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Huber, Mary, "Adrift in the Ether: The Market for Literary and Cultural Criticism in the Digital Age" (2015). *Senior Capstone Projects*. Paper 478.

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“Adrift in the Ether: The Market for Literary and Cultural
Criticism in the Digital Age”

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English Senior Tutorial

17 December 2014

A New Criticism for a New World?

What happens when literature loses its preeminence in a culture? Or more to the point, what have movies, television, and the Internet done to the status of literature, and by extension, literary criticism? For one, when books cease to be a society's main cultural product and source of entertainment, writers must turn to the analysis of other forms if they want to discuss the media that shape people's actual lives—because they do shape our lives in ways that are powerful and often invisible—and keep those same people reading their work. Since the 1960s universities have developed whole departments in media and various cultural studies in order to address the world as it now appears and to remain relevant. Much like the vernacular novel wormed its way into the university curriculum in the mid-19th century after decades of writers attempting to establish themselves as serious artists, now movies and television, popular music, even advertising has become the object of serious critique and debate.

Perhaps as a product of this generation I am biased, but I see little in the traditional ranking of media in terms of seriousness or importance. The novel was always more of a popularizer than an originator in the history of ideas, and various media forms often draw on the same source material—philosophical, sociological, and other work that shape dominant trends in intellectual history. Today more than ever, artists working in different representational media frequently reinterpret and riff on each other in the form of adaptations from one medium into another in a way that further weakens strict distinctions between literature and other media. If anything, the more ubiquitous, easily digestible media forms need more unpacking

than the books we learn to analyze in school, because they can be consumed so automatically. Applying cogent analysis to all media seems a more effective way of approaching the digital landscape than mourning the lost supremacy of the novel.

Not everyone agrees with me, of course. The academic study of popular and mass media remains fraught, as it has been since mid 20th century, when debates on the merits and dangers of mass culture, which will reappear later in this paper, reached their peak. Not that anyone minds, really; tension within the academy only spurs further arguments and fields of study, more opportunities for writers to publish. In the early aughts, then-*Book World* editor Chris Lehmann pointed out a source of uneasiness regarding these studies, stating “It was, indeed, a subordinate irony of the ’80s cultural studies boom that, for all of its populist posturing it was gestating a genuine academic elite” (Lehmann, 39). Lehmann views the study of mass culture as “ironic” because its discourses typically remain within the confines of college campuses and academic journals, far from the purview of the mass audience who might benefit from such analysis. There is truth behind this observation—the isolation of the academy from the general public, especially in the anti-intellectual US, has become a commonplace. However Lehmann overlooks that not just the subject of criticism has shifted, but its purpose as well.

Writing for the *New Yorker* blog, Alex Ross points out that “when online recappers expend thousands of words debating the depiction of rape on ‘Game of Thrones,’ or when writers publish histories of sneakers or of the office cubicle, they show intense awareness of mass culture’s ability to shape society.” This quote encapsulates several important facets of this “new” criticism. For one, nonacademic

cultural discourse (still usually written by the college-educated for the college-educated, but more accessible in its subject matter and approach to critical theory than that of past generations) is everywhere now, taking advantage of the public's enthusiasm for self-reflection and minute analysis. A shift in focus in criticism could also point to a shift in the way we consume media. Passive activities like television-watching and hive-like corporate work, or automatic consumerist impulses like sneaker collecting, when subject to cultural criticism, become contextualized historically and culturally. Yes, most television shows and movies are produced by a small number of companies with a shared interest in encouraging consumption through advertising, but if people watch critically and read relevant analysis, they may see that the worldview promoted by corporate interests is not the only option. Almost every phenomenon has clear origins and possible alternatives when no longer treated as a given fact of life.

At least this is the one great hope for our hyper-analytical culture of criticism, despite its frequent navel-gazing reflection or a pedantic focus on ephemeral pop culture. Do we actually think it can happen? Do critics think they can change the world by writing about books, and movies, and the way we read, and the way we watch? Like Lehmann, Ross acknowledges the power of media so omnipresent their presence would become invisible if not pinned down and dissected, but implies that criticism, even of the supposedly trivial, can affect our outlook. He remains ambiguous over whether criticism can influence the wider culture in a political or social sense. We see how mass media affects society, but can criticism—accessible or not—change anything about how media affects us?

