence, and gives several factors fuelling these difficulties. (Jansen 12) In his view ‘without question the primary driver of the crisis in South African universities’ was declining state subsidies. (Jansen 28) Exacerbated by global disinvestment from universities and the humanities as well as shifting funding priorities associated with the legacy of Apartheid, the state had dramatically cut spending on higher education. As Adam Habib, at the time Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) describes, ‘at the historically white universities... 70 per cent of... expenses [were] covered by the government subsidy. By 2013, 2014, it [was] down to 30 to 35 per cent.’ (Quoted in Jansen 29) This cut in subsidy had resulted in dramatic fee increases as universities sought to cover the shortfall; students’ contribution to funding higher education increasing from 24 to 31 per cent between 2000 and 2014. As a result, student debt grew from R 2.6 billion to 3.4 billion over the same period, fuelling protests across South Africa’s universities. (Jansen 29)

At the same time, there was an explosion in student numbers at both universities and technically-focused Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. As ‘the doors of education’ were opened at the end of Apartheid, pressure was put on universities to take on a greater number of students. Exacerbating these political concerns was a funding structure that linked subsidy to enrolment, such that the more students a university enrolled the more funding it received. Between 1994 and 2014 university enrolment increased from 493 342 to nearly 1 million (969 154). For Jansen, ‘the system had no capacity to absorb these large numbers,’ leading to declining standards of learning. In addition, weaker students were admitted, often from black families deliberately under-resourced by the Apartheid regime. By 2014, less than 50 per cent of students were completing three-year Bachelors degrees within six years. (Jansen 34) Complex prejudice against technical and vocational training also meant that the majority of post-school students were at universities (about 1 million) and not TVETs (about 700 000). In short, ‘there was less money and more students.’ (Jansen 35)

Overall, the intersecting crises of a fall in subsidies and student throughput, and an increase in fees and enrolment numbers created exemplary conditions for widespread student resentment. For Jansen, ‘what protesting students were looking for was... the resolution of a *systemic* failure in the funding of higher education’. (Jansen 45) Fuelling this desire for systemic reform was a deep resentment towards the economic inequalities ubiquitous in South Africa – the country with the world’s highest GINI coefficient. At the same time, the protests reflected social inequalities that intertwined with economic discrimination. In fact, RMF at UCT (as opposed to the FeesMustFall movement that emerged later in the year) took on the primary aspect of a protest over prevailing cultural, pedagogic and spatial patterns of inequality at the university, or what Jansen calls ‘intellectual concerns.’ (Jansen 46) While at times incorporating (inter alia) struggles over patriarchy, cis-normativity and heterosexual hegemony, these ‘intellectual concerns’ related principally to combatting what was often referred to as a ‘culture of whiteness’ at UCT, as well as

the concrete under-representation of black professors, and a plethora of racially-skewed institutional symbols, including in the curriculum. (Jansen 57)

How the relationship between economic and social discrimination should be explained was a point of constant tension during RMF. Siceba Masinde explains that,

[T]here was a strong dislike [amongst Fallists] of the old-left Marxist idea that really this was just a struggle over fees or working-class access... for us race wasn't a neat proxy for money... we were quite tired of hearing that race and economic unfairness are linked in South Africa... for us it was time for race to be taken seriously without having to be explained in another way – it was patronising. ('Masinde Interview')

In several of my interviews, other students at the same time expressed anger at being accused of neglecting class considerations in favour of combatting racial discrimination, with some seeing the emphasis on class in criticism of RMF as a 'strategy' for avoiding real 'reform'. ('Slayan interview'; 'Doloda interview') The need to embrace 'intersectionality' was nearly universally embraced, but there was a simultaneous desire to avoid what Joe Mpemba calls an 'intersectional flattening' – the use of the language of intersectionality to dull the force of, amongst others, race-based critiques of the university. ('Mpemba Interview') While discussion of class was present throughout RMF, and manifested in, for example, a campaign to end the out-sourcing of workers at the university, there was a clear resistance to using class analysis as a primary tool.

At the same time, some, including Jansen and at-the-time UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price, argued that the class-position of black students was also a driving force behind the rise of the kinds of race analysis central to RMF. As Price explains,

What I think is happening in part is that black middle-class students [at UCT], often from private schools, come onto the campus and for the first time actually are significantly confronted with the fact that that most blacks are poor... And they're in the uncomfortable

position of feeling that they're somehow privileged and they don't deserve to be privileged, and that they need to take on the battle of the broader community of black students who are poor and rural... [T]hey become more radical than even those poorer black students. (Price 2)

Aside from the obvious factual inaccuracies attendant on the idea that private school-attending black South Africans were only 'significantly confronted' by black poverty at the time of arriving at university, this analysis also wrongly suggests that there is something mendacious about the RMF movement's professed resistance to racist institutional structures. It moreover diminishes the very real sense of alienation described by students at UCT. Often in discussions of the 'intellectual' or 'cultural' genesis of RMF emphasis is too quickly put on the position of those resisting power. The mechanisms by which resistance is socially permitted are in this way given explanatory prominence over the often societally pervasive discriminations that bring about a need to resist in the first place.

At the same time, that Fallists were largely a black university-going elite is evident, and there were important implications to this composition, some recognised by the movement itself. In *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation* Rekgotsofetse Chikane, a student leader at UCT in 2015 and 2016, uses the idea of the 'coconut' – black on the outside, white on the inside – to reckon with the class motives of RMF's leadership, and the eventual collapse of the movement. Resisting the idea that RMF was only 'a coconut revolution,' Chikane nevertheless argues that 'to deny the influence of coconuts and the black elite, both political and economic, within the movement is to pretend that snakes don't hide in tall grass.' (Chikane 237)

Charting the ups and downs of the movement from its origins in March of 2015 until its denouement in late 2016, Chikane shows the extent to which the direction of RMF was dictated by the interests of this group. 'Coconuts' tended to occupy leadership positions, were the face of

the movement in the media, and dictated the direction of demands.¹³⁸ This was particularly true at UCT – traditionally the richest of South Africa’s state universities. The direction of value discussions that marked RMF, as well as the demands made of the English Department by students and staff, should consequently be seen as shaped by these interests. While easily overstated, shifts in thinking about value at UCT were to a significant extent reflective of the tension between the interests of ‘coconuts’ and a previously white, liberal university, supported by an increasingly fiscally parsimonious ANC government.

In practical terms, this tension manifested itself in the form of a strong feeling of alienation on the part of black students at UCT. As Naidoo explains, members of ‘RMF started questioning what change, transformation or liberation had taken place such that they, black university students, “born free”, raised in democratic South Africa, with access to higher education at one of the most elite and highly ranked universities on the continent, still felt alienated and discriminated against. This position of being included and yet excluded was the starting point of their questioning.’ (Naidoo 7-8) Described by Eve Fairbanks as the ‘paradox of integration’, black students who had been notionally admitted to elite institutions of education acutely felt the alienation brought about by Apartheid because of their proximity to historically hegemonic spatial and cultural formations, many of which continued to be racist. (Fairbanks, 2014) Being part of UCT also gave these students some of the social resources necessary to resist their exclusion. As David Kabinda, a student of the English department during RMF explains, the

¹³⁸ In her influential 2015 Ruth First Lecture, Panashe Chigumadzi describes ‘coconuts’ as ‘a particular category of “born-free” black youth that were hailed as torchbearers of the “Rainbow Nation”... [coconuts] were a conduit for the country’s absolution from the real work of reconciliation as we were shipped off to Woolies [an elite grocery store], skhaftins in tow, to the likes of Pretoria Girls and Michael House [elite previously whites-only schools].’ (Chigumadzi 3) In short, ‘coconut’ refers to a cohort of black youth who, through a varying array of circumstances, were able to receive the privileges previously set aside only for whites in the wake of the end of Apartheid. These privileges generally reflected a wealthier background, and in turn allowed coconuts to themselves acquire a higher income. Self-identifying as a Coconut, Chikane argues that ‘[coconuts] unconsciously influence[d] #MustFall politics to protect our own self-interest under the impression that our acts [were] for the greater good.’ (Chikane 234) In particular, coconuts ‘influence[d] the natural logic of these movements in such a way that their actions [would] not jeopardise their own ability to achieve economic freedom... Whether it is through their ability to take control of plenaries, or to provide resources to the movement... the black elite use[d] their unique position in society to reinforce their need to achieve their own economic advancement.’ (Chikane 235)

experience of UCT was ‘physically distressing because the books we read and the place we were expected to learn felt oppositional and prohibiting. It was more than... cultural dislocation... I had a very painful feeling of being not [just] lost but also unwanted by the actual university. I wanted it to end.’ (‘Kabinda interview’)

Black Pain

Kabinda’s invocation of his ‘painful feeling’ introduces an increasingly pervasive emphasis on the idea of ‘black pain’ within the writing and discussions of RMF. As Naidoo explains, there was ‘an explicit centring of [the] lived experience [of black students] named as “black pain” in all of the discussions and working of RMF, which became more and more thought through and practiced every day’. (Naidoo 160) In nearly every RMF press release, and its central mission statement, black pain is deployed as a key analytic tool. On nearly all these occasions, emphasis is put on the physical experience of being black at UCT, and forceful resistance is justified on the basis of this ‘pain’. Rather than seeking an objective correlative against which the university’s practices could be assessed, RMF deliberately and repeatedly centred the subjective experience of black students in its activism and analysis. The asserting of black pain was seen as a crucial component of resisting structural racism.

Through the work of critical psychologist Derek Hook, Naidoo argues that the increasing prevalence and force of the idea of ‘black pain’ can be seen as a recognition of, and resistance to, the alienation described by Fanon. Alienation for Hook (drawing on Fanon), ‘provides a means of *relating experience to social conditions*, of linking *personal-subjective* and *sociohistorical domains*, and of doing so in a way that produces critique.’ (Hook 91) Alienation is the separation of the personal and the political, and the recognition of alienation is a resistance to this function. RMF’s constant invocation of ‘black pain’ is in this vein a reasserting of the ‘personal-subjective’ within the ‘sociohistorical’ reality of the university’s racist structural configurations. The work of RMF

was to bring subjective experience back into the picture so as to combat alienation. The constant foregrounding of black pain was,

The beginnings of more systematically alienating the alienation that they as black students experienced, by making it strange. Strange to be black in a majority black country, with a black government, but feel like an outsider. Strange to see statues and portraits and artworks that memorialise and elevate white people. Strange to be at university but not see writings and histories of black people entered in the curriculum. Strange to see that the majority of academics who teach remain white more than two decades after apartheid officially ended. (Naidoo 162)

Accompanying this call to ‘alienat[e] the alienation’ was a strident rejection of the ANC-led narrative of ‘transformation’ that dominated South African political discourse from the early 1990s. The Mandela-administration ANC had promised to ‘transform’ South Africa into a non-racial, non-sexist society, where all had equal opportunities. RMF insisted that, ‘in its analysis, transformation as a process of change had been co-opted by a neo-liberal government and university leadership as well.’ (Naidoo 11) It had ‘failed precisely because it had not dealt sufficiently with some of the root causes of oppression for indigenous and black people – experienced as the pain of poor landless black life in South Africa.’ (Naidoo 124) Over the twenty years since the arrival of democracy, the narrative of transformation had come to normalise discrimination.

‘Decolonisation, by contrast, ‘was the process of disrupting the existing norms and making the alienation of black people, and also poor, women, queer and differently-abled people, strange.’ (Naidoo 145) It was a conscious ‘re-racing [of] South Africa’ with the physical experience of ‘black experience and black pain’ at its centre. (Boersema 29) Taking the racial discrimination born of colonial oppression as its starting point, decolonisation was also ‘about the conceptualisation, conscientisation and practice of power as realised through an array of means,

whether they be economic, racial, ethnic, religious, coercive, institutional, political, sexual or gendered' aimed at tackling all and any 'systematic oppression based on any power relations'. (McKinley, 45) Transformation was increasingly seen as willing to entrench discriminatory elements of the status quo to serve the needs of the elite. (RMF 6) The rejection of transformation was 'not the rejection of the belief in equal liberties and freedoms. It [was] the rejection of the normalisation of injustice despite these liberties.' (Chikane 31)

Notwithstanding this professed intersectionality, the primary identity point driving RMF was race. As Maxwele put it in the founding meeting of RMF on the same day as the statue protest, 'Student organisations must put aside differences and unite on this – the experience of black pain at UCT must be universally acknowledged'. (RMF n.p.) While many of the pivotal organisers of the movement, particularly in its early stages, were women and (or) queer, demands which did not relate to race 'tended to be side-lined' throughout. ('Hotz interview') At numerous points, splinter groups including PatriarchyMustFall and The Trans Collective deliberately separated themselves from the main RMF leadership and plenary spaces because of its failure to take other forms of discrimination seriously in its activism and demands. In an early plenary discussion in the occupied Azania House, white attendees were for instance asked to leave the hall so as to facilitate open discussion, while non-white men and non-queer attendees remained. This extended to the movement's imagining of both colonialism and Apartheid, both of which were diagnosed and analysed principally through the lens of race.

As a result of this relative ideological hegemony within the movement, it was generally writing and thinking about race that dominated the books read in RMF reading groups, and the kind of films and other media discussed and displayed in RMF spaces. Extending out from Maxwele's intervention with the Rhodes statue, the spatial set-up of UCT was similarly critiqued principally on grounds of race. This was recognised by the Trans Collective, who, in early 2016, disrupted – naked – a retrospective photography exhibition on RMF by daubing red paint over the

photographs because of their perceived ‘saintification of blackness.’ (‘Pule interview’) During 2015, these critiques were however largely peripheral.

Black Space

While in some ways overly narrow, the race-based spatial critiques of UCT’s campus remained importantly subversive, especially at an institution that had traditionally been dominated by liberal gradualism rather than radical disruption. Dianne Harris points to the importance of considering the relationship between spatial geographies and race by noting that, ‘The primary terms of racism – segregation, seclusion, marginalisation, incarceration, hierarchy – are all spatial phenomena or have a spatial corollary... We have to question spatial distribution of privilege and link social justice to environmental or spatial justice, which can only be done through careful examination of the spaces themselves.’ (Harris 2) This is especially accurate in the case of university buildings, which, as Ted Gordon points out, are conspicuously powerful ‘physical manifestations of social systems and concepts such as racism’. (Gordon 14)

In the course of her character study of the white, liberal academic A. H. Murray (chair of Political Philosophy at UCT between 1938 and 1970), Teresa Barnes takes up just this sort of work through a reflection on the kind of spatial inequalities that alienated black ‘coconuts’ from the university in 2015. She notes first the careful distancing of the University from the city of Cape Town: ‘[T]he first observation about UCT’s main campus is that it is literally higher education, well separated from the hustle and bustle of the city. You can see it from many parts of Cape Town – but only if you look up. It is accessible only with difficulty.’ (Barnes 131) As celebrated architect (and Rhodes confidante) Herbert Baker describes, this cloistering effect was deliberate, with the intention of creating a public space where the elite of South Africa’s two predominating white populations – the so-called ‘English’ and ‘Afrikaans’ – could bond ‘under the shadow of Table Mountain.’ (Baker 47) Barnes then describes the university buildings as ‘European in design’, drawing on the quadrangles and chapels of Oriel College, Oxford (Rhodes’

alma mater), the Thomas Jefferson-designed Rotunda at the University of Virginia, and the Baker-designed Union Buildings in Pretoria. (Barnes 132)

In addition to the alienating effecting of a set of buildings constructed to resemble European majesty and foster connection between South Africa's white elite, Baker in his memoir notes that Rhodes funded the construction of UCT from the proceeds of his De Beers Company 'company store' – money paid by African miners employed on De Beers mines for food, beer and accommodation to the tune of 10 000 pounds a year. As Baker explains, '[Rhodes] used to repeat jokingly that "he meant to build the University out of the Kaffir's stomach."' (Baker 48) Both at the level of ideology and of financing UCT's buildings have from their inception been disfigured by racism.

This focus on the spatial dimensions of racism was perhaps most strongly exemplified during RMF by the extended occupation of what was formally known as the Bremner Building, and which Fallists called Azania House after a long-standing pan-Africanist name for South Africa. From the time of its annexation in March 2015, the building became the centre of the movement's organising, planning and discussion.¹³⁹ In their own documentation, RMF describe Azania House as, 'a place where all black students, workers and staff know to go to be a part of the movement, to develop solidarity, to educate and be educated, and to be safe to express themselves, their experiences and their pain'. (RMF 18) Many of the Fallist's ideas about curriculum reform and textual evaluation emerged out of this environment, through a range of formal and informal discussions. It was an 'educational institution for alternative pedagogy and critical engagement', but also, in Fallist Khumo Sebambo's words, 'a fantasy world... removed from the white gaze and... the violent [constructions] of blackness which other University

¹³⁹ At the same time, the building continued to function as UCT's central administrative office, and university staff worked alongside students throughout the occupation. Many of the university's mid and low-level administrative staff were supportive of the movement. The Bremner Building was chosen because of its symbolic value as the site of the university administration.

spaces inform' (Sebambo 108). This element of fantasy allowed Azania House to be a terrain of 'play': 'blackness was not only imagined in this space, it was also performed'. (108)

RMF Position

In the evenings, the building became the de facto residence for committed Fallists, and it was here that students discussed their strategies and theoretical stances through open plenaries (sometimes referred to as Mafeje Meetings, in honour of Arthur Mafeje – a black academic pushed out of UCT during Apartheid) and the eight committees (referred to as SubComs) that formed the organisational heart of the movement.¹⁴⁰ SubComs would report their work at the Mafeje Meetings, and any decisions made at SubCom level had to be ratified by the plenary. In this chapter I focus especially on the Education SubCom, which organised reading groups and a nightly public seminar held at Azania House throughout 2015. As Naidoo explains,

During the occupation, and through the Education SubCom, interested students volunteered to collectively take responsibility for what, in formal university processes, would be called curriculum development and would traditionally be the domain of a specialist academic in their role as teacher. These responsibilities would include selecting the topic to be engaged, formulating the question/s to be asked, selecting or suggesting which writers to read in order to engage the selected topics. These were also spaces where students and those who attended the nightly public seminar, were reading and discussing writings that spoke more to black experiences, analyses of oppression, and questions of decolonisation and revolution. (Naidoo 224)

Over time, the committee developed into the 'intellectual hub' of RMF, and records of meetings along with material produced by the committee paint a lucid picture of RMF's evolving idea of

¹⁴⁰ The eight committees were named Education, Radical Action, Writing, Creative Expression, Media, Support, Intersectional Audit, and Strategic.

value. The SubCom also organised two discussions on ‘the canon’, including one focused on the humanities, though no records of those meetings remain.

The Education SubCom’s working processes were multiple, but in its larger gatherings there was a strong element of what members of the committee called ‘disruption’. Developing organically, ‘disruptions’ initially took the form of an interruption of a speaker or speakers to bring ‘personal experience and feelings to the fore or to call out someone in the room who was saying or doing something that felt oppressive to another.’ (Naidoo 64) Over time these interventions developed into a distinct form of discourse specific to the Education SubCom. As ideas, books, movies and other media were presented, there was an expectation of an uncontrolled, sometimes even perverse, engagement with the speaker and the material. Often the disruptor would move into the centre of the room, and there was sometimes ‘pushing’ and other physical interaction with the speaker. (‘Mpemba interview’) While initially making proceedings slow and combative (as accounts of early gatherings illustrate), disruption came over time to be what Slayan describes as a ‘sharp reminder of the pain and other kinds of confusion and suffering’ that had initially jogged students into action. (‘Slayan interview’) Drawing on the uncooperative, disorderly shape of RMF as a whole, ‘disruptions’ maintained an element of ‘upset’ to proceedings, and in the process created a form of ‘disruptive comradeship’. (‘Ramaru interview’) As Jolile Swambo, a student in the UCT English Departments describes, ‘disruptions [became] the bedrock for the Education SubCom’s choices on what we read... as well as the agreed positions... on things like... canon’. (‘Swambo interview’) In latter meetings of the Subcom, the lack of disruptions was overtly diagnosed by students as a sign of the movement’s waning power and intensity.

More direct than Bhabhaian mimicry, ‘disruptions’ used the internalisation of the affect bred of UCT’s racially oppressive spatial and pedagogical arrangements as a basis for intellectual innovation. Rather than seeing the Education SubCom and Azania House as sanctuaries to escape from the oppressive structures of the university, students – intentionally or otherwise –

transfigured their predominantly negative ‘outside’ experience into analytic tools. While this approach brought some degree of catharsis for Fallists, there was a strong resistance to ‘levelling-off’ while oppressive conditions persisted, and many of the discursive patterns of RMF sought to destabilise rather than organise. (‘Doloda interview’) The ordering principle that structured the chaos was however a desire on the behalf of students to constantly broach and re-broach the lived experience of being, in particular, black at UCT. Many of the formal innovations within RMF structures were both a result of distressing experience and an intentional reminder of their continuation.

Another example of this kind of formal innovation was the persistent use of song during RMF gatherings. Drawing on a long-established tradition of (black) South African politics, nearly every assemblage, meeting, or discussion was precluded by singing, often of songs taken or reconstructed from the anti-Apartheid struggle. Perhaps the most frequently heard strain during RMF was *‘Iyboo Solomon’*, a segment of a protest song referencing Solomon Mahlangu, a student and uMkhonto weSizwe (the ANC’s armed wing) cadre hanged by the Apartheid government in 1979. The ANC subsequently named a college it had set up in Tanzania for young activists in exile after Mahlangu. As poet and activist Pethu Serote describes, Solomon Mahlangu College became the centre point of the ANC’s theorising about the kind of curriculum and pedagogical approaches it hoped to adopt come the fall of Apartheid. (Serote 47)

In addition to this connection to pedagogy and student activism, and as with the use of ‘disruptions’ during Education SubCom meetings, the singing of *Iyboo Solomon* was a constant reminder of the physical toll taken by systemic racism. The song itself ‘thunders through the body forcefully’, continually foregrounding corporeal being, and the song’s lyrics are graphically visceral. (Mupotsa 36) Fallist John Mafetho points out that *Iyboo Solomon* was very seldom accompanied by instruments or any form of percussion, bringing a ‘raw and bodily’ quality to its sound. (‘Mafetho interview’) Used as both a tool of order and disruption, the song persistently

grounded RMF within both South Africa's brutal past and the contemporary lived experience of black South Africans at the university. In its immediate usage, *Iyboo Solomon* altered the atmosphere of the places it was sung, bringing a physical intensity to proceedings in sharp contrast to the generally scholarly ambiance of the university.

Teresa Brennan accounts for the relationship between 'formal signification' in group settings and the body through what she terms the 'transmission of affect'; occasions when 'the "atmosphere" or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before.' (Brennan 1) Mediated differently by different social forms, the transmission of affect, 'if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject'. (23) Rather than adducing mental shifts in ideas or conceptualisation, these kinds of communal signification bring about changes in the body, and it is through the body that they are 'comprehended' and 'registered.' (23) 'Affect', in Brennan's sense, is social in origin but biological in effect. (3)

The singing of songs like *Iyboo Solomon* and the use of disruption in Education SubCom meetings can be seen as functioning in this way. Both work to elicit a bodily response and bring conscious attention to physical sensation. Notably, Brennan draws an explicit connection between 'affect' and judgement. Unlike feelings, affects are, for Brennan, always and constitutively normative, or as she explains, 'by affect, I mean the physiological shifts accompanying a judgement'. (5) In other words, affect is defined by the physical sensation accompanying the transmission of judgement between people or groups. This normative dimension is moreover necessary for transmission – for Brennan the projection or introjection of a judgement is the moment transmission takes place. For this reason, 'the evaluative or judgemental aspects of affects [are] critical in distinguishing between these physiological phenomena [i.e. affect] and those deployed in feeling or discernment.' (5) The passing of affect through formal mechanisms like song and

disruption is necessarily, for Brennan, moments of judgement rather than description or disinterested sensation.

The value discussions that took place within the student movement, including those relating to art and aesthetics, map onto this methodological shape. Shared value-systems and views on evaluation developed through forms that facilitated affectual (in Brennan's sense) experience more than structured debate. Instead of coming to over-arching theoretical accounts of value via intellectual deliberation, the RMF movement developed shared accounts of value and made value decisions through formal mechanisms that promoted the transmission of affect; necessarily centring physical sensation over 'disembodied' thought. (Ibid) These evaluations came directly of shared physical experience, which were only partially transmuted into theoretical concepts. Ideas of value were not discussed with the same kinds of intellectual directedness characteristic of the Cambridge and Stanford examples. Instead, approaches to value were methodologically shaped through 'bodily perception' sourced in common historical experience, but also shared physicality.

Contesting Race

This framing challenges Achille Mbembe's sometimes over-simplified criticisms of RMF, and begins to introduce the conceptual dispute central to this chapter. In several fora, Mbembe accused Fallists of failing to advance a 'proper argument' for their positions. (Mbembe 4) In his view, RMF's greatest flaw was its resistance to developing a 'structured analysis' of the material and social conditions that justified their disruptive activity. (4) As he explains, within RMF circles, 'Personal feelings [came to] suffice. There [was] no need to mount a proper argument. Not only [can't] wounds and injuries... be shared, their interpretation cannot be challenged by any known rational discourse. Why? Because, it is alleged, black experience transcends human vocabulary to the point where it cannot be named. This kind of argument is dangerous.' (4) In essence, Mbembe sees RMF as deliberately fudging their position so as to ward off criticism of the movement's priorities and demands. Instead of coming to and refining a structured critique,

RMF sought to ram home its own preferences and beliefs under the cover of what Mbembe terms ‘black experience’. (6) A better approach would have been to use ‘reasoned argument’ to diagnose the political forces that created these harmful occurrences in the first place. (7)

Read with the kinds of formal arrangements that structured RMF’s internal processes in mind this critique looks overly narrow. While it is no doubt true that there were occasions when ‘black pain’ was weaponised by students to avoid the burden of justification, to see RMF’s focus on the body and ‘black pain’ as wholly obfuscatory is to miss the power attendant on alternative, non-discursive and corporeally-rooted methods for analysing and confronting discrimination. What made RMF reformist and progressive was its development of innovative methods for evaluating cultural formations, including texts. Novel forms like ‘disruption’ and protest song facilitated alternative approaches to understanding, pedagogy and evaluation that went beyond ‘argumentation’. For RMF, to see forms that ‘transcend human vocabulary’ as ‘dangerous’ was to miss the importance of centring subjective experience in confronting alienation. (Mbembe 4) Students were reluctant to fall back on ‘structured analysis’ because of the distance it created between critique and their lived experience. (4)¹⁴¹

Mbembe’s criticism of RMF’s focus on the body and black pain introduces a key fault-line within ‘progressive’ politics at UCT; a fault-line which I argue is important for understanding the disputes in the English Department post-2015. Often dividing along generational lines, and partly resuscitating old South African debates between ‘black-consciousness’ and ‘left liberal’

¹⁴¹ For similar reasons, students were strongly resistant to the university’s advocacy of ‘analysis and debate’ in the wake of the initial statue protest – seeing it as a staying-mechanism taking the steam out of reform, and generally serving entrenched interests. This is nowhere more clearly evident than in Fallists’ rejection of UCT’s ‘Have your Say’ campaign, in which the university erected notice boards around campus where students could air their views on the fate of Rhodes’ statue and Fallist demands in general. RMF’s response was clear: We find it infuriating that management is attempting to open up a process of debate through their ‘Have Your Say’ campaign... This is not meaningful engagement of black students by management, and in fact shows a complete disregard for the black experience... Our pain and anger are at the centre of why the statue is being questioned, so this pain and anger must be responded to in a way that only we can define. It must be highlighted that the push for dialogue around the statue reflects the disturbing normalisation of colonisation and white supremacy at UCT.’ (‘RMF Manifesto’) Dialogue here is construed as a proxy for ‘normalisation’. In much of its organising, RMF consequently attempted to find other mechanisms for sharing experiencing and mounting critique – mechanisms that put the ‘pain and anger’ of students into its working processes, rather than distancing them.

thought, the division resulted in often acrimonious disagreements over hiring policy, departmental practice, and curricula. While this fissure to some extent reflected a difference in ideological heritage – RMF thought was conspicuously American-influenced, while those critical of the movement were generally steeped in English and European thought – the position and approach of the two camps was specific to UCT.¹⁴² At the centre of the disagreement was the position and conceptualisation of blackness, both as a category and in relation to other forms of oppression. For RMF, as previously suggested, blackness and black pain were the central terms of analysis. For critical (black and white) academics at UCT this way of thinking was no more than a narcissistic, tautological ‘identity politics’. As I later suggest, it was partly along these lines that conceptualisations of value decisively split in the UCT English Department.

A practical example of the two approaches is the debate surrounding a 2013 proposal by university management to reduce the prominence of race in its affirmative action policies, which governed admissions and allocation of funding. As Vice Chancellor Max Price explained, “The basis for affirmative action in admissions should be disadvantage, rather than reliance on “race” as the proxy for disadvantage’.¹⁴³ As the inverted commas around ‘race’ suggest, Price saw the idea of blackness as a constructed fiction to be gradually erased, together with the discriminatory practices that had been premised on the category. A prominent supporter of Price at UCT was legal philosopher Anton Fagan, who, while a ‘realist’ on the important social implications that blackness now entailed, would work towards the elimination of the idea, comparing it to the old European of the ‘witch’:

¹⁴² In this respect I disagree with Jeremy Seekings’s somewhat-crude conclusion that the conceptualisation of race dominant amongst Fallists ‘travelled from the United States to South Africa.’ Not only does Seekings’ stance occlude the intricate system of influences and experiences that resulted in RMF’s loose position, but it also fails to note the complex genesis of ‘modern American ideas on race’. For example, Frank Wilderson, one of the founding ‘American’ progenitors of Afropessimism - which I discuss in more detail below - spent more than fifteen years in South Africa, and is on record describing the importance of this experience to his emergent view. The sociological patterns through which ideas travelled to, from and around South Africa during RMF is just beginning to be explored. With respect to social media, see for example Bosch, and Knudsen and Andersen.

¹⁴³ See further Michelle Jones, “UCT Pledges to Revise Admissions Based on Race,” *The Mercury*, February 14, 2013.

Both the idea that a person is of some race and the idea that a person is a witch are both “illusions or fictions” created and sustained by social practices. Now suppose that a university was to provide redress for those who were victimized on the ground that they were witches. It would be odd for the university to pursue that redress by asking every applicant to the university this question: “are you a witch or are you not” and then to make the provision of the redress conditional upon the person answering: “Yes I am a witch”.

(Fagan 3)

The implication is that, as an ‘illusion’, race-based thinking should be discouraged, and that the social implications of this illusion, notably racism, will disappear as the smoke dissipates. In similar fashion, UCT’s at-the-time Deputy Vice Chancellor for Transformation Crain Soudien argued at the time that, ‘Even when the realist argument is made that race exists, insufficient attention is paid to the hegemonic social and political modalities through which the idea of race has been constructed. Its constitutedness is elided and effectively naturalized. Even where its effects—through racism—are invoked to prove and demonstrate its materiality, what its empirical substance by itself consists of is never explained.’ (Soudien 251) For the university, the constant invocation of race had come to stymie real progress, preventing the real problem – discrimination in all its forms – from being addressed.

By contrast, students on campus, led at the time by the ANC-aligned Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) resoundingly rejected the proposed change. At an open student assembly held in August 2013, both black and white students voiced their distaste for the proposal. (‘PYA Memorandum’) The PYA subsequently called for a special meeting of the University Council (UCT’s highest decision-making body) to discuss the issue, where they again voiced their opposition. The main basis for their opposition was an opposition to the universities’ conceptualisation of ‘race’ – which they saw as ‘irrevocably solid’, despite its social origin. (‘PYA Memorandum’)

Explaining this position, Xolela Mangcu, a member of staff and prominent critic of the university's position, notes that, "The liberal and Marxist injunction that Black people must find scientific ways to validate their experience or stop talking about race is a negation of the fact that human beings are social beings always in the process of making and remaking their identities depending on the context in which they find themselves and the challenges they face... Each generation has had to define itself, while drawing on long pre-existing traditions of racial thought, or what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls a "shared text of blackness"?' (Mangcu 253) Rather than affirmative action being an attempt to unpick some generalised disadvantage brought about by Apartheid, it needed to respond to the complex social formation of blackness around which Apartheid was largely constructed. For Mangcu, the university's proposal 'signalled a shift from racial identity as the main consideration to making it only one among many other factors, as part and parcel of a broader liberal discourse that delegitimized the concept of "race" as the sole basis of real social identities.' (Mangcu 247) Instead of seeking its elimination, the work of the university should instead have been to engage with blackness and the forms of alienation that black people experienced.

The roots of Mangcu's response are in the black consciousness (BC) movement, formed by Steve Biko and other student leaders in the late 1960s. The movement gained momentum through the 1970s, resulting in the banning of many of its leaders by the Apartheid government, and Biko's murder in 1977 at the hands of the security police. Mapogo More summarises BC 'as a tradition that deals with issues of the emergence of black self-hood, black suffering, embodied agency, freedom, bad faith, racism, and liberation; in short, it deals with being-black-in-the-world'. (More 47) Not shying away from blackness' social origins, Biko defined 'the black' as those who are 'by law and tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society', and who identified as a group in opposition to this discrimination. (Biko 18) Blackness was therefore 'an attitude of mind... skin pigmentation had

nothing to do with it.’ (Ibid) His definition of blackness in this way closely aligned with a particular form of oppression, although he saw the idea of the black as picking out an array of other social predicates. As a result, he advocated for black solidarity and ‘consciousness’ globally; distancing BC from white student movements of the time.

Mangu argues that in the context of a radically different South African political context where racism is constitutionally prohibited, this idea of blackness should be given space to evolve.

Blackness ‘would now be consciousness of a shared experience of racism and using the memory of that experience to build a new cultural patrimony for the country as a whole.’ (Mangu 255)

This new conceptualisation would be linked to BC and other ideas of blackness through what Gates describes as a ‘dynamic historical tradition mediated by songs, stories, jokes, proverbs and riddles – in short by an unfolding body of literature and language, both written and spoken.’

(Gates 282) Rather than seeing blackness at UCT as a proxy for a certain kind of oppression, Mangu’s approach looks to understand how the evolving idea of the black person is formulated and imagined, both proactively and reactively, within the university community, and more widely.