Awareness does not entail action on the consumers' part. Perhaps this hunger goes too far; whenever an essay about the *Breaking Bad* series finale has millions of readers while hardly anyone pays attention to drug cartel violence, a thoughtful person will likely wonder if this new criticism is also a new opiate, as powerful as the first television. It would take a different paper to answer that question, one that would trace almost imperceptible currents of influence between life and media (to call all the work we consume "art" sounds inaccurate, to start drawing lines counter to the stance I have just taken in this paper and a work of criticism, rather than a discussion of the state of criticism).

So what should we say about the state of literary culture today? One might argue that the new criticism, which includes internet recappers and culture bloggers, better reflects our contemporary sensibility than more traditional academic scholarship and prestigious cultural magazines do, that it better recognizes the difficulties and ambiguities of the critic's position. It certainly does not resolve the critic's anxieties, but no theory of culture is free of ambivalence or vacillation. Commenting on the "end of adulthood" in contemporary American culture, *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott admits,

I do feel the loss of something here, but bemoaning the general immaturity of contemporary culture would be as obtuse as declaring it the coolest thing ever. A crisis of authority is not for the faint of heart. It can be scary and weird and ambiguous. But it can be a lot of fun, too (Scott, "Adulthood").

With all due respect to Scott, practically every critic surveying the state of criticism or general cultural discourse today concludes with something of this sort, and I always find it unenlightening and a bit of a cop-out. In the piece by Alex Ross

mentioned above, which simplifies and contrasts Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin's attitudes toward mass culture to comment on our modern uncertainties, Ross suggests that "Perhaps, on a peaceful day, they would have accepted the compromise devised by Fredric Jameson, who has written that the 'cultural evolution of late capitalism' can be understood 'dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together'" (Ross). The question of whether these developments are catastrophe or progress—essentially whether they are *good*—misses the point. Most intellectual, progressive critics today view "good" as subversion of, say, the market or our "late capitalist" society or traditional aesthetic values (as if there was ever one set of them). Even I have defended our hyper-awareness as potentially subversive, if not actually so. There is one popular outlook that art ought to challenge us, yet at the same time realize that in our current environment it is virtually impossible to subvert the power of the market through art. We progressive academic types yearn for the power to subvert... something, to have an effect on the world through words. But the market is the ether that permeates our entire society, including the literary world that would like to hold itself above such things.

What does seem relevant and worthy of investigation to me are questions dealing with our approach to the cultural products we analyze, of the role a critic can play, of the assumptions underlying the entire critical endeavor. Critics often do not ask these questions—and God forbid they attempt to answer them. Perhaps they fear posterity proving them wrong; perhaps they simply do not have the time or proper audience to write pieces that examine their own theoretical underpinnings along with those of their subjects. But these questions merit some answers, however

tenuous. The only way we will orient ourselves in this ether is by analyzing its contents. Therefore this thesis will offer some opinions on aspects of contemporary literary criticism, drawing comparisons with historical developments and wider contemporary media trends where applicable. I will begin with a brief history of the economic and political phenomena involved in the critical profession. Then I will examine writers' anxiety over the state of criticism, which has become ubiquitous, but diminished the power and influence of the individual writers, and how these anxieties appear in critical discourse. To do this I will mainly examine trend pieces from publications with variable content and wide audiences, like *Slate* and Gawker. I will then look at how more recent changes in the marketing and consumption of literature have become subjects of critical debates rather than invisible forces below notice in comparison to 'art.' Then I will shift my focus to examine the exalted ambitions that writers in the 19th and 20th centuries had for literary criticism, which mirror the own diminished hopes that form as a driving force behind many serious "little magazines" (now often really "little websites" according to *Los Angeles Review of Books* editor Evan Kindley, but still usually the best place to find cogent cultural and literary criticism, despite the bullshit). Finally, I will turn my attention to writers' attempts to make sense of and perhaps embrace our present sensibility, particularly their interpretations of what new media and commercial conditions have done to literature and culture more generally.

Criticism in the Book Market

Before we address in detail how literary criticism functions in our own time, we need to look at how it developed in its proper historical context, keeping in mind the economic and political forces that shaped it. We might start with the question, what is the purpose of literary criticism? Why write about other people's writing at all?