Afropessimism

In general, Fallists were sympathetic to both Biko and Mangu’s writing and approach. During my interviews there was however a consistent resistance to seeing the BC conception of race as wholly accurate. As Lesedi Tsenang explains, ‘[we] were influenced by BC and mostly had grown up with it. We liked that it saw blackness as a definite thing... [But] [i]t wasn’t even that much reading Biko and Fanon. We didn’t agree with that picture of blackness, it was empty – it was more Afropessimism that people were agreeing with... it was direct.’ (‘Tsenang interview’)

Confirming this trend, the names that came up most often during my interviews as influential on RMF’s thought were Fred Moten (particularly) and Frank Wilderson – American exponents of what has come to be known as Afropessimism. The surviving records of RMF reading groups, as

well as records of black-led discussion groups prior to 2015 (such as Conscious Conversations, an open forum started at the UCT law school in 2010, and the Transformation discussion group set up by English Department postgraduates) reflect a similar preoccupation. Organised around seminar titles including, ‘The Black Body beyond BC’, ‘Black Pain’, and ‘Afropessimism: Is there a Black experience?’, these reading groups became increasingly influential on the movement.

Researcher Danai Mupotsa introduces what this shift from BC to Afropessimism entailed:

In the months leading up to the protests in 2015, many students took to reading groups. One of the preoccupations of their reading was the intellectual and political field of Afropessimism. black consciousness marks a move against the category of being “non-white” toward blackness as a political, intellectual and cultural identity. Afro-pessimism makes a different move, as blackness comes to signal a structural and libidinal position that carries disposability, or the site of ontological death. (Mupotsa 38)

While black consciousness seeks to resist racial discrimination by centring black experience – thereby extricating it from the complicity of white organisation and thought – Afropessimism rejects the implicit assumption in BC that blackness and whiteness are categorically equivalent ‘experiences’ within the ordinary course of human sociology and politics. Blackness, for Afropessimists, is instead seen as outside human experience – as outside the human ‘race’: the differentiation that underpins discrimination against black people is not based on socially constructed racial categories within the broader category of humanity but on the difference between the human and the non-human. Blackness cannot be analysed as an excluded group within humanity because it is outside of what it is to be a human at all. For the Afropessimists, the very idea of the human moreover developed historically in opposition to blackness. Constructed notions of ‘the human’ and of ‘being’ that developed in Europe through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not only excluded blackness but came to depend on this exclusion for their meaning. As Wilderson, often considered to be the inaugurator of

Afropessimist thought, explains, 'Human capacity (the power to be a subject of relations) is violently parasitic on Black flesh... the Human is not an organic entity but a construct; a construct that requires its Other in order to be legible... the Human Other is Black.' (Wilderson xi) 'To be black is not to be a 'degraded human', it is to be no human at all, and to be human is defined (in part) by what it is to be non-black. (13) The 'antagonism' is not between black civilisation and white civilisation, but between blackness and civilisation.

Fred Moten develops this idea by arguing that blackness should be seen as 'paraontological' rather than 'politico-ontological'. (749) That is, that blackness is not a category of political identity excluded for prejudicial reasons. Instead, the exclusion of blackness is a prerequisite for 'being' to have meaning at all; being is a 'warding off' (para-) of what it is to be black. As Moten puts it, Blackness cannot be brought into 'equal relation' because it is 'not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence, but that blackness is prior to [and constitutive of] ontology.' (739) Blackness 'and antiblackness remain in brutally antisocial structural support of one another like the stanchions of an absent bridge of lost desire.' (739) For Moten, this does not mean, (as it does for Jared Sexton) that to be black is to live a 'social death' or to be outside of society, but rather that 'black life is lived in political death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject.' From the position of the 'political subject', 'who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and selfpossession' blackness 'is nothing'. (739) To be black in society is to be perpetually and consciously 'in the hold' of the slave ship – disposable and ontologically dead. (Wilderson 322)

If the defining antithesis of blackness is not whiteness but being, political resistance to anti-black racism can only be forged out of a rejection of 'accepted ontology'. To resist the oppression of blackness is to resist the historically assembled idea of being. Drawing on the BC preference for prioritising black experience (as opposed to focusing on resisting whiteness or the constructed

idea of race), the ‘affirmative response’ for both Moten and Wilderson is an embrace of ‘nothingness,’ that is, a ‘celebration’ and ‘animation of black operations, which are, in the first instance, our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality.’ (Moten 742) Instead of looking for avenues into realising racial equality which necessarily flounder on blackness’s category exclusion from being itself, the response is a full inhabiting – what Moten calls an ‘enfleshing’ – of the reality of what it is to be ‘nothing because black’ (773). Afropessimists consequently reject notions of equality as a human right, and have attacked the idea of rights in general, arguing that statutory or constitutionally enshrined entitlements can never be meaningful to black experience until the fiction of black inclusion is laid bare.¹⁴⁴

One of the key connections between these traditions was the sense of black people being a pathological embodiment of the human. In Wilderson’s words, ‘Black people *embody*...a meta-aporias for political thought and action.’ (13, emphasis original) Much of the language of constitutive pathology in Wilderson and Sexton’s work is traceable to Fanon, whose structures of analysis are central to much Afropessimist writing. (766) In Moten, the idea of ‘analysis’ is itself brought back to the body through Fanon. Noting that ‘[t]he language of biochemistry permeates Fanon’s text’, Moten uses the Platonic character and dialogue of Lysis – object of desire, and setting for exploring normatively preferable forms of desire respectively – to ask, ‘What, precisely, is the morbid body upon which Fanon, the pathologist, trains his eye? What is the object of [Fanon’s] “complete lysis”? ...How do we think the relation between transcendental frame and the body, or nobody, that occupies, or is banished from, its confines and powers of orientation?’ (739) In approaching an answer, Moten notes that for Fanon, ‘The language of biochemistry is all bound up with the language of friendship’. (766) Lysis as the Platonic study of amity intertwines with the biological permeation of cell walls. Psycho‘analysis’

¹⁴⁴ See for instance Modiri, Joel ‘Conquest and Constitutionalism: First Thoughts on an Alternative Jurisprudence’ *South African Journal on Human Rights* 34(3) (2018) and Madlingozi, Tshepo ‘Social justice in a time of neo-apartheid constitutionalism: critiquing the anti-black economy of recognition, incorporation and distribution’ *Stellenbosch Law Review* 28(1) 2017.

is the physical loosening up ('ana' - up, lysis 'loosening') of the mind. Even when Fanon asserts that 'Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being', his 'analysis' is framed by biological metaphors of 'reabsorption' and 'prognosis' (Fanon xv). For Moten, Fanon continuously 'deploys biochemical metaphors for the ana/lysis of sociogenic products by way of sociogenic means... [thereby] making explicit what would emerge from this overlay of social and biochemical processes, sociopsychanalytic and experimental practices.' (768) Even as his study of the black condition tends towards lysis ('to separate, to break down walls, to refute, but also to redeem'), it resists metaphysical extraction. (766) Rather than seeking to understand blackness as an abstract conjectural idea, Fanon (deliberately or unconsciously) incorporates the biological into his processes and language of analysis.

For Moten, Fanon's connecting of the biological and the psychoanalytic is what enables him to excavate – to diagnose – the exclusion of blackness from the abstract Kantian transcendental markers of being. Rather than the study of a perpetual, immutable and abstract 'imperative', the study of blackness is an ana/lysis of the body excluded or left behind. Fanon's lesson 'takes the form of a postmortem reconstruction. This is forensic phenomenology: autopsy, eyewitness, unflinching determination of the cause of our sociality, which is taken for our death, given in or initiated by a metaphoric of biochemistry and supplemented by figures of text and textile.' (772) The invocation of 'text' in this section introduces Moten's corollary argument that Fanon's account of black language is likewise bound up with banishment and death. Through his extensive discussion of 'gobbledygook,' 'pigin' French, and 'palaver', Moten argues that Fanon shows the extent to which black speech 'doesn't yet show up... as an object of analysis; more precisely, the new speech doesn't show up as speech.' (759) Fanon's response to this malady is not to elevate black language, but to consolidate its descent; 'to eradicate language's place', 'to get man to admit he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and get him to eradicate this narcissism

whereby he thinks he is different from the other “animals.” This is nothing more nor less than the capitulation of man.’ (Fanon 6-7) In typically Afropessimist fashion, opposition to anti-black racism is construed not as the destruction of inequitable language or inequitable approaches to different languages, but the recognition that blackness is excluded from language as artefact of ‘man’, and that it is the idea of ‘man’ (‘being’, ‘subject’ etc) that must be dismantled to oppose anti-black sentiment.

For this reason, and unlike black consciousness which affirms blackness’s particularity within the broader milieu of humanity, Afropessimists argue that to be black is to embrace exclusion. Any other approach is to be complicit with whiteness. Choosing to be black ‘implies paying the cost; it is a kind of ethical gesture to claim this dispossession, this nothingness, this radical poverty-in-spirit.’ (Moten 774) To live blackness comprehensively is to normatively accept and adopt structural exclusion, even from being itself. Afropessimism ‘performs, in and as theory—an affirmative gesture toward nothingness, an affirmation of negation and its destructive force. It implies and demands a negative political ontology that is manifest as a kind of affirmative nihilism.’ (Moten 774) Whereas black thought previously sought to avoid or deny that blackness is socially defined as in opposition to being, Afropessimists promote a full acceptance and exploration of this nothingness. Working out the terms and function of ‘affirmative nihilism’ or ‘constitutive negativity’ is then made the crux of Afropessimist everyday practice (Wilderson 7).

Central to Afropessimism is therefore the seemingly contradictory idea that inhabiting the ‘nothingness’ and deficiency of blackness is in some way affirmative or constitutive. Rather than arguing for the re-evaluation of black cultural productions within the existing cultural economy, the Afropessimists ‘celebrate’ (a favourite term of Moten across his writing) blackness as the ‘embodiment’ of what is of no value. Where black thought had previously sought either to resist negative perceptions of blackness in the service of formal (and sometimes substantive) equality or to move entirely away from value systems constructed out of Western political thinking and

pedagogy, Afropessimists argue both that blackness cannot be made equal to whiteness in any meaningful way and that the construction of an independent ‘black conscious’ utopia within the general framework of ‘human’ culture is impossible. Instead, Afropessimists urge an embracing of the deprivation that comes with the term ‘black’. Responding to the ‘traditional Marxists’ claim that ‘nothing could ever come of such formal deprivation’... Moten, for example, answers ‘yes. Only nothing. Only that less and more than subjective and subjected sociality. Fantasy in the hold.’ (Moten 773) Rejecting ‘fraudulent’ claims to blackness’s cultural specificity, Afropessimists make their stand outside of the constructed realm of being – preferring the ‘fantasy’ of constitutive nothingness to the fantasy of meaningful equality or genuine black-only self-sufficiency.

As Wilderson recognises, this affirming of ‘nothingness’ is a foundational rejection of conventional accounts of social and aesthetic value.¹⁴⁵ (Wilderson 195-6) As suggested, Afropessimism does not ask for a reassessing of the value of blackness within existing frameworks (as is typical of liberal egalitarianism), nor does it assert the value of blackness on its own terms (as is typical of black consciousness). Instead, it ‘pessimistically’ embraces blackness’s lack of value. As Moten explains, this is not a political choice but an ontological necessity; the historical process of the construction of blackness, including through slavery, was one of ‘extraction from the sciences of value.’ (Moten 740) The relationship between being and blackness is binary – there are no alterations in the domain of ‘human’ culture that can make blackness (and its associated artefacts) more or less valuable. For Afropessimists, the value of blackness is not open to reappraisal – it is only as invaluable that blackness is properly defined.

By starting the process of thinking about value from the perspective of blackness as a nothingness, what is not black can be more accurately defined; namely, ‘what is not nothing’,

¹⁴⁵ As was clear to late eighteenth-century political economists (who, as Guillory shows, were at the genesis of aesthetic theory’s employment of value terminology) if ‘nothing’ has value, then nothing can have value. See for instance the discussion in Charles Fourier’s *The Four Movements* (1808).

incorporating the full range of (in the Arendtian terms preferred by Morton) human sociability. (Sexton 4; Moten 739) Removing blackness from the set of characteristics, objects and phenomena picked out by 'being' shifts that concept's meaning. Moreover, as Sexton recognises, identifying blackness with 'lack' 'allows for alternatives to current statements of "being", some of which can be meaningful for the everyday life of black people.' (Sexton 72) A positive endorsement of blackness as a 'foil to humanity' allows both for an authentic description of black experience and gives an analytic platform for resisting, or at least recognising, what opposes blackness in the guise of 'being' as currently defined.

The Afropessimist approach does not however advocate for broadening 'being' in ways that incorporate blackness, or even for dismantling the idea of being with intentions of reconstructing it on more equitable terms. This because, as Moten, Sexton and Wilderson all maintain, blackness's paraontological exclusion means it has no footing from which to launch a critique of this kind. Instead, in typically aporetic fashion, Afropessimists operate within the existing value framework, but valorise blackness's abjection, challenging existing value assignments only from a position of lack. Returning to the example of 'black language', Moten for example asks, 'What does it mean to consider that black speech is the sound of natal alienation, the sound of being without a heritage, without a patrimony? It means, first of all, that all these terms must be revalued, precisely from the already exhausted perspective of the ones who are both (de)valued and invaluable.' (Moten 770) Playing on the dual meaning of 'invaluable' as either without value or so valuable as to be unquantifiable, Moten brings to the fore the Afropessimist endorsement of an oppositional metaphysics by which nothingness is both lack and sufficiency. Blackness by this reading is a normatively positive term, despite also embodying exclusion from human activity, including evaluative practices.

Afropessimists are not value subjectivists because they see blackness as positively content-bearing – that is, valuable – despite being identifiable with negation and exclusion. At the same

time, there is no attempt to justify or defend in the abstract any generalised theory of value. Instead, Afropessimists take existing value assignments as their starting point, and find both moral and aesthetic goods in the paradoxical act of affirming blackness's lack. This challenges the commonly-held view that processes of evaluation begin with establishing what is more or less valuable in the abstract, before proceeding to an assessment of particular texts against these established determinates. Because of this emphasis on what Moten describes as 'embeddedness', the primary unit of analysis is unsurprisingly 'the body', and especially the (politically) 'dead' black body. Rather than pitting abstract injunctions of 'theory' and 'principles' or 'relativism' and 'universalism' against one another (as in the Cambridge and Stanford examples), Afropessimism starts with embodied black experience, and develops a theory of the good from the inside out.

RMF and UCT English

Within the UCT English Department, the importance of this conceptual approach for those seeking reform in the wake of RMF is evident in, for example, a manifesto drawn up by the newly formed English Postgraduate Caucus (EPC), sent to the Department in the second half of 2015. The 35-page manifesto overtly aligns its aims with Fallism, and sets out a list of concerns and recommendations. In detailing its 'foundational' concern, the group describes the Department as 'characterised by a predominantly white, Western, Eurocentric culture that is predominantly male, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, Anglo-Saxon and driven by northern-hemisphere norms', arguing further that, 'The department's canon, curriculum and pedagogic approach seem for the most part to be influenced by these norms.' (EPC 5) Unlike at Stanford where this by now familiar critique was analysed as a political exclusion needing political redress within the boundaries of shared human rights, the Postgraduate Caucus takes a Fallist posture, immediately describing the effect of this 'dominance' in bodily terms, and drawing out its suggested departmental reforms from this experience (EPC 7). In particular, the Caucus uses the language of pathology and death in characterising the position of black students

at UCT, concluding, for instance, that, ‘The culture of the Department... devalues or “pathologises” ... black students.’ (EPC 5) Notably, rather than attempting to reverse the relationship and portray the Department as the real patient, the Caucus sees its recommendations as aimed not as a form of ‘remedy’ or ‘treatment’ but as an affirmation of the ‘like dying’ reality of being black at UCT’ (EPC 9,10).¹⁴⁶ In doing so, it rejects the approach of those like Fagan who seek to eliminate race, instead centring its suggestions for reform within the constructed reality of black life.

The linking of ‘value’ and ‘health’ – evident in the quote above – is also prevalent throughout the document. In discussing the reform of choices of text for undergraduate teaching (much less of a focus during RMF than at Stanford), the Caucus for instance describes how the ‘Anglo-American curriculum’ taught at UCT has traditionally been associated with ‘good mental conditioning’, while ‘African, diasporic and world literatures’ were considered to be ‘unchallenging’ and so produced students with ‘weaker’ critical capabilities. (EPC 19) As the Manifesto notes, the implication is that texts outside of the ‘established canon’ are of less value because of their association with ‘weakness’ and ‘transience’. (EPC 16) Added to this was a sense of biological estrangement – black students felt they were not ‘the “direct-heirs” of white Anglo-Saxon culture.’ (EPC 6) Unable to assimilate, black students resultantly felt ‘alienated’ from the curriculum. Much of the Caucus’ work was aimed at resisting this partly-corporeal feeling. In typical Fallist fashion, the Caucus saw its aim not as arguing for the relative ‘strength’ or ‘weakness’ of texts, but ‘showing up the alienation’ brought by the incumbent canon (EPC 16).

This Manifesto and its accompanying approach were delivered to a Department already in a state of considerable upheaval. In addition to the disruptions brought by RMF, the Department was

¹⁴⁶ While there are segments of the Manifesto that speak, for example, of how ‘the study experience in the department suffers on all fronts from a lack of transformation of the curriculum, pedagogy, teaching and learning practices,’ and of a ‘joint pathologising of black and white students (and staff),’ the cause of the suffering is always rooted in anti-black racism. As David Kabinda summarises, ‘it is possible for anyone to have black pain..., [but it] happens always because of... the oppression of black people specifically.’ (EPC 6, 26; ‘Kabinda interview’)

in serious financial difficulties; in 2014 it was put into internal university administration owing to financial mismanagement. Academics in the Department were also radically divided on personal grounds, with contestation centring around Imraan Coovadia, who later left the Department to head up Creative Writing in mid-2014. Owing to the seriousness of the dispute, an external Head of Department, Jane Bennett, had been brought in from Gender Studies to lead the Department. As might be expected of a South African university post-Apartheid, questions of race, transformation and decolonisation formed a central part of the disagreement.

The arrival of RMF however ‘thoroughly shifted’ the content and emphasis of departmental debates (‘Twidle interview’). A good example of this shift is the increasingly heated contestation over the second-year curriculum. By 2015, as a result of earlier departmental disagreements (discussed below), English at UCT was taught simultaneously through a combination of ‘lectures’ and ‘seminars’, connected loosely by theme, but comprised of different texts and led by different academics or postgraduate students. Lectures tended to be taught by more senior academic staff, and formed the basis for end of year examinations, while term-time summative assessment related to material covered during seminars, and was taught by a mix of postgraduates and permanent staff. At second-year level, and unlike the first and third years, lectures were split into two streams. Four courses were offered across the two semesters: African Literature and Language Studies 1 (first semester); African Literature and Language Studies 2 (second semester); Shakespeare and Company (first semester); and Romance to Realism (second semester). Students were expected to choose (at least) one course from the first two options, and one from the second. Shakespeare and Company and Romance to Realism were loosely chronological – covering literature from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, while both African Literature courses drew chiefly on twentieth century texts.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ The two first-year courses were ‘English Literary Studies 1’ (first semester) and ‘English Literary Studies 2’ (second semester) – the latter of which also incorporated some twentieth-century South African texts. ‘Modernism’ and ‘Contemporary Literature’ were taught in third year.

The bifurcated structure reflected a long-standing tension in the Department between a desire to ensure that ‘major figures of British literature’ were taught, and that South African and African texts ‘were not side-lined.’ (UCT Humanities Handbook 2015 110; ‘Mkhize interview’) As I suggest in the next section, the structure of this agonism is a relic of departmental debates traceable back to the 1980s. Unlike at first- and third-year levels, the shape of this dispute could be seen clearly in the second-year curriculum itself. It is thus unsurprising that the approaches to evaluation and race ushered in by RhodesMustFall were targeted most directly at this section of the undergraduate programme. At a practical level, disagreement over the second-year course was kindled by certain members of the Department – notably Khwezi Mkhize who had recently joined as permanent Faculty after completing a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania – who ‘intentionally introduced’ Fallist thinking and demands to discussions over ‘teaching and book selection’ in the Department (‘Mkhize Interview’).

Mkhize describes this push as aimed not at ‘trying to fix the representational problems of the Department, even if this was... something we sometimes spoke for.’ (Mkhize Interview) Instead, the aim was to ‘restructure’ the degree so that ‘the *embodied* experience of the black students’ was ‘answered and spoken to.’ (‘Mkhize email’, 23 August 2021 my italics) While this did mean changing the texts on course lists, the ‘evaluation of literature’ was construed as part of ‘giving a proper recognition’ to what it means to be ‘black in South Africa’ (‘Mkhize Interview’). As such, and like the position of RMF in general, Mkhize saw the aim of curriculum reform as ‘finding value’ in the ‘alienation’ of what it meant to be black in South Africa. (‘Mkhize Interview’) When asked about the impact this had for thinking about literary and other forms of value at UCT in general, Mkhize suggested it engendered a need to see value as ‘something which starts from the hopeless perspective of... [being] black’. (‘Mkhize interview’)

While no minutes or comprehensive records were kept of discussions related to reform of the second-year course immediately following RMF, ‘post-2015 it was abundantly clear that the

curriculum needed to be discussed and changed' (Mkhize email, 23 August 2021). This recognition resulted in 'many weeks' of sometimes acrimonious debate over the structure of the degree at the Monday departmental staff meetings. (Mkhize email, 24 August 2021) According to Mkhize, through these meetings the 'basic form' of the 'recast' second-year curriculum was set, probably at some point in 'the middle of 2015'. (Mkhize email, 24 August 2021) The process by which the changes were brought into effect, was, however far from straightforward. Because no committee with a specific mandate to handle curriculum reform had been created, questions relating to choices between literary texts and the everyday running of the Department became increasingly intertwined. This resulted in complex and multifaceted tensions between academics, particular those teaching on second-year courses, which in turn culminated in a substantial reluctance on the part of many members of the department to teach on the second-year course at all.

At a practical level, substantial alterations to the courses taught at second-year level are only visible from 2018. The Romance to Realism course taught in the second half of 2015 does, however, shows some signs of change. Most notably, *King Solomon's Mines* (taught by Mkhize) is added to a long-standing set list comprised centrally of *The Country Wife*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Scarlet Letter*, 'Romantic Poetry' and 'Victorian poetry'. Mkhize describes the novel as 'not part of the original conception of the kind of text that would be taught in that course', and his teaching approach as 'different' to both the 'usual discussions' associated with romance and realism, and the symptomatic critical techniques of 1980s Marxism (Mkhize email, 25 August 2021). Using both 'RhodesMustFall-related energy and ideas' and '[A]fro-optimist material [he was] reading,' Mkhize used the four lectures allotted to him as a way to illustrate the connections between the 'eradication' of black perspectives across time. (Mkhize email, 25 August 2021) The seminars associated with the Romance to Realism lectures also underwent some reform, with two of the six now incorporating some reference to empire – 'Romance to Realism: Colonial spaces' (again

taught by Mkhize) and ‘Romanticism and Imperialism’ (taught by Chantal d’Offay, an untenured recent graduate of the Department). These changes, as Mkhize notes, continued to reflect a central dichotomy between the texts of empire and those critical or outside of it, but there was some breaking of the course boundary between ‘African’ and ‘English’ literature. (‘Mkhize interview’)

The years 2016 and 2017 were an especially difficult period for English at UCT. Owing to resignations, retirements, and positions left unfilled because of financial difficulties, the Department was reduced to just six fully employed staff members from a complement of more than 30 in the 1980s. As might be expected, material battles developed over who should take on teaching responsibilities, with temporary and junior staff irked by the lack of teaching commitments taken on by, in particular, John Higgins and Kelwyn Sole in the year before their retirement. In order to avert some of this conflict, a ‘Staffing Committee’ was established in early 2016 and tasked with the hiring of at least three new academics. This committee’s proceedings quickly became the centre of both internal departmental dispute and RMF-related activism within English. In particular, discussion around the Committee’s first responsibility of establishing the criteria to be used in hiring decisions became heated.

For the Postgraduate Caucus, as a third of the Department’s permanent staff were to be hired on the basis of these criteria, involvement in their formulation was an excellent opportunity for bringing about reform. The group thus advocated for the inclusion of ‘direct reference’ to the ‘goals of transformation and decolonisation as raised by RhodesMustFall’ in the advertisement for the position. (‘PG Caucus minutes’) This suggestion – submitted by way of oral testimony – resulted in ‘thinly-disguised derision’ from some (unnamed) members of the Staffing Committee, who resisted the direct association of the department with any political movement. (‘Mkhize interview’) There was, however, general agreement within the committee that the appointments needed to be ‘sensitive to the race and language questions of South African society’ (‘Staffing

committee Final Summary' 2). Disagreement centred on what a 'race-sensitive approach' would entail.

While minutes of the Committee's debates are not available, the wording of the agreed advertisement offers some insight into its final position. Noting both the Department's 'global... orientation' and a need to 'diversify', the advertisement calls for applicants with strong research interests in 'critical African and diasporic literary studies, South African literatures, black feminist postcolonial and decolonial literary studies, historical and archival literary research grounded in work on continental contexts, and translation and theory of language studies.' ('UCT Advertisement') In addition to a clear geographical leaning, the Committee links its hiring to a disciplinary trajectory. Use of the word 'critical' links the Department to critical race studies, emergent in the United States in the late 1980s, and an important influence on Afropessimism. Notably, combining 'black feminist postcolonial and decolonial' into a single 'studies', creates a single field from a number of disparate intellectual traditions emanating from various parts of the world. ('UCT Advertisement') While this might be seen to create ambiguity on the position of the Department, it also illustrates the extent to which the Committee felt that there was an homogenous discipline to which the call for applicants was aimed. For both representatives of the Postgraduate Caucus and Mkhize this was a clear reference to the intellectual, organisational and evaluative ideas emanating from RMF.

The language of the document is, however, considerably weaker than that evident in, for instance, the Postgraduate Caucus manifesto. So as to understand some of the countervailing forces that pushed back against RMF, the next section considers the history of the UCT English Department since the 1980s. I argue that the dominant intellectual position in the Department at the time of RMF's occurrence, and therefore the most significant counterpoint to the Afropessimist-infused evaluative approach popular amongst Fallists, was the form of materialist humanism I have already identified in the writing of Achille Mbembe and Anton Fagan. After

sketching the Department's early history, I use the work and biographies of the two longest-standing figures in the Department to draw out the position I have in mind. These two figures also became the most prominent opponents of Fallist-aligned academics and students in the English Department.

Materialist Humanism at UCT

The English Department at UCT was founded in the early 1920s (before the English Faculty at Cambridge, but after Stanford), and structured around two Chairs, one of which was funded by, and named after, Rhodes' mining corporation De Beers.¹⁴⁸ After a long period of what Ian Glenn describes as 'Oxford model' research and teaching (marked by philology and historicism), David Gillham was appointed Head of Department in 1971, inaugurating a 'militantly Leavisite program', with hires during the 1970s and early 1980s 'made of people who seemed to have an aptitude for the critical rigor associated with the Cambridge-based *Scrutiny* rather than the scholarship associated with Oxford and Old English.' (Crewe 15; Glenn 416) By the mid-1970s, the entire final year mark was dependent on a 'four-hour practical criticism exam.' (Glen 418)

Under Gillham, the Department grew substantially, reaching nearly 30 permanent academic staff by the mid-1980s. This was achieved in part by leveraging the English Language Tutorial Scheme – a programme intended to improve the quality of reading and writing across the university. Money from the programme allowed for a radical re-shaping of the Department through a range of new hires. One of those appointments was J. M. Coetzee, who, when interviewed for the position in 1972 was very nearly overlooked in favour of Gillham's preferred candidate, Jonathan

¹⁴⁸ The two chairs were originally divided between 'language' (the De Beers Chair) and 'literature' (the Arderne Chair). This distinction fell away in the early 1960s, following a fractious departmental dispute over the division of teaching and other responsibilities. See further Mary Penrith 'A Historical and Critical Account of the Teaching of English Language and Literature' (1972) 153-8.

Crewe – at the time a confirmed Leavisite trained at the University of Natal’s Pietermaritzburg campus.¹⁴⁹

Coetzee, who had recently returned from a three-year stint at the theoretically experimental SUNY Buffalo in the United States, was dismissive of Gillham’s latter-day Leavisism.¹⁵⁰

Developing similar arguments in departmental syllabus and staffing fora during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Coetzee argued for drastic curriculum reform, advocating, as Andrew Dean summarises, that students ‘should take courses in literary history, critical theory, contemporary literature, and regional literatures.’ (Dean 38) Drawing on the work of South African academics and publishers including Isabel Hofmeyr and Mike Kirkwood, Coetzee contrasted this new approach with the ‘isolated-masterpieces principle’ which he saw as central to the practical criticism holding sway over the department. (Coetzee *LG* n.p.).

Coetzee’s scepticism of the idea that art has intrinsic value ‘isolated’ from its social context was shared by several of his colleagues. This ‘reformist’ position is epitomised by a special edition of the journal *Critical Arts*, published in mid-1984.¹⁵¹ The edition, titled *English Studies in Transition*, includes contributions by Nick Visser, Michael Green, Ian Glenn, Michael Vaughan and Rob

¹⁴⁹ Both candidates were in the end appointed following a ‘very rough meeting’ between the interview panel (who were impressed by Coetzee) and Gillham. (Crewe 16) Coetzee’s biographer J. C. Kannemeyer argues that on the whole, and with some notable exceptions, ‘[i]n appointing new lecturers, [Gillham] saw to it that his sycophants got the jobs, people who would not question his authority.’ (Kannemeyer 367) As Glenn suggests, this characterisation is likely harsh, but there was certainly a strong Leavisite-lurch. (Glenn 416) Other ‘exceptions’ might be seen to include Eve Bertelsen, Ann Bowler, Ian Glenn and Tony Parr, who were all appointed from positions in the United States.

¹⁵⁰ In a two-page departmental memorandum written in 1977, he made his position clear: ‘Practical Criticism is not a critical theory but a package designed to simplify and streamline the preparation of large numbers of culturally semi-literate students for careers in school teaching. As a teaching package, it is modelled on a drastically oversimplified version of human psychology. Designed with the limitations of the 45-minute tutorial in mind, it fosters a skill in doing rapid explications of half-page texts with a tight semantic structure. Since such texts are largely unrepresentative of the vast body of literature, the relevance of Practical Criticism to literary criticism is smaller than one might be led to think. (Coetzee *PC* n.p.)

¹⁵¹ The editorial board of *Critical Arts*, based out of the University of Natal, included many luminaries of left-leaning Literary and Cultural Studies in South Africa at the time, a small number of whom were non-white. Members included Njabulo Ndebele, Eve Bertelsen, David Coplan, Tim Couzens and Don Pinnock.

Nixon – all of whom had affiliations to UCT at the time. In his contribution, Vaughan defines the group's shared view on the prevailing order:

[I]t seems to me, there is one absolutely central and dominating concept at work. This is the concept of a universal (and hence timeless) aesthetic order. This order is empirically, rather than theoretically defined: it consists of literary texts, rather than of theoretical concepts about literature. At the same time, the texts that belong within this order are recognized as belonging in terms of certain concepts, or values... These values are partly imported from the West, and partly produced locally by South African liberal elements. (Vaughan 37)

As with MacCabe's 'theory'-based approach at Cambridge, UCT's reformers rejected as dishonest the notion that certain literary texts (or their components) can be identified as aesthetically valuable based merely on their form or facial content.¹⁵² Unlike the compromise position reached by the Stanford senate following the CIV debates, the reform wing of the UCT English Department was committed from the start to justifying the practice of textual evaluation on more politically normative grounds than what I described as pragmatist commonality. Its position was also more openly normative than early MacCabe and late Kermode, who both saw the value of the canon as connected chiefly to its curatorial function. For the contributors to the *Critical Arts* special edition, the purpose of literary studies and the justification for the privileging of texts was instead social improvement and well-being. Specifically, the key question facing the Department at the time was, 'In what way can our academic concern with literature in English

¹⁵² As for Kermode's initial importation of French theory in *The Classic* through a discussion of American literature and from American sources, the UCT reformist position was associated with American literary studies. At an institutional level, one of the major departmental battle lines was drawn over whether an 'American' system, where undergraduates chose from a varied list of electives taught in seminars, or a 'British' system, where students were given 'lectures and tutorials on canonical texts', was preferable (Glenn 419-20). Gillham advocated for the latter approach, while what Glenn describes as the Department's 'Young Turks' (many of whom, including Coetzee, were US imports) preferred the former. (420) In the end, a compromise was agreed, through which 'a core course of lectures handled the major texts (however defined), while options allowed staff to teach in their areas of specialization and research interest.' (420) Practically, this meant that seminars operated alongside lectures and tutorials. Notably, this system persists to this day, and the sometimes-confused division of labour it entails became a theatre for hostilities in the wake of RhodesMustFall.

best support the objective of the cultural liberation of South Africa?’ (Vaughan 50) While this did not mean a crude reduction of a text to ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it did mean choosing and reading texts with the principal aim of ‘cultural liberation.’ (Vaughan 52)

Like the birth and development of cultural studies, the development of this approach was rooted firmly in opposing unjust social systems. By the mid-1980s, the United Democratic Front’s (UDF) efforts to make South Africa ‘ungovernable’ had reached fever pitch, and, as Crewe describes, ‘Although still fundamentally liberal, the English-speaking white South African academy had become radicalized to a degree... The academic liberal conscience had increasingly come under critical pressure – from Marxists among others – and was uneasily trying to negotiate its relations with ascendant Black Power.’ (Crewe 14) Wanting (or compelled) to contribute to ending minority white rule, reformists in the Department came to define the role of literary criticism in terms of the liberation struggle. Practical criticism and its advocates were by contrast associated with the kinds of spatial humanism described by Barnes, and discussed above.