One constant goal has been boosting book sales. In his history of English literary criticism, *The Function of Criticism*, prominent Marxist theorist and professor Terry Eagleton states that,

by the 1730s, literary patronage was on the wane, with a concomitant increase in bookseller power [...] By about mid-century, then, the profession of letters had become established and literary patronage was in its death throes; this period witnesses a marked quickening of literary production, a widespread diffusion of science and letters and, in the 1750s and '60s, a veritable explosion of literary periodicals (*FoC*, 30-31).

It should surprise no one that as the power of the market increased thanks to new technology and rising standards of living, tastemaking could no longer remain sole purview of a very few aristocratic patrons, but rather became the result of a new calculus of influence involving book editors, publishers, sellers, reviewers, early literary celebrities and luminaries, and whoever else could convince people to buy the books they endorsed. This does not mean that aristocrats ceased to have an influence on book sales or literary culture, but with the number of books being written and the number of potential book buyers increasing beyond what had ever been seen before, court tastes could not provide a singular literary standard for diverse classes of people. Literary periodicals, even if they typically employed "Grub Street hacks," provided readers with more than entertainment; they marked

one's particular class status (or aspirations) and taste, even giving advice on how to invest one's money in a certain type of knowledge or cultural capital through book-buying.

Victorian-era literary critic (and in one small illustration of just how cloistered the republic of letters remained despite its several 'explosions,' father of Virginia Woolf) Leslie Stephen's lectures *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1904) support this emphasis on market developments shaping public attitudes toward literature. In discussing Alexander Pope's then revolutionary venture of selling his translation of the *Iliad* (1715-1720) to readers via subscription, Eagleton quotes Stephen's as saying that, "The individual patron was superseded by a 'kind of joint-stock body of collective patronage'" (*FoC*, 30). Literary magazines worked in a similar way—indeed Pope also wrote for the most popular reviews of his age, and wrote not just criticism but "An Essay on Criticism" (1711), proving my own meta-critical interest is hardly original—writers made money if their work sold copies (meaning it was popular with a general audience), rather than by winning the favor of one or a handful of wealthy patrons. Old hierarchies had shifted rather than tumbled, however. Critics wrote for a mass audience rather than the elite, but in order to make their bourgeois publishers money through subscriptions and sales. Today little magazines or serious literary reviews still offer a type of collective support, but due to several essential changes to literary culture that this paper will address, today these magazines often bolster writers' reputations in a way that will possibly help them procure a book deal or teaching job at some point instead of offering the kind of cash payment a writer can live on.

This market-focused account is not, however, the only narrative told about literary culture. In its very early stages, literary criticism had a more exalted role, at least in European politics. Eagleton's *Criticism* expands on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, claiming that,

Modern European criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state. Within that repressive regime, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European bourgeoisie begins to carve out for itself a distinct discursive space, one of rational judgment and enlightened critique rather than of the brutal ukases of an authoritarian politics (*FoC*, 9).

Essentially, anyone with education and taste could participate in a public discourse on the arts and culture with relative equality at this point, setting the stage for more representative government. The development of modern industry and democracy made this function superfluous—perhaps worse than that, since the bourgeois public sphere (if it ever existed) excluded the exhausted and undereducated working classes even as they gained political rights. How could semi-literate wage laborers hope to enter the republic of letters? The ideal always embraced only those with the money and leisure time to take part in the republic, whatever claims it laid to egalitarianism, and disparities in wealth and education continue to limit access to it as much as any sort of personal taste. Many progressive intellectuals, especially those with leftist or Marxist convictions like Eagleton, have ineffectually sought to reclaim the political function of criticism in our own time and expand it to include more people than it previously reached, but the resulting conversations have mainly limited themselves to the insular realm of academia. Eagleton describes his work on the history of literary criticism “as a way of raising the question of what substantive social functions criticism might once again fulfill in in our own time, beyond its

crucial role of maintaining within the academies a critique of ruling-class culture.” He thus justifies the exclusivity of the academy as a necessary if problematic defense of the intellectual legacy he values, but seeks to reach beyond that sphere to a much larger audience (*FoC*, 8). This desire has not had much concrete political effect since Eagleton wrote *The Function of Criticism* in 1984. It has, however, contributed to developments in literary criticism and particularly the kind of literary boosterism meant to bring literature to the masses, not simply to sell books, but because reading has moral and political dimensions as well.