While there is some irony in rejecting practical criticism in terms that sound remarkably Leavisite, the UCT reformist approach was distinctive in its express commitment to defining ‘cultural liberation’ through what Visser describes as ‘social theory and history’:

Where once the exhortation to study poetry first as poetry and not as another thing seemed compelling, now increasing numbers of academics and students find the appeal to larger social and historical frameworks far more persuasive. The sources for those frameworks, as these essays demonstrate, lie not in the official poetics of modernism, but in social theory and social history. (Visser 1)

As the discussion below of the work of Kelwyn Sole describes in more detail, this ‘social theory and social history’ was defined through research coming out of left-leaning history and sociology departments in South Africa and elsewhere, and was materialist rather than ‘scholarly’.¹⁵³

In general, this shift led to a sometimes-clumsy eliminativism, as when Vaughan argues that, ‘We must attempt to replace universalist or essentialist terms of aesthetic reference with terms which are capable of assisting the work of sensitive and detailed historical, or social-contextual analysis.’ (Vaughan, 38). Both Vaughan and Nixon describe aesthetic evaluation as ‘imbricated’:

[W]e need to argue for completely different concepts of aesthetics, and of aesthetic evaluation. The challenging concepts need to be historical ones: ones, that is, that recognise the imbrication of aesthetic issues with social and political forces, and that effect this recognition not simply in a tokenistic or perfunctory way, but as a directive for the central momentum for research and teaching. (Nixon 14)

At these moments, there is a vague recognition that reinstating material and social normativity does not, of itself, imply the rejection of aesthetic goods.¹⁵⁴

On the whole, the 1980s were a time of considerable uncertainty in the Department, and there were several unpleasant internal disputes, forming loosely along the lines outlined above. Unlike at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg where an African Literature Department had split from the English Department in 1983 in part because of English’s

¹⁵³ Vaughan, for instance, stresses that he is ‘not arguing for a non-evaluative approach to literature: I recognise aesthetic evaluation as an integral feature of all literary experience. Literature is never about neutral things: it is about ways of thinking, ways of “seeing”, ways (therefore) that are implicitly evaluative.’ (Vaughan 37)

¹⁵⁴ As in the Cambridge dispute, the main evaluation-related fault-line in the UCT English Department of the 1980s developed in response to methodological question of what the practice of literary criticism should entail, rather than content-driven questions related to canon and core list, as at Stanford. The value debates centred on how texts should be read, rather than which texts should be read. In his contribution to the Critical Arts special edition, Visser argues that – as at Cambridge with Joyce – this was because the South African literary studies academy had found ways to incorporate previously excluded texts while keeping the methodological shape of practical criticism; noting the development of a South African specific ‘Great Tradition’ – Pringle, Schreiner, Plomer, Campbell and so on – which in the late 1970s had come to incorporate some black authors as well. (Visser 4) As is evident from my earlier discussion of RhodesMustFall, university value discussions in South Africa have nearly always coalesced around institutional culture, rather than canon production or text lists.

unwillingness to abandon Leavisite forms of teaching and research, the UCT English Department continued to operate with many of its internal conflicts institutionally unresolved. During the course of the 1980s, as David Johnson describes, a variety of ‘critical theories’ nevertheless began to gradually occupy the theoretical and pedagogical space previously taken by Gillham’s ‘prac crit’, though some of the residue of Leavisism remained (Johnson 832) The immense political pressure of the period also began to tell with the appointment of the Raymond Williams-inspired cultural materialist John Higgins in 1986, and then of Kelwyn Sole as the Department’s ‘first African literature expert’ in 1987 (‘Sole interview’). Both were to become long-standing members of the Department, retiring only in 2017 in the wake of RhodesMustFall. These two figures are of particular importance to understanding the value debates in English Studies at UCT during RMF because of their position as, in Khwezi Mkhize’s words, the ‘chief antagonists’ of ‘reform-minded’ staff and students in the Department ‘during 2015 and 2016’. (‘Mkhize interview’) Understanding their approach and stance on value is therefore a helpful starting point for understanding the Department’s reckoning with RhodesMustFall as a whole.

Higgins

Higgins in particular became the RMF Departmental reformists’ *bête noire*. His position in this regard is particularly interesting for present purposes because of his pre-UCT history. Having grown up in a working-class family in Bradford, England, Higgins won a scholarship to King’s College, Cambridge. His time at the College happened to coincide with that of MacCabe, and the two became ‘close friends’, forming part of the same small ‘King’s post-structuralist intellectual circle’. (‘Higgins interview’) Working on early editions of *Screen*, and involved in the formation of broader ‘British post-structuralism’, Higgins’s interests and career trajectory were fundamentally shaped by the MacCabe affair. After finishing his undergraduate, he was accepted by King’s with full funding to complete a PhD, but was rejected by the Cambridge English Faculty for similar reasons to MacCabe. Forced out of the university, Higgins took up a junior lectureship at the

University of Geneva in 1980, where he founded – again in the face of internal Leavisite resistance – the Cultural Studies Group, which later became an influential institution in the burgeoning field of cultural studies as an academic discipline. In 1987, through the intervention of Coetzee, he joined the UCT English Department as a lecturer.

Higgins describes the ‘intellectual currents’ of Cambridge English and the MacCabe Affair as the ‘animating ... intellectual interest’ of his life. (‘Higgins interview’) Much of his early work in the English Department centred on the writing of Raymond Williams. In later years, partly as a response to changes in policy and governance structures in South Africa, his focus turned to questions of academic freedom. Over these two periods, Higgins developed a theory of aesthetic and literary value, grounded firmly in Williams’s ‘cultural materialism’. Two of his books, 1999’s *Raymond Williams: literature, marxism and cultural materialism* and 2013’s *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities* give a good sense of his general position.

Raymond Williams: literature, marxism and cultural materialism is written as a chronological commentary on Williams’s full oeuvre. Progressing from a discussion of Williams’s early ‘left Leavisism’ through his rejection of ‘Cambridge criticism’ and development of the idea of cultural materialism, the book concludes with a discussion of Williams’s involvement in the Departmental debates surrounding the MacCabe Affair and commentaries on Thatcherite Britain. Higgins’s own positions on questions of literary and aesthetic value appear most comprehensively in his discussion of Williams’s writing of the late 1970s and early 1980s, starting with 1977’s *Marxism and Literature*. Most potently, Higgins endorses what he describes as Williams’s view that – despite the departmental furore at Cambridge – the late-Leavisism of Ricks and associates was in ‘general compatibl[e]’ with the ‘British post-structuralism’ of MacCabe and his circle. (Higgins RW 137) On Higgins’s reading of Williams, MacCabe’s approach was no more than a continuation of the kind of thinking characteristic of the

Cambridge English Faculty from its inception; ‘an indirect inheritance from the kind of thinking which Richards had been doing about the isolated internal organisation of a poem’ (206) Rather than being a break with the dominant literary paradigm which Leavis had entrenched through school syllabi across the United Kingdom and its colonies, British post-structuralism was ‘the paradigm itself in its most influential modern form.’ (206) Practical criticism and post-structuralism shared a genetic basis in a form of ‘bourgeois literary analysis’ marked by an overemphasis on the individual at the expense of the social (125).

More specifically, what linked the two sides of the MacCabe Affair was an absence of real historicity. For both, ‘the whole text was to be read without date and author’ – either as a deracinated text, or through a deracinated theory or ‘ideology.’ (Higgins *RW* 223) Both approaches assumed that a text can be explained in terms of a given ‘system of internal signs’:

What I then see is... their own deep forms. I can feel the bracing cold of their inherent distances and impersonalities and yet have to go on saying that they are indeed ice-cold. I see, practically and theoretically, the estranging consequences of the general assumption – as active in modernist literature as in theoretical linguistics and structuralist Marxism – that the systems of human signs are generated within the systems themselves and that to think otherwise is a humanist error.¹⁵⁵ (Williams, quoted in Higgins *RW* 223)

In addition to a striking invocation of humanism – discussed in further detail below – this passage illustrates Williams’s (and Higgins’s) construal of British post-structuralism’s commitment to, in MacCabe’s terminology, ‘chang[ing] the position of the subject within ideology’ (through the linguistic destabilisation of a writer like Joyce or the anti-realist filmic avant-garde of Jean-Luc Godard as historically detached, and therefore ‘cold’ as a convector for social change. (MacCabe *JJ* 53) ‘Frozen in place like characters in *Endgame*,’ contemporary theory

¹⁵⁵ As Higgins notes, ‘modernist’ for Williams bears a broader definition than is usual, and ‘is best read as referring to the literary theory emerging in Britain through the mid to late 1970s’. (Higgins *RW* 148)

produced a subject whose idea of liberation was reduced to the politics of textuality. (Higgins *RW* 168) As an alternative, Williams argued for a critical practice aimed at identifying ‘a range of distinct and in many cases actually opposed formations, as these have materialized in language.’

(79) Rather than spending time ‘investigating some single position of language in the avant-garde or language in Modernism’, literary analysis should work to bring into focus social determinants.

In interview with me, Higgins also noted, however, that despite his general endorsement of Williams’s criticism of post-structuralism his work remains closely connected to MacCabe’s, partly as a result of their personal affiliation. (‘Higgins interview’) In *Raymond Williams: literature, marxism and cultural materialism* this is evident in Higgins’s stressing of Williams’s occasional distancing of the ‘radical semiotics’ of MacCabe, Heath and others from its more obviously bourgeois structuralist predecessors. For instance, in Williams’s faculty lecture at the height of the MacCabe affair in 1981, he describes ‘the new sense of deconstructionism’ as a ‘much more open and active process which is continually taking examples apart, as a way of taking their systems apart.’ (Higgins *RW* 208-9) Where Kermode saw Williams as an absent presence in the day-to-day combat of the MacCabe affair, Higgins describes him as actively supporting the MacCabe ‘faction’. (‘Higgins interview’) In his own subsequent writing, it is likewise notable that Higgins is a strong advocate for channelled materialism through the aporias and other deconstructive techniques of writers including Derrida and Miller.

In practical and pedagogic terms this boils down to a rejection of the idea of ‘literature’ in favour of ‘literacy’. Drawing on Williams, Higgins argues that the term ‘literature’, which once referred to the full set of textual productions, had come since the eighteenth century to mean a certain sub-set of texts, picked out on normative grounds. (Higgins *AF* 128) As Williams puts it, literature became ‘a category of use and condition rather than of production.’ (Williams 47) Central to this shift was a linking of evaluation to the very category of literature. Over time, literature came to be defined by evaluative terms like ‘taste’, ‘sensitivity’ and ‘genius’ – the ‘norms

of aesthetic judgement' – rather than by the mere fact of their creation or 'formation.' (Higgins *AF* 128) Such a shift encouraged the demarcation of the field of literature to be accomplished by reference to the right kind of works, collected in a canon or national tradition. Literacy, by contrast, recognises the 'multiplicity of writing', and makes no attempt to delimit its object of study through evaluative mechanisms. (130)

As I read Higgins, it is this *use* of evaluation to define literature that should, as a consequence, be opposed. Such a conclusion is also central to the discipline of cultural studies, which rejects distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art, and between 'imaginative' and 'factual' writing.¹⁵⁶ This understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic and the evaluative is revisited in Higgins's later work, including *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa*, published the year before the emergence of RhodesMustFall in 2015. In an interview with Terry Eagleton from the collection, Higgins links the 'changes we're being asked to make in the humanities' – namely 'to instrumentalise literature' – to Eagleton's notion of the 'aestheticist Marx.'¹⁵⁷ (Higgins *AF* 204-5)

Even as the aesthetic can be a tool for resisting general acquiescence to the causal chains of capitalist production and replication, the conditions necessary for the flourishing of non-

¹⁵⁶ This does not amount to a rejection of evaluation *tout court*. Disentangling the literary from the evaluative does not mean that texts, seen broadly, are not open to objectivist evaluative treatment. Higgins recognises this through his differentiating of the 'aesthetic' from 'literature'. While historically bearing some of the same negative hallmarks of literature 'in its careful selection and specialisation of human creative energy to forms of class culture', the aesthetic has also had more radical usage in resisting those 'same alienating and reifying forces of bourgeois culture' (Higgins *RW* 130). One of the strengths of the aesthetic is its function as a normatively potent category of 'action and agency' in opposition to bourgeois hegemony. (13) Through its distinctive emphasis on non-economic goods, the aesthetic has disrupted and at times actively resisted economic notions of value.

¹⁵⁷ In short, what makes Marx 'aestheticist' is his commitment to non-instrumentalist accounts of value, or, as Eagleton puts it, 'the very radical notion, which I call aestheticist, of activities as valuable in themselves.' (Eagleton in Higgins *AF* 204) Not only does Marx engage with aesthetics, but for Eagleton his 'political ethics are of an aesthetic kind, too'. (Eagleton in Higgins *AF* 205) Marx mounts an open and calculated defence of non-causal evaluative norms, even as his analysis is rooted in material conditions. For Higgins, it is this characteristic that differentiates Marx from the 'populist' notion that there is no such thing as value, or that value in literature should be ignored because it is classist, elitist or hierarchical. Similarly, for Eagleton, to 'rethink the grounds of valuation', including through 'aesthetic' means, is 'an entirely different matter' to a rejection of evaluation. Against the 'multiculturalist' value sceptic and in support of Higgins's contention that the aesthetic is differentiable from the literary, Eagleton asserts that 'of course we value, it's part of social existence... it's an academicist fantasy to think that value can simply go away.' (Higgins *AF* 204) Rather than seeing a commitment to materiality as a hindrance to value, Eagleton and Higgins see the pursuit of value as a key component of a proper diagnosis of material culture. For Higgins, it is then the 'openness and freedom' to uncover and pursue non-instrumental ends that is the key mark of a free and democratic academy and society. (205-6)

instrumental evaluative discussions and pronouncements remain, for Higgins, dependent on constant critical intervention. For this he returns to Williams's expansive idea of literacy; closer to 'advanced' or 'critical' literacy, than the acquisition of the basic ability to read and write. As in his earlier work, Higgins argues that a discipline built on a combined textual, theoretical and historical standpoint is essential to societal flourishing as well as good evaluative decision-making. (Higgins 82) In 'It's Literacy, Stupid', he concludes that 'this common ground forms the basis for a defence of the humanities.' (82) Practically, Higgins's approach amounts to reading texts ('fictional' or otherwise) as both a 'screen that conceals', and as a point for identifying the 'problems and contradictions' inherent to its place in history. While showing some similarity to the kind of symptomatic reading criticised by Kermode, Higgins's approach is often more interested in the surface meanings of texts than early Eagleton, and he is sceptical of critics who overly historicise. His approach tends to move away from 'bald sociology', just as it resists a 'phantasmal' surface reading of texts, and disembodied theorising. (91)

With this methodological approach in mind, Higgins's discussion of race is remarkably short of nuance, a difficulty which played out in pronounced fashion during RhodesMustFall.¹⁵⁸ Rather than parsing prevailing or nascent ideas of race through the textual, theoretical and historical methodologies he outlines, Higgins instead takes the hackneyed route of depicting race as a smokescreen occluding class discussion.¹⁵⁹ Seeing resistance to class distinction as playing out

¹⁵⁸ In an ugly incident during 2016, Higgins received an email from a student, Nuhaa Soeker, asking if she would be allowed to break her Ramadan fast just before 6pm during a 5-7pm exam. Higgins responded: 'By breaking the fast do you mean a five-course meal with dessert, or a small snack whose eating would disturb no one around you? The exam office, which runs the exams (not me!) makes no mention of this, and you would have to approach them for clarification. But please tell me what you see as fast-breaking (sic).' While later issuing an 'unreserved apology', Higgins's crass bigotry solidified his position as one of RMF's *bêtes noires*.

¹⁵⁹ In 'Institutional Culture as Keyword' (forming part of the same 2014 collection) Higgins for instance considers in detail a 1999 report by Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl on UCT's 'institutional culture' entitled prophetically "'Like that Statue at Jammie Stairs...': Some Student Perceptions and Experiences of Institutional Culture at the University of Cape Town'. Accepting the report's recognition of "'whiteness" as an invisible norm' operating perniciously on UCT's campus, and the need for an 'intensive consciousness-raising exercise around the issue', Higgins nevertheless concludes that 'though race may be an obvious and immediate factor in the experience of alienation and anomie, it may well be a secondary phenomenon in terms of explanation.' (Higgins 121) In a manner typical of what one RMF student described to me as 'one-dimensional old white leftists,' Higgins explains that 'race is secondary to the deeper logic of social subordination and reproduction that divides racial groups internally according to the force of class distinction.' (Higgins 121; 'Hotz interview') He goes further in arguing that the

more directly in struggles over academic freedom than in those over race is peculiar for a writer persistently resistant (with Williams) to the early twentieth century leftist notion of economic 'base' as fully determinate of cultural 'superstructure'. In fact, one of Higgins's abiding preoccupations across his work is defending arguments for the constitutive nature of culture, both as a forum for perpetuating class distinctions and for opposing them. This especially in a country where discrimination based on race and class was consciously and institutionally aligned through the Apartheid regime.

More generally, as Higgins recognises, resisting class discrimination is not helpfully distinguishable from resisting other forms of discrimination, at least without a complex understanding of the symbolism and meaning of each discriminatory practice or idea within a given social context. In a 2001 review, Higgins criticises Kelwyn Sole along exactly these lines for his supposed preference for South African poets whose work is 'related immediately and perhaps even causally' to 'corresponding features of the economic base'. (Higgins 98-9) For Higgins, lauding a group of poets because of their 'bearing witness' to class discrimination has the unintended effect of creating a canon of 'good' poets; a beatifying move that conversely replicates 'the highly individualised ideology of Romanticism.' (Higgins 101) Raising poetic 'bearing witness' to an aesthetic virtue, and then canonising those poets who write to this aim, ironically resuscitates the same Leavisite individualism that it professes to oppose. Instead, says Higgins, economic inequality should be tackled in and through culture. There is no 'primary' form of class analysis that can be conducted outside of the wide-ranging set of cultural concepts that make up a society's relational functioning.

report's emphasis on whiteness as racial differentiation tends to 'background... the broader issues of reproduction and cultural capital at the heart of Bourdieu's account [of class distinction].' For Higgins, the result of an overly far-reaching focus on UCT's 'institutional culture as whiteness' is a 'marginalisation of the changes occurring at the interface between academics and administrators.' (Higgins 121) In short, a focus on race entrenches deeper class disenfranchisement by side-lining critiques of capitalist deployment of state apparatuses, in this instance through university administration.

In my view, Higgins's argument for the preferencing of the struggle between academic and administrator has a similarly 'individualising' effect. If class is a cultural determinate (even if one constitutively linked to the economic base), any number of cultural interventions – including those related to race – can be effective as a form of resistance to materially determined patterns of class-exclusion. Moreover, the economic base can *only* be conceptualised through culture as a whole – as Adorno put it, 'Materialist determinations of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process.' (Adorno 98) Viewing race as an obfuscation of class is both too simplistic an analysis of the role race plays in class formation, and one that actively hides the full functioning of class discrimination. Claims that struggles for the end of institutional racism are always damaging to the broader fight against class discrimination are moreover likely in this way to perpetuate the same harm they claim to be remedying.

Understanding Higgins's motivation for ignoring his own commitment to 'cultural' materialism, as well as his carefully constructed 'text/theory/history' triad would require its own careful reading, historicising and theorising of Higgins and his work. Whatever the explanation, for some Fallists, this resistance to giving institutionalised racism at UCT its proper explanatory due manifested as covert racism. As one Fallist explained to me, 'we kept hearing he's left, but then why can't he see that... in this place being left is about the black child and the black body... he tries too much to tell us about poverty, and it starts to feel like he's hiding he's white.' ('Tsenang interview'). For many Fallists, the experience of oppression was mediated through race, no matter its broader provenance in class structures. As another interviewee put it, it wasn't that Higgins was blind to race, he just 'hadn't really taken time to find out what it [meant] in South Africa.' ('Swambo interview') By creating a false opposition between race and class Higgins thus both prevented a proper analysis of the culturally-encoded economic conditions of discrimination in South Africa, and came across as intentionally downplaying the effects of racism in South Africa.

Sole

For his part, Sole is broadly sympathetic to Higgins's professed 'non-reductive' take on traditional materialism, but opts for a conspicuously different line on the relationship between race and class. Somewhat surprisingly, this comes out of a greater commitment to 'materialism', rather than a greater commitment to 'culture'.¹⁶⁰ Responding to Higgins's allegations that his reading of South African poetry is an example of brute-economism, Sole makes his scepticism of Higgins's vigorous defence of Williams-style 'culturalism' patent. (Sole '*JHP*') While foregrounding his long-standing opposition to the 'rote, reductionistic application' of the 'base-superstructure formulation', he explains that, 'Contemporary practitioners of cultural studies seldom take time to specify what is other than culture, so by definition... they never define culture itself. They post clear warning signs on the road to reductive economism, but leave unmarked the equally reductive road to culturalism.' (Sole '*JHP*') Rather than arguing for the need to highlight culture as a mediator of class, Sole argues that it is an overindulgence in 'culturalism' that is the real political hazard. What is needed is not more focus on culture, but a clearer understanding of the relationship between cultural formations and material base. He goes on to argue that, 'the hegemonic - at times canonical - position Williams's critique has gained in contemporary cultural studies has blinded students to the need to look at other intricate arguments among Marxists revolving around problems of base-superstructure, arguments which remained cautious about a complete ditching of the concept.' (Sole '*JHP*') In particular, Sole points to G. A. Cohen's argument that it is entirely possible for social processes and institutions to be empirically omnipresent in society and at the same time usefully conceptualised and analysed as various 'levels' of that society. Sole sees the classical account of the base as wholly

¹⁶⁰ In general, Sole sees himself as 'essentially Marxist'. (D'Arcy 48)

constitutive of any cultural superstructure as helpful at minimum as a metaphor, even if descriptions of class are themselves always mediated through culture.

With respect to race, this amounts to a critique of popular race-related ideologies for their lack of focus on economic determinates. In particular, Sole works extensively on black consciousness literature and especially (oral and written) poetry – arguing for its ‘economic emptiness’, before, but particularly after, 1994.¹⁶¹ As he puts it, ‘post-liberation South African cultural and literary studies have too often come to operate within a realm of culturalism which, through an effective rather than an espoused avoidance of the study of literature and culture as determined and mediated aspects of the social totality, tends towards philosophical idealism, despite its radical veneer.’ (Sole ‘*JHP*’) Following Guillory, Sole criticises what he describes as the ‘omnipresent’ ‘liberal humanism’ in discussions of canons and literary value in South Africa, arguing that the prevailing approach excludes discussion of class-based economic distinction in favour of culturalist posturing over race, development and nation building. (Sole ‘*JHP*’) He stresses, however, that overcoming this tendency does not mean a simplistic rejection of culturalist debates (as in Higgins’s discussion of ‘whiteness’), but instead a careful combination of both fields.

This position is helpfully contextualised though Sole’s own intellectual history. A product of the same Wits that had seen the development of an African Literature Department under Es’kia Mphahlele and Isabel Hofmeyr, Sole came belatedly to UCT, having spent ten years outside of formal academia working and teaching around Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.¹⁶² His early intellectual approach and interests were heavily influenced by a debate between, on the one hand, a group of contemporaries under the tutelage of Sheldon Leader in the Wits Development Department, and on the other, members of the Wits History Department, who came later to be

¹⁶¹ See for example the still prescient ‘Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions’ (1983).

¹⁶² For further biographical detail from this early period, see D’Arcy.

referred to as the Wits 'Revisionist Historians'. In general, the shape of the debate between the groups was structured around whether a 'structuralist' or 'humanist' approach to human culture and history was preferable, which Sole refers to as the 'Thompson-Althusser wars' ('Sole interview'). Sole took a definite position on neither side, being 'about the only person both sides would tolerate' ('Sole interview'). Instead, it was the contours of the debate as a whole that shaped his approach. As can be seen from his response to Higgins, Sole's later position sits somewhere between the two; seeking an understanding of the 'fluid' structures of human culture away from a strict base-superstructure dichotomy, but also interested in the 'static' relationships between material conditions and individual actors.

In assessing the value of literature, this translates to Sole choosing 'to highlight... poems with political ramifications and resonances that [are] also formally experimental: poems and poets I perceive [as] ignored by orthodoxy.' (Sole *EDV* 5) The process of literary evaluation is on these grounds ongoing, responding to the controlling discourses of a given moment. For Sole, 'canonisation is an ineluctable process; it cannot be avoided, only fought at the point where reception, and people's sensibilities and expectations, start to rigidify. Anything else transmogrifies, despite intention, into an argument for stasis.' (6) While resistant to the idea of any deracinated 'final aesthetic evaluation', Sole is clear that a 'central question with regard to literary value' is the 'manner in which politico-economic circumstances have impacted on poets'. (7) The key to bridging the gap between a simplistically determinist materialism and culturalism in literature is to recognise that formal experimentation and attention to political concerns are both essential to the construction of a 'good' text.

In his writing of the 1990s, Sole argues repeatedly that post-liberation South Africa has conversely tended to work towards the construction of a static canon of South African literature, abetted by 'the more recent intervention of deconstructionist and postcolonial theories into this country [which have] seemed to result, somewhat paradoxically, in even less interest being taken

in forms of local literary expression outside of the printed page and the ambit of the most complex texts.’ (Sole *EDV* 5, 6) For Sole, a new set of assumptions about literature and a new canon were ‘being put into place with remarkable celerity, often by proponents of theories and aesthetics who proclaim themselves as eschewing such closure.’ (Sole, 263) Instead of invigorating struggles against oppression, the ‘relativism’ introduced by the rejection of master narratives ‘served in turn to downgrade crucial areas of study – history, sociology, cultural studies etc. – at a time when research into South African social life need[ed] to be expanded by utilising these disciplines.’ (17) This trend extended to a walk-back on the modest gains of black consciousness, with “‘opinion-makers” deriving their view from New Criticism, or from newly tinted re-creations of liberalism... given free and uncontested range.’ (8) Even ‘progressive’ interventions like Albie Sachs’ and Njabulo Ndebele’s call for a return to the ‘ordinary’ fall into the trap of seeing literature as a restorative, unifying cultural force. (15) While acknowledging that the need for an exploration of ‘widely scattered historical contingencies’ and ‘loss of meaning, conditions of anomie’ which do not simply cluster around ‘class antagonisms’ is useful, for Sole, to lose sight of, and render obsolete, the powerful socialising and differentiating force of class struggle and formation is wilfully blind. This especially in a situation like contemporary South Africa, where the rapid formation of a new national bourgeoisie, and exacerbation of class and income differences, point to the continuing importance of class as an interpretative and analytical tool. (21)

By the early 2000s, while remaining supportive of the anti-racist and socially emancipatory sentiment in black consciousness-related poetry from the 1990s, Sole had begun to be openly critical of ‘a type of poetry that’s starting to emerge now [which] perceives identity politics as the only game in town.’ (7)¹⁶³ Drawing on some of the more parochial aspects of black

¹⁶³ Notably, at the same time, Sole was continuing to write in defence of under-appreciated black poets writing in the black consciousness tradition. In his analysis of the work of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, he for instance highlights the importance of Matshoba’s work ‘as a marginal, anti-canonical expression of black experience, attuned to more than simply the “temporal demands of black experience in the 1970s,” as one critic would have it.’ (Sole *PF* 116)

consciousness theory and writing, Sole sees this sort of poetry as reductive of the idea of identity, caught up in the individual's search for resolution, with an associated potential for triumphalism (7). Analysed with class concerns in mind, this approach becomes a comfortable middle-class re-imagining of history and self. Playing on the false ideas that Africanist or black philosophies are also always opposed to neo-liberalism, identity politics allows for the entrenchment of individualism under cover of revolutionary rhetoric. Sole argues instead for a form of 'street-postmodernism' that takes in the lessons of cultural studies, but which is sensitive to the real exclusions of modern South African life. (7) In his own poetry, Sole works increasingly to close the gap between the rhetoric of a modern South Africa that is 'developmental' but still actively invested in debates over racism, and the reality of an underclass for whom these debates feel increasingly remote.

This trajectory helps explain Sole's position in the immediate aftermath of RhodesMustFall – notably the first occasion he writes about poetic, literary and aesthetic evaluation directly. Developing a consistent position across several articles and interviews published during 2016 and 2017, Sole begins to argue openly in favour of 'aesthetic and literary evaluations.' (Sole *EDV* 87) Not only is there such a thing as 'poetic value', but its occlusion 'impoverishes' cultural discourse. (29) These evaluations are connected, for Sole, to an attention to form. He argues strongly that the 'cavernous' lack of textually-focused 'formal' evaluative analysis has meant that the 'array of different – sometimes seemingly contradictory – standpoints, expectations, themes, and modes of expression' in South African literature have been left largely unexplained and underexplored (86, 89). If form is not viewed as an 'ineluctable constituent' through which poetic consciousness is formulated, transmitted, received and understood, critics will struggle to find ways to talk about value or worth in poetry which do not 'immediately cede the critical terrain' to 'contextual and politicoideological' qualifications and distinctions. (33) Not only is there such a thing as literary value linked to the form of a text, but not making associated

aesthetic evaluative pronouncements has ‘benumbed’ critical writing on South African literature.

(33)

While Sole sees the move away from formally-focused literary and aesthetic evaluation as a longstanding issue in South African poetics associated with black consciousness’ disconnection from class, he argues that the problem is a ‘particular’ blight of the RMF moment from which he writes. The result is a regrettable valorisation of poetry serving a particular political purpose, assessed on ideological grounds. As he explains:

I don’t think one should write or think strictly according to any theory or paradigm – this is the trap some of the present ‘#Fallist’ poetry falls into... I recently sat in an audience and heard a young woman perform a poem that sounded more like a Sociology 2 essay, and none of her movements around the stage counteracted that fact sufficiently. I am generally very anti-mythology. I am not much attracted to poetry that sees as its goal a final identity or view of the world. I’m also irritated by the supporting literary commentary that is highly expressivist, full of excessive praise. There’s a lot of this, these days. In my opinion it’s not revolutionary, despite its claims: it’s a new Romanticism, tailor-made for a rising class. (Sole quoted in D’Arcy 51)

The allusion to ‘a rising class’ connects Sole’s position to Chikane, who notes the close association between RMF and the interests of ‘coconuts’. The glib invocation of Romanticism plays largely rhetorically – notably contradicting Walter Benjamin’s attack on Romanticism for its largely anti-expressivist attachment to unitary form. Sole’s use of the term is conversely aimed at skewering RMF’s anti-formal privileging of ideological content. He notes, however, that ‘Given the history of [South Africa’s] fraught and divided society,’ before one ‘even gets to the specifically literary, a number of other dynamics help to predispose our literary judgement: socially based questions relating to race, class, gender, religion and other issues.’ (29) His view is

that ‘a sensitivity towards social concerns is the precondition for literary judgement, although such concerns are not a sufficient explanation for poetic value’.¹⁶⁴ (9)

What it means for social dynamics to ‘predispose’ literary judgement is never made clear in Sole’s late writing. ‘Precondition’ suggests a level of logical or temporal ordering; something his earlier endorsement of a (limited) anti-culturalist ‘superstructure’ portends. At the same time, his clear and repeated argument that these preconditions are not sufficient to explain poetic value leaves the place and relevance of the aesthetic uncertain. The crucial question of whether Sole’s position is something like Guillory’s emancipation of the aesthetic from the ‘economic’ or some other description of poetic value’s distinction (in the non-normative sense) is left underexplored. What is clear, however, is that for Sole, literary value is at least partly dependent on normative considerations stemming from ‘broader society’ – there is no account of value that is not in some way conditioned by social history.

This emphasis on starting the process of poetic evaluation from the bedrock of ‘social concerns’ is evident in Sole’s earlier criticism of writers like Njabulo Ndebele for replicating the ‘European’ emphasis on individual subjectivity. (Sole *CP*) As David Attwell summarises, ‘Sole argues that Ndebele’s conceptual framework bears the hallmarks of intellectual humanism: moral abstractions, binary oppositions, and a tendency to wish “for a certain type of human nature to prevail in South Africa”.’ (Attwell 176) For Sole, such quixotic idealism both replicates the kind of ideological imaginings that worked to uphold imperialist capitalism, and closes off analysis of the social forces which ‘divide human beings and position them in antagonistic groups within the nation.’ (97) Still shaped by his distaste for the Leavisism of Gilham’s 1980s UCT English

¹⁶⁴ Or as he puts it slightly differently elsewhere: ‘The necessity of such a scrutiny is not specific to this country, though it should be particularly obvious in our fraught and divided society. Before one even gets to the specifically literary, a number of other determinants need to be noticed and absorbed to be mobilised, if necessary, during one’s judgement. Race is only the most obvious of these terms, which include gender, class, region, and a number of others. Any wider aesthetic and literary evaluations should flow out of these concerns but, as independent yet overdetermined questions, also add to them; they are the precondition for literary judgement, rather than a substitute for them.’ (87)

Department, Sole is consistently disparaging of any claims that English Studies should be at the centre of public education and civil society, preferring a fostering of the particular vision and expression of artists within their own milieu: it is writers themselves, ‘as they struggle to develop identity, direction and technique, who will have to choose how best to express their chosen concerns.’ (97)

Attwell notes, however, that this conclusion, rather than being a repudiation of Ndebele and associated black writers of the late 1980s and early 1990s is, in fact, an ‘entirely apt summary of Ndebele’s project.’ (Attwell 176) Instead of reaching for a deracinated liberal ethic, Ndebele’s writing is coded ‘in terms of the social conditions of agency against a particular historical background.’ (176) *Fools and Other Stories* carefully interweaves social conditioning and questions of agency, often with less than straightforward effect. While Attwell sees this as giving Ndebele’s writing a ‘post-humanist historicity,’ the congruence can just as easily, and more accurately in my view, be construed as pointing in the opposite direction. As I see it, through their insistence on the value of artistic free expression and the creation of novel forms within the context of social critique, Sole and Ndebele in fact assert the most prominent version of humanism within the literary studies tradition of the late twentieth century.

Humanism

This variant of humanism is to some extent systematised in Edward Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Notably, in a reversal of Attwell’s linking of humanism to ahistorical abstraction, one of Said’s main projects in the book is to return historicity to the humanities, championing Giambattista Vico’s argument that the only material from which conclusions about humans can be made is their own productions, and that it is therefore ‘secular history’ that forms the basis of humanistic inquiry. (11-13) In the context of the disciplinary confines of literary studies, this amounts to a prominent endorsement of both materialism and philology. At the same time, Said, like Sole, is committed to finding place for agency – the aspect of humanism

that he sees as most centrally undermined by ‘French theory’ and ‘the forces of structuralism and post-structuralism.’ (9-10) Humanism, for Said, is fundamentally premised on the ‘achievement of form by human will and agency,’ and therefore cannot be either systematised or rendered aporetic. Finding room for these two facially contradicting stanchions becomes the book’s central project. As Akeel Bilgrani summarises, ‘By forging a methodical link between the two poles of humanism... Said allows us to resolve, or at any rate make measurable progress in resolving... the tension between history and agency.’ (Bilgrani xii)

My earlier discussion demonstrates the extent to which the same can be said of Sole’s evolving position in the period between 1985 and 2015. This is nowhere more plainly evident than in the example of his changing stance on poetic value. In his early work, the desire to flush out the remnants of neo-imperialist Leavisite accounts of the ‘canon’ resulted in a strong position against universalism – stressing the particularities of ‘history’. As he explained in an email to me, ‘I think what people like myself were doing was stressing the sociological and cultural issues, which necessarily called for a degree of relativism and rethinking.’ (‘Sole email’, 23 February 2021)

Nothing in his writing suggested, however, that there was no place within artistic production and criticism for an engagement with universal forms of the good. Over time, and with the rise of ‘politicoideological’ attacks on the idea of aesthetic value more generally, this early standpoint shifted, and Sole argues increasingly forcefully in favour of poetic value and artistic agency. A sensitivity to historical fact, however, remained. By the time of RMF’s emergence, Sole was actively rejecting both relativism and abstract universalism in favour of a socially embedded form of objectivism – the same balancing act exemplified by Said’s secular humanism.