What I call boosterism, and what others might call outreach or something of that ilk, is another major use for literary criticism—one that many intellectuals almost disdain even as they study its crucial role in contemporary literary culture. While academics like Eagleton usually seek to educate in an explicitly political way, to raise consciousness, there is another impulse. Not just a show of disposable income, but of middle class respectability. Improving yourself, rather than learning to improve your world. While few early literary critics were academics (most universities did not even have English departments until the second half of the 19th century—reading novels or vernacular poetry was a leisure activity, not the focus of serious study), all had strong opinions on what works their readers should consume and how. Criticism thus taught the cultural elite—or more likely those who aspired to a certain level of refinement and class status—what work merited their attention and how they should receive it. This went hand in hand with the 18th century appearance of popular literary reviews and passed onto academics as English became part of the established university curriculum in the mid-19th century.

According to Eagleton, this time in *Literary Theory*, “English was literally a poor man’s Classics—a way of providing a cheapish ‘liberal’ education beyond the charmed circles of public school and Oxbridge” (*Theory*, 27). From very early on then English imparted some culture on those outside the elite, the developing middle classes clamoring for higher education, and attempting to uplift the poor through culture. In an age when we have the same thirst for schooling as previous generations and far more outlets seeking to slake it—YouTube tutorials and lectures, TED Talks, or even TV book clubs—it should surprise no one that tastemaking has now become so diffuse, with so many alternate taste judgments and hierarchies jostling for followers, that it is difficult to list contemporary literary authorities with universal appeal.

Critical Anxiety

In order to understand the ways in which criticism today differs from that of the past, we need to examine the new forums for discussing current events and culture, often at the same time: popular general interest blogs and news aggregation sites like Slate, Gawker, The Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vice, that feature national news, trend pieces and cultural commentary. (Yes, Slate is technically an online magazine, but it is sprawling enough to compete with any proper aggregator. And BuzzFeed is not a blog or an aggregator, but it probably *is* the news site of the future. Somehow none of the midcentury writers of dystopian fiction predicted the fall of civilization by listicle.) These sites have gained far more readers with far more uneven content than either major newspapers or smaller high-culture magazines since appearing in the early to mid 2000s. They are convenient to access, have an article for every taste and interest (without being too taxing to read), and set up to guide readers from one piece to the next. This makes them nearly impossible to avoid, if one cared to do so, and often addictive to the point that even people who regularly read more serious publications and roll their eyes at lists of cute cat videos usually have at least one of these sites favorited on their laptops.

Some of these sites have a reputation for snark (a word meaning everything from malicious sarcasm to biting but still amusing wit), while the larger and more general ones typically feature a wide range of styles and attitudes toward every possible subject. However, the tone of these sites—and we can usually generalize their signature tones to the point of overlooking individual writers—in headlines and articles, often share certain traits derived from their shared characteristics. They

seem somehow more insistent in their stances *and* more cautious—probably the result of “clickbait” headlines, quick turnover, and often shallow coverage. (To be fair, the quality of articles that these sites post varies widely and can include some prescient analysis. I in no way mean to imply that popular and accessible criticism is dead, just crowded by filler, which is perhaps not so different from other eras.) To give you a sense of what I mean, take Alex Ross’s previously mentioned *New Yorker* blog post from the introduction, where he quickly sketches this region of the current cultural landscape,

“Headlines have an authoritarian bark (“This Map of Planes in the Air Right Now Will Blow Your Mind”). “Most Read” lists at the top of Web sites imply that you should read the same stories everyone else is reading. Technology conspires with populism to create an ideologically vacant dictatorship of likes” (Ross).

Ross’s description of this “dictatorship” as “ideologically vacant” reveals more common critical fears of depoliticized, toothless value judgments. Writers and reader-commenters have strong opinions, but these sites host little actual debate. Heated arguments erupt in the comment sections or in “threads” of articles where one particularly provocative piece sparks a series of reactions, before disappearing to give way for the next thread. Articles often do not stay relevant long enough for readers to digest them or for critics to write fully thought out response to them.

This impermanence is not simply the result of our short attention spans, or if it is we must account for why we can no longer pay attention long enough to read a fully fleshed argument rather than a mosaic of writers’ personal reactions to a topic. Karl Taro Greenfield, writing for the *New York Times Sunday Review*, addresses the ease with we can all pretend to “cultural literacy” thanks to social media internet

criticism that is more or less summed up by its title. We can all pretend to know about everything this way and parrot an opinion easily, but often we do not have the same kind of depth to our arguments. More troubling to Taro Greenfield is the often-unnoticed way social media and other sites guide readers into the comfortable, “ideologically vacant dictatorship of likes.” He asks,

Who decides what we know, what opinions we see, what ideas we are repurposing as our own observations? Algorithms, apparently, as Google, Facebook, Twitter and the rest of the social media postindustrial complex rely on these complicated mathematical tools to determine what we are actually reading and seeing and buying (Taro Greenfield).