In my view, this brand of humanism is also characteristic of John Higgins’s writing and thought. In fact, Higgins describes himself explicitly as a humanist, and a humanist in the mould of Said, who was a ‘good friend and intellectual concordant’. (‘Higgins interview’) In an interview he conducted with Said in 2000 – the year *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* was finished – Higgins

reflects particularly on the similarities between his own advocacy of ‘literacy’ and Said’s position. In particular, he argues that Williams’s ‘text-theory-history’ triad (discussed above) is another way of framing Said’s ‘two poles’ approach. Said reciprocally argues that the ‘crisis in literacy or high literacy’ that Higgins describes is ‘related to the general eclipse of the culture of humanism’. (212) Prompted by Higgins, Said also explains the extent to which his humanism is embedded in ‘the slow skills of high literacy’, as opposed to the ‘systems’ approach of ‘high theory’. Both endorse Williams’s criticism of post-Marxist structuralism (highlighted in an earlier quote) as an ‘unfortunate ... refusal of humanism’. (216)

For all of Higgins, Said and Sole, the methodological practice of literary studies is bound up with recognising and working through the tension between ‘history’ and ‘agency’. It is this shared neo-materialist humanism that I argue clashed with the RMF position, and in particular its conceptualisation of race and ‘black pain’. For RMF, the nature of value, and not just the answer to evaluative questions, was shaped by the already exhausted perspective of embodied black experience at UCT. By contrast, for humanists, racism shaped evaluative judgements, but not value itself – racist practices at the university were something to be eliminated rather than construed as constitutive. At the heart of the difference is a disputed conception of race; a variant of the same dispute that I argued divided Mbembe from Mangcu. As I show in more detail below, Mbembe’s criticism of RMF comes out of his humanist conceptualisation of black reason, just as Mangcu’s emerges from his black consciousness and Afropessimist-infused refusal of just this tradition.

As suggested earlier, there were important differences between Higgins’s and Sole’s engagement with how race-related questions should be approached and race itself systematised, but both took an essentially ‘cultural materialist’ position. In my view that position is fundamentally humanist in the manner of Mbembe or Said. One of the most methodical humanist expositions of the relationship between humanism and race in the recent work of Paul Gilroy, whose writing

on the subject coincided with the emergence of RMF and the popularisation of Afropessimism. In particular, his *The Black Atlantic and the Re-enchantment of Humanism*, given as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 2014 and published in 2015 argues openly in favour of a humanist approach to race and value.

Gilroy expressly locates his argument for a humanist conception of race within the tradition of the ‘later work of Edward Said.’ (Gilroy 28) In broad summary, he argues that the mechanisms of Atlantic modernity ‘saw the novel, abstract figure of the universal human gradually acquire a stubborn, racial outline.’¹⁶⁵ In response, ‘Critical black Atlantic intellectuals... developed not just arguments for an expanded, less ethnocentric conception of human rights aimed specifically at repairing the destructive effects of racial hierarchy, but what appears to be a broader politics of the human, centred upon remedying problems that derived from the consolidation of racial sensibilities into a political ontology.’ (24) This new humanism ‘was shaped by the overcoming of racial hierarchy and the racial systems of thought – the racial rationality – that produced it.’ (65) Contra the Afropessimists, humanism aimed at disconnecting the relationship between ontology and race. Gilroy reads Fanon as a scholar in this tradition, arguing that he, ‘was hostile to ... the fraud that followed from the reification of racial identity’, and thus ‘approached racism instead as a major factor in the corruption of humanism.’¹⁶⁶ (38) Fanon’s arguments, for Gilroy, renew our incentive to imagine a new humanism that has been ‘contoured specifically by the denaturing of race and the repudiation of racial orders.’ (38) This approach aligned with Said’s suggestion that democratic and secular criticism might benefit from a rigorous focus upon the abuses of humanism as opposed to its ‘mechanistic dismissal.’ (38)

¹⁶⁵ Gilroy focuses here on ‘Atlantic modernity’ in part because the series of lectures was aimed at commemorating the 20-year anniversary of the publication of *The Black Atlantic*. As his argument expands, he however draws on examples of racialisation that extend beyond these geographical confines, including from Australia, Sri Lanka, and notably includes a wide-reaching discussion of South Africa – discussed further below.

¹⁶⁶ Gilroy reaches the same conclusion as C. L. R. James, who for instance declares, ‘Now to talk to me about black studies as if it’s something that [only] concerned black people is an utter denial. This is the history of Western Civilization. I can’t see it other wise.’ (48)

Such an argument for the decoupling of race and ontology squarely confronts the Afropessimist depiction of blackness as premised on a ‘paraontological exclusion’ which prevents reconciliation with older forms of humanism (because the human, as a matter of historical fact, is definitionally constituted by blackness’s debarment).¹⁶⁷ Gilroy supports his position through careful historical analysis of the relationship between blackness and animalness. Agreeing that the ‘history of racial hierarchy... taught us that the condition of dumb animals is often better than that of people who are reduced... to a bestial or brutish state’, he nevertheless argues that both colonial and slave narratives were invested in defining blackness as ‘proximate’ to animalness, but not identical to it. (43) Moreover, the process of resisting racist descriptors was associated from its early stages with the reclaiming of humanity, a position echoed by Fanon’s ‘exhortation to establish a new humanism’. (52) We can ‘escape the grip of racism’, Gilroy argues, only by creating ‘richer alternatives’ addressed to the ‘common human hunger for groupness’. (52) Implicitly rejecting the notion that blackness should be premised on some aporetic acceptance of nothingness, Gilroy sees in ‘twentieth-century black Atlantic history’, ‘the desire to see oneself being seen as human and the related will to rewrite the history of humanism from an antiracist standpoint.’ (51) Being black is bound up with the fight to reclaim human status, rather than being defined by exclusion from it.

Gilroy, like Higgins and Sole, purposefully links this humanism to twentieth-century Marxist materialism. He notes, for example, that in the transatlantic context all of W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and C. L. R. James, ‘turned toward Marxism’. In each case, ‘European materialism’ was supplemented through a ‘grasp of capital’s planetary history.’ (56) All three, for example, argued for the inclusion of ‘peace and reconciliation’ as essential underpinnings for the utopia of classlessness. When it came to questions of aesthetic value, this meant, as Alaine Locke pointed out, that the ‘alienation and reification that characterized black life’ was ‘a long way from

¹⁶⁷ Gilroy seldom refers to Afropessimism, preferring terms like ‘scholastic antihumanism’ or ‘campus antihumanism’. (53, 74)

art for art's sake.' (61) Locke's work nevertheless offers, in Gilroy's estimation, a 'complex, untimely defense of art's necessary distance from the strategic calculations of official politics.'

(60) His approach, 'was premised upon political and economic concerns and accepted the integrity of both kinds of agency in vindicating Negro humanity,' but in rejecting 'Jim Crow aesthetics', Locke sought a 'humanist art', valuable outside of the 'economy' of race. (60) Like Sole, Gilroy – through his reading of Locke – positions the aesthetic as 'entangled' with the social, but not reducible to it. For both, it is artistic agency that enables a critique of essentialist racial categories, both of the colonial and Afropessimist varieties. At the methodological level, this should involve moving away from cementing established racial identity, and encouraging formal exploration and 'aesthetic novelty'. (61)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Gilroy's discussion of race adds to humanism a reparative dimension. Importantly, he roots his argument for this 'reparative humanism' in the South African historical experience. In particular, he uses the work of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a psychologist intimately involved in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Gobodo-Madikizela builds on Fanon's diagnosis of the colonial condition and its associated racial subject to argue for a 'culture of empathy and forgiveness.' (72) She takes as her metaphorical site the maternal body; drawing both from her political experience and her professional psychological observations. Focusing particularly on patients who had been directly harmed by the Apartheid regime, either physically or through the loss of family members, Gobodo-Madikizela develops the isiXhosa word *inimba* (meaning, amongst other things, umbilical cord) into an abstract noun depicting the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Some of her patients explained that while the feelings of hurt brought about by Apartheid were experienced in various parts of the body, the source of their felt response to the perpetrators who had caused the harm was the womb. For Gobodo-Madikizela, 'those mothers who felt *inimba* in response to the former police informants begging for forgiveness... were responding to him as if he were their own son.'

(Gobodo-Madikizela 38) This association had a powerful remedial effect. Moreover, the more direct the harm, the more Gobodo-Madikizela found the response maternal. For Gilroy, this shows a foundational commitment in post-Apartheid South Africa to interconnectedness, prefiguring a broader humanism. When given political space, such a reparative gesture can be, and was, expressed through institutions like the TRC. At the core of South Africa's 'transformation' was a recovery of humanness, with forgiveness and reconciliation flowing from this effect.

In Gobodo-Madikizela's terms, this is a process of 'rehumanization though humanization.' (Gobodo-Madikizela 40) Strikingly, Gilroy prefers the term 'disalienation' – echoing Naidoo's RMF-aligned call for 'the alienation of alienation'. (Gilroy 72) Notably, however, the RMF response to alienation was disruptive, and the movement was critical of the reconciliatory narratives emanating from the TRC. Rather than being a process of compassionate reconciliation, disalienation was an active process of 'taking space'. For Naidoo, 'decolonisation' was the name given to this work: 'Decolonisation for RMF was the process of disrupting the existing norms and making the alienation of black people... strange.' (Naidoo 145) As one student made clear to me, this did not mean a crass endorsement of violence, but instead a 'different starting point', where the focus was put on 'finding space rather than finding each other'. ('Hotz interview') This entailed a rejection of narratives of reconciliation or redemption. In taking that position, RMF drew on the Afropessimist injunction, summarised by Wilderson, that, 'There is no interracial redemption. There is no Afrocentric redemption. Redemption is the narrative inheritance of Humans.' (Wilderson 323)

Conclusion

What the above analysis shows is therefore that two contrasting positions on the nature and position of blackness refracted into differing conceptualisations of value. These conceptualisations then clashed within the context of the everyday workings of the UCT English

Department. For departmental humanists like Higgins and Sole, evaluation of literary (and other) objects was a socially-grounded process, even as the normative realm of the aesthetic was carefully defended. Blackness in this context was a social factor that allowed for the emergence of novel forms of evaluation, but was not of itself definitive of how literary evaluation operated. To the extent that racial thinking carried with it prejudices and discrimination, humanists stressed the haecceity of humanness, and took up anti-racist positions that called for the removal of essentialist distinctions brought about by racial categories. Even when writing or evaluating from the position of blackness, the aim was to explore human aesthetic goods more generally. While difference allowed for novel artistic creation, thinking about value itself was not dependent on race.

By contrast, for RMF, the nature of evaluation itself changed at the point the human was defined in opposition to blackness. RMF's position was that the kind of texts, pedagogical techniques and criteria for appointment adopted by the department should work towards highlighting the pathological, 'devalued', paraontological position of what it means to be black. The purpose of doing so was to further explore and inhabit this position rather than overcome it – an 'affirmative nihilism'. In Wilderson's words, 'Afropessimism has no prescriptive gesture', because to move away from blackness is also to eliminate humanness; 'the end of our suffering signals the end of the Human, the end of world.' (Wilderson 12) The evaluative position is therefore a repeated exploration of the pathological contradictions of black life.

By adopting this stance, Afropessimism shifts radically from the kind of humanist historicism that sees evaluative practice – including literary and aesthetic – as dependent on first accomplishing the sociological unpicking of prejudice and exclusion. Instead, value discourse is seen as internal to the failure of that gesture: because there is no ur-state of the human, evaluation can only begin from the fact of exclusion. Unlike the pragmatism of the Stanford senate and the many historicist positions on value that attended it, Afropessimism is resistant to

starting with what 'is'. This resistance results in a move towards anti-historicist descriptions of blackness and its attendant conditions, including through an emphasis on bodily experience.

What makes this position different from the kinds of aporetic approaches to value discussed in the Consortium chapter is that the Afropessimist account of value is not constitutive. There is nothing generative in the inability to reconcile blackness with being. Instead, Afropessimism constantly points to rupture, foregrounding the failings attendant to an inability to synthesise. Rather than the disjunctive character of value being in some important sense constitutive, it instead is merely a constant reminder of the gap between ideas of objective value and the lived experience of blackness. While it is possible to generate value from the perspective of the 'already dead' black body, this comes out of nothing more than a constant recognition that there is no redemption of that body under the rubric of the human.

The Afropessimist account may well run into serious logical difficulties, as has become apparent from recent responses to key texts by Wilderson, Moten and others.¹⁶⁸ In particular, Afropessimism's analysis seems to undermine its own rejection of historicism by beginning from a broadly historicist position about the creation of the idea of blackness in opposition to the human. Noting this difficulty does not, however, meaningfully negate the importance of embodied experience in RMF's workings. Instead, any latent historicism seems to cement the centrality of contradictory experience in recent thinking about value. By constantly foregrounding the difficulties that aporia generates, the RMF contribution to curriculum debates at UCT seems to show up a lack of resolution, rather than providing any positive basis for drawing conclusions about the building blocks of value.

¹⁶⁸ See for instance the work of Jose Sanchez, including 'Against Afropessimism' (2022).

Conclusion

Across the four chapters of this thesis I have explored the idea of value, through, and in relation to, public-facing disputes at tertiary institutions. This has involved both analysing the approaches to value emergent from each dispute, and reflecting on how dispute itself shaped the content and portrayal of these positions. Drawing on the examples, I have also argued that the chapters can be connected through a mapping of the place and importance of what Kermode calls ‘history’ in defining value. Specifically, the disputes suggest a move from an idealist to an historicist understanding of value (the first chapter), a solidification of that historicist approach (the second chapter), the emergence of a paradoxical middle-ground incorporating both (the third chapter), and a final moment when the effectiveness of this aporetic position is brought into question (the fourth chapter).

Rather than this mapping being a complete or accurate representation of how value was conceptualised between 1975 and 2015, it is a picture coloured by the specificities of the four case studies, and also by my focus on dispute. In addition to playing a role in demarcating how value is defined at any given moment, dispute, as a structuring framework, can also impact on how we see value debates as changing over time. It is interesting, in this light, to consider how the distinctive schema outlined above can be helpful for responding to contemporary trends in literary studies and the humanities more generally.

Before turning to this theoretical question, I want, however, to reflect briefly on some of the content of the chapters. One of the ‘characters’ who appears regularly throughout this thesis is Colin MacCabe. That he was involved centrally in two large disputes in the English academy is to some extent unsurprising as his positions are often forthright, and reports of personal clashes were not unusual when his name was brought up in my interviews. His centrality also attests, however, to his strengths as an organiser – while MacCabe sometimes describes his pivotal involvement in the Cambridge dispute as incidental, his importance is clearly linked to the circle of friends, acolytes and associates he had developed at the university and elsewhere, as well as to his shaping of undergraduate courses. Likewise, his formidable organisational abilities are one of the main reasons for the emergence of the

Consortium, and his clash with the (new) BFI administration is linked to questions of organisational control.

All of this shows the extent to which the shape of the disputes I have considered are significantly determined by who is willing to enter the fray of contesting institutional control. In addition to MacCabe, this is also true of those participating in the Stanford Senate debates, and those actively involved in determining the content of the second-year curriculum at UCT. What this thesis has shown, however, is that how value is thought about is not in a one-to-one relationship with these questions of influence. Often, the approaches to value that manifest are only obliquely connected to institutional contestation, even as their centre of gravity is determined by those ructions. Rather than organisational factors determining value questions, they operate as multidimensional contexts in which value questions arise and dissipate.

Another notable dimension of all the chapters is the extent to which questions of moral and political value intermesh with aesthetic and literary equivalents. In fact, very little of the academic writing or university-organisational material I analyse attempts to make a case for individual forms of value – most assume that a defence of one aspect is closely related to a defence of all others. This is perhaps most notable in the UCT chapter, where both the ‘Fallist’ and the ‘Departmental’ position on aesthetic value come out of political observation and reflection. As suggested in several of the chapters, this does not amount to a reduction of, for example, the aesthetic to the political – instead it shows the extent to which their respective justifications are seen as mutually dependent.

A theoretical basis for this kind of argument can be found in the work of legal theorist Ronald Dworkin, who, in *Justice for Hedgehogs* argues for a similarly holistic account of value, originally with the intention of supporting his account of justice.¹⁶⁹ In short, Dworkin argues that the value – cultural, aesthetic, political or ethical – of any text (imagined broadly) is dependent on all other evaluations, such

¹⁶⁹ Dworkin’s argument expands on his previous work on justice and interpretation, particularly in *Law’s Empire* and *Justice in Robes*.

that no evaluative act can be separated from evaluation in general. Value, in Isaiah Berlin's terminology, is a Hedgehog; it knows one big thing, rather than a fox, which knows many small things. This 'unitary' characterisation of value requires Dworkin to develop an account of interpretation that in turn derives its force from existing evaluations. (9) Interpretation is in this way itself value-based. All value claims, and all theories of interpretation, form a unitary, interdependent web.

Luke MacInnis helpfully divides Dworkin's reasoning into three theses. The first, which MacInnis calls the 'independence thesis', holds that value 'is an autonomous area of inquiry and that value judgements must therefore be defended with evaluative resources drawn from within the domain of value itself' (407). The independence thesis drives against what Dworkin calls the 'Archimedean' belief that value claims can be anchored in 'purely conceptual, descriptive, empirical, metaphysical, or other nonevaluative sources external to the domain of value' (Dworkin 122). The 'interpretation thesis' then explains how specific value claims can be explained within this independent domain by relating value claims to one another through the process of interpretation. Finally, the 'unity theses' holds that while there are many distinct values, 'when they are properly understood they comprise a mutually supporting network,' rather than competing entities. (10, 116).

Dworkin's unitary position, embedded, as it is, in a rejection of the justification of value on grounds outside of value, also helps reintroduce the place of history and the material world in how value is conceptualised – one of the abiding concerns of many of the people and institutions discussed here. As indicated previously, the first chapter showed how Frank Kermode moved from a structuralist to an historicist conception of value partly as a result of the MacCabe Affair at Cambridge. This historicist thread was picked up in the second chapter in the form of pragmatism: the Stanford Senate came to see value as defined by 'commonality' emergent out of shared historical practice. The third chapter saw the re-emergence of a case for evaluation and normative justifications for its practice. This position was however put into paradoxical relation with the relativist historicism characteristic of Stanford. The final chapter then showed how the historicism of the UCT English Department clashed with elements of

Fallist thought – a clash which illustrated the difficulties of trying to hold historicism and idealism together.

How, then, can this emergent schema be helpful for thinking about contemporary ideas of value, particularly in literary studies? As suggested in the introduction, what marks these ‘contemporary approaches’ as distinctive is an open advocacy for literary and aesthetic value. In Guillory’s recent summary, ‘The revival of interest in the aesthetic, though it has something of a perennial aspect, appears of late to be in earnest, a reassertion of judgement as the legitimate practice of all readers of literature—scholars, reviewers, students, and the reading public, whoever they are.’ (Guillory *PC* 37)

Pivotal to evaluation’s upswing has been an increased wariness of ‘critique’: an approach to textual study centring questions of interpretation and associated challenges to the limits of language as a purveyor of truth. Once thought of as emancipatory, the interpretative constructivism that critique entails has been progressively marginalised in the academy – increasingly seen as fussy, humourless and restrictive. Accompanying this decline has been a move away from interpretation-centred ‘criticism’ and the restoration of formal types of analysis; critics as disparate as Helen Vendler and Jonathan Culler have offered formalist readings of texts across several periods.

Form’s rise has, however, been cautious by the historical standards of the early and mid-twentieth century. An influential example is Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, a book which stresses the ‘affordances of form’ rather than its constraints. (7) Instead of ‘asking what artists intend or even what forms do, we... ask what potentialities lie latent... in aesthetic and social arrangements... As they move, forms bring their limited range of affordances with them, gesturing at ‘a series of conflicting, sometimes even paradoxical meanings.’ (5) Form’s new guise is ‘part-gamble, part-guesswork’, a ‘way of knowing’ rather than a ‘philosophical nutshell’ (Leighton 124). At the same time, formal constructions and readings are seen to have politically efficacious consequences, as both Levine and Anna Kornbluh’s 2018 *The Order of Forms* demonstrate.

The postcritical turn, epitomised by Rita Felski's rejection of the hermeneutics of suspicion, has repeatedly been associated with this new formalism. Both trends resist the 'critical mood' which demands that scepticism be the dominant register of reading and response. As Felski's forebear Susan Sontag put it: 'the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.' (Sontag 47) Rather than looking behind the text, postcritique asks that we approach from other angles, 'reflecting on what [the text] unfurls, calls forth, makes possible.' (Felski 12) In both cases, the focus is taken off the question of how the text should be interpreted – itself thought of as a 'style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intense engagements and eager commitments' – and put on the myriad other ways that a text can be written about and received. (10) This opens up the possibility of reading a text not just as a symptom of social maladies, but on other autonomous terms.

Such a creating of space in the humanities to think about texts not only as a representation of their society's patterns of power and distribution has been key to evaluation's recuperation. The evaluative turn has been built on the idea that texts can be both a site of discrimination – at both the level of subject matter and language – and also 'better' or 'worse' within the aesthetic domain. At the same time, as with new formalism, 'new evaluation' construes the 'affordances' of evaluative practices as themselves political, refusing to see the aesthetic as detached from the material conditions of the texts it evaluates. By doing so it hopes to avoid the criticisms of elitism and idealism levelled at, for example, the New Critics. Supporters of evaluative practice in this way argue for the specificity of the aesthetic, but see a reciprocal (and political) connection between the aesthetic and other kinds of value, including ethical considerations spotlighted by critique's examination of language.

One way to approach this shift from constructivism to 're-enchantment' is as a Graffian swing of the disciplinary pendulum away from historicism and back towards philology. Such a disciplinary-focused picture may however lack the necessary scope to explain the expansion of these new trends. Steven Connor attributes the rejection of constructivism to the wrench of the environment and the climate

emergency, which has compelled progressives to abandon the deliberate irresolution of critical theory. Where colonial, patriarchal and similar legacies could, at least ostensibly, be combatted by pointing to the constructed nature of their associated linguistic binaries and more broadly of language itself, constructivism starts to feel impotent when it is nature at stake. In a phrase like ‘radical ecology’, ‘the revolutionary and the conservative switch place’. (Connor *RF* 17) As Connor notes, pledging yourself ‘to the dissolution of every constraint began to seem embarrassing in an era that had experienced the unregulated flight of everything into a market imagined as itself entirely unregulable in its forms and effects’. (17) Moreover, while the linguistic turn was notably successful in unpicking persistent social binaries, the structures that upheld them have ‘declined to care about having been caught out in contradictions.’ (Connor *STO* 5) This results in constructivism offering only the modest pleasures and profits of its own practice. As the ‘Romantic exorbitances of critical theory’ dissipated in the early 2000s, the exactitudes of evaluation began once more to look attractive as a reformist rather than a reactionary act. (Connor *RF* 18) Aesthetic evaluation, re-enchantment and new formalism are here portrayed as a response to the ‘real’ world, as opposed to their usual characterisation as a strain of detached ‘aestheticism’.

All of this would seem to suggest that it is evaluation, new formalism and post-critique which are most engaged with the political struggles of our time. In this vein, much of the discussion surrounding this school of thought – which I have been calling ‘the school of re-enchantment’ from a phrase of Julie Stone Peters’ – has been accompanied by a prominent foregrounding of the ‘state of the humanities’. (Peters 451) Felski, for instance, regards critique as a founding cause of the crises in the humanities. As she explains, the ‘heady iconoclasm’ of criticism is alienating and self-defeating: even as critique shows up the fallacies of linguistically-bound social categories and limitations, it burns its own turf, leaving the humanities without an object of study.’ (Felski 15) Michael Clune similarly concludes that, ‘The absence of a defence of judgement paralyses our capacity to defend our discipline at a time when it is threatened

on many fronts.’ (Clune *DJ* 10) Evaluation on this logic is part of the cure to the humanities’ current malaise; offering a justification for what is valuable about the humanities in general.

Such a narrative has however begun to be put under scrutiny. Instead of viewing postcritique as a remedy to the crises in the humanities, Caleb Smith for example construes the school of re-enchantment as the crises’ effect. For Smith, the rise of postcritique and stronger claims for the importance of evaluation should be seen as a despairing attempt to reclaim the legitimacy of the humanities in the face of its demise at the hands of the market. In his cutting formulation, ‘we might cast the postcritical scholars as neglected suitors who console themselves for their lack of cultural capital with the notion that humility is an intellectual and ethical good. Mortified, they make a virtue out of an austere necessity imposed from without.’ (Smith 125) The collapse of critique is on this reading a consequence of the broader collapse of literary studies. Instead of being a cure, postcritique is a symptom of a more serious malady.

Merve Emre similarly detects a ‘whiff of desperation’ in postcritique’s development of a mode of reading compatible with the ‘neoliberal political and economic order’s “attempt to rule without penetrating interiority”’. (Emre 255) She offers as an alternative the ‘double impulse’ of an increased exploration of the ‘embodied archive’ – ‘a microsociological record of how readers within institutions of literacy can form constitutive relationships between literature and historical schemes of action’ – and an active, democratising push towards expanding what is currently thought of as ‘literature’. (257) Emre’s championing of a focus on ‘the empirical, historical, and institutional practices of reading’ defines literature by what is *there*, and the practice of ‘good’ (or in Emre’s reverse honorific, ‘bad’) reading as an exploration of that archive. (255) Rather than privileging any type of reading, she puts emphasis on paying attention to what emerges from an investigation of the relationship between the reception of texts and their material schemes.

A related approach is evident in the work of Guillory, whose *Cultural Capital* continues to loom large in contemporary debates on value. At the time of writing in the early 1990s, Guillory saw the main

problem in debates over ‘the canon’ as stemming from a deficit of ‘sociological studies of judgement’ (including into the etymological background of ‘value’ and associated terms), with the forgetting of these social histories facilitating significant exclusions. (xiv) These consequences were borne out institutionally, and it was only by exploring the structural settings of value discourses that their force and function comes to light. In the case of ‘aesthetic value’, Guillory for instance shows that the ‘aesthetic’ is a ‘relatively autonomous’ field of cultural activity emergent in the eighteenth century and subsequently misidentified with ‘use value’, while the broader concept of ‘value’ is itself a product of attempts to differentiate the ‘work of art’ from the ‘commodity’ during the same period. (314) Once this confusion is identified, it becomes easier to see that ‘value’ debates over things like canonicity are expressions of cultural capital intimately connected with, amongst other institutions, the university, rather than normative contestations within the aesthetic domain.

Situated in the broader context of the rest of this thesis, there would seem to be strong congruence between the school of re-enchantment’s political posturing and the Consortium’s attempt to reinvigorate evaluation as part of a broader political response to Thatcherite Britain. In both cases there is interest in ‘re-enchanting’ faded systems and modes of analysis in order to respond to a difficult historical reality. In Felski and Levine’s work there are also trace elements of the kind of aporetic compatibilism that I have argued marks the Consortium’s approach. A careful recognition of history and social context remains central to the analysis of both, but there is also a strong sense that other non-historicist ‘cutlery’ (to use a term of Levine’s) should be brought to the table. Felski moreover recognises that there is a clash inherent to this position: to read a text in post-critical mood means accepting that ‘there will be some nagging critical questions that would enfeeble your reading if you attended to them’. (Felski 134) Rather than seeking a bridgehead between the critical and the post-critical, Felski encourages an acceptance of their contradiction.

This characterisation begs the question of where the kind of logic I identified in the writing of Guillory and Emre fits into the schema of this thesis. In the evident discomfort with abandoning critique in

favour of non-historicist forms of analysis, there are clear connections between this logic and that of the anti-Fallist camp of the UCT English Department. All see the value question as purely a matter of historical explanation, or, more accurately, see other (normative) justifications for evaluations as something to be bracketed until after an analysis of what has historically defined its practice. The important divergence from Kermode's earlier historicism is that now not only is value defined by history, but how we should think about value – how the question of what is valuable should be answered – is also seen as linked to the study of material circumstances.

In both Emre and Guillory's cases, as for Higgins and Sole, the practice of evaluation is not however entirely side-lined, nor are objectivist approaches to the justification of value completely abandoned. In his introduction to *Cultural Capital*, Guillory for instance asserts that, 'The strangest consequence of the canon debate has surely been the discrediting of judgement, as though human beings could ever refrain from judging the things they make,' and similarly, in its conclusion that, 'The point is not to make judgement disappear but to reform the conditions of its practice.'¹⁷⁰ (xiv, 340) The whole thrust of *Cultural Capital* is in fact towards a utopian condition where aesthetic judgement is a 'genuine' possibility. The 'discrediting' of judgement cannot therefore be confronted merely by pointing to the need to reform the social functions that underpin its current practice – a point I made in more depth in the Stanford chapter. While it is unquestionable that the absencing of the sociology of judgement through deracinated debates over normativity – particularly in the analytic philosophical tradition – have had detrimental consequences, trying to do without an account of value that extends beyond sociology would seem to be equally limiting. It is this normative component of judgement that, in my view, Guillory tends to understate in his efforts to reinstate social explanation.

¹⁷⁰ For Guillory, because the aesthetic domain has achieved, for historical reasons, some autonomy from the ordinary functioning of the market, it is uniquely able to function as a 'privileged site for reimagining the relation between the cultural and the economic in social life.' (xiv) To play this role, the aesthetic must be universalised to such an extent that judgements in the aesthetic domain are purely symbolic, no longer expressions principally of cultural capital.

Emre runs into similar problems in *ParaLiterary*, where the ‘constitutive’ relationship between history and literature is undertheorised. Unlike for instance Derek Attridge who defines the literary by the ‘ethical’ and ‘singular’ experience that particular kinds of texts evoke, Emre views all texts as ‘possible literature’, preferring to pay attention to the institutional context against which their reading occurs, and encouraging an expanding of the definition on this basis. (Attridge *SL* 63, 123; Emre 255)

Paralleling difficulties with positivist accounts of law, this leaves open the question of how literature relates to the various evaluative terms in its orbit, including the aesthetic. Literature as an institutional construct can be anything, but to understand what makes the reading of texts ‘constitutive’ as literature requires a level of normative scrutiny. The literary is not just an historical construct, it is also a documentation of the relationship between the evaluative concerns of readers and the texts they read. If normativity is not built into the definition of literature (as it is for Attridge) there remains a need to explain how questions of value fit into its functioning.

Thus, while Emre shows up the claims of postcritique to ‘material groundedness’ as superficial, her approach risks asserting in its place a dour sociology that gives up on normativity in favour of unalloyed fact. (256) The absence of an interest in normativity is especially starkly noticeable in the case of thinking and writing about value itself – historically the archetypal site of normative thought. In Emre’s work, paying attention to the causative trajectory that brought about our current conceptions of value displaces theorising the normative components of evaluative judgement. At no point does she argue against ‘objective’ evaluation, but her methods for thinking about value are never themselves normative.

In the wake of this analysis, the temptation is to argue in favour of using more openly normative reasoning and premises to explore the nature of value. Normative claims cannot, however, escape the pull of historical fact: there remain good reasons for wanting to pay attention to the sociological factors that dictate how we think about value, as the Cambridge and Stanford chapters attest. Within the context of the logic of this thesis, the most attractive alternative would seem to be an aporetic

acceptance of both. The UCT case however puts pressure on this approach. One of the main reasons for Fallists opposing humanism was a suspicion of the idea that historical analysis can be used for undoing social ills. Instead, they argued for an Afropessimist alternative that sees the black condition as always-already unresolvable. Nevertheless locked into the historical conditions that determined black people's suffering, Fallists opted for an embracing of abjection, and an account of value dependent on that 'pessimistic' position. Notably, this is different in structure to the Consortium argument for an aporetic picturing of value where the historical and the ideal are held in constitutive contradiction. Instead, the Fallist approach inhabited the failure of a meaningful account of value, and drew theoretical sustenance only from that fact.

While I am unconvinced that abjection is a helpful basis for founding an account of evaluation, or for developing a methodology to begin asking questions about value, I want to end this conclusion by suggesting that the resultant uncertainty is nevertheless instructive. Rather than embracing aporia, Afropessimism does no more than foreground the importance and failings of both historicist and idealist approaches to value, noting their inherent contradiction. This contradiction it sees, however, as a puzzle rather than a solution – a reason for pessimism rather than a statement of constitutive fact. Notably, pessimism itself a consequence of normativity; to be negative about a position is to give it value. In my view, the better position is therefore to strip away that affective conclusion, noting merely that we do not, at present, have a solution to the apparent contradiction. Instead of the value question being constitutively unresolvable, it is merely unresolved. Taking this position enables a more honest intellectual engagement with the problem faced, as well as giving space to theoretical and formal exploration.

Doing so also allows space for the possibility of thinking about value through methods that extend beyond the historical. As this conclusion has begun to suggest, my view is that this should involve more normative tools. Part of the justification of aesthetic value would seem to lie in a fuller understanding of other value determinations in unitary relation. A further defence of this position is

however a separate project. This thesis does the more limited work of bringing to light some of the ways in which value has been presented and shaped through dispute. In the postscript to *What is a Classic?*, Ankhi Mukherjee, like Dworkin, uses a hedgehog to metaphorically represent value. The classic, she explains, is ‘a thing of splendid and defensive isolation as well as a textuality mutilated over time by iteration and critical intervention.’ (Mukherjee 214) This sense of mutual transcendental isolation and historical iteration holds of how value is represented in and across disputes. By bringing four examples together, I hope, however, to have begun the process of better understanding how they relate.

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