The Internet is not a free and open space. Maybe it once was, like the mythical Wild West, but the railroad companies (or in this case, multinational corporations with sophisticated algorithms and crack lawyers) have fenced off most of the open sky. In this respect, MacDonald’s work was prescient. He states in the 1950s that, “the mass audience is divisible, we have discovered—and the more it is divided, the better. Even television, the most senseless and routinized expression of Masscult [...] might be improved by this approach” (MacDonald, 70). A part of the population, mostly the older generation, still value reading as above other forms of media consumption, but others value the perceived quality of the commodity—whether book, TV show, or podcast—above a hierarchy of media. But enough people still maintain the early mythical view of internet freedom to make sorting algorithms powerful tools, even for those who know how the system works.

In examining these popular sites and the criticism they offer, we are dealing with market forces like those working in every other aspect of our society, and in this case the main factor consists of a glut of information, analysis, reflection, and

reminiscence we are trying desperately to keep up with. Despite—or perhaps because—talk about culture and its relevance is now ubiquitous, critics are uneasy with their position, constantly seeing threats to not just their profession, but to the importance of taste or value judgments. Anyone can write about books, movies, and the like—and it often seems like everyone does. So how to separate self-indulgent prattling from true criticism? That is, if there remains any significant difference. I believe there is one, but you can almost hear this worry echoing through writers' occasional attempts at manifesti defending some aspect of their work. Tiffany Jenkins writes for BBC Culture earlier in 2014,

“Taste should be formed through debate. Doing so means convincing fellow members of our society about what art has value according to the standards we have chosen. [...] If art matters, then we should care about quality. And that means having the courage to forge a standard of good taste.” (Jenkins).

Now Jenkins does not actually cite anyone saying that we should not argue over matters of taste, or that any value judgment is just as good as any other. This unnamed relativist who does not think art matters, or that the market should dictate what is good, or any number of things, is a strawman, but a strawman that gestures toward a wider anxiety about the importance of criticism. Critics' anxiety about the state of culture and value judgments often limits them, making them believe have to defend taste itself, and not just their own opinions and work. It is not that critics no longer have opinions, but they do not have the same faith that their standards are correct or universal, or that their attempts at thoughtful reflection will cause any sort of change once mashed up by the all-powerful aggregator.

Despite the fact that his analysis was often woefully simplistic, journalist and *Partisan Review* editor Dwight MacDonald's concerns about mass culture echo through many of the more pessimistic critics' writing. Take what he says about "midcult" as opposed to "real" culture: "Why struggle with real poetry when the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric can give you its effects in capsule form—works twice as fast and has a "Blow on the coal of the heart" ending? Why read the sociologists when Mr. Packard gives you their gist painlessly?" (MacDonald, 52). Then listen to Ruth Graham criticize adults who read young adult literature: "But even the myriad defenders of YA fiction admit that the enjoyment of reading this stuff has to do with escapism, instant gratification, and nostalgia" (Graham). Or Rebecca Mead criticize readers' expectation that writing be "relatable:"

To reject any work because we feel that it does not reflect us in a shape that we can easily recognize—because it does not exempt us from the active exercise of imagination or the effortful summoning of empathy—is our own failure. It's a failure that has been dispiritingly sanctioned by the rise of 'relatable' (Mead).

The common theme among these critics? Not a distrust of pleasure, as their own critics might claim, but of easy pleasure, of escapism or passive reception that does not require mental work. Why do these writers distrust easy pleasure? After all, adults who read only or mainly YA books and insist on "relatable" characters probably would not have spent much time enjoying "High Culture" in another era. The answer in MacDonald's case stems from his leftist politics and genuine love of art; he views the escapist fantasies of the mass media not only as a poor imitation of popular culture or folk art, but as powerful tools to oppress the poor and poorly

educated. Writers still debate whether MacDonald sees mass culture correctly, but I am inclined to agree that

The arguments implied by Graham and Mead point to the well-developed work of MacDonald, but perhaps because their pieces are so short they do not enter into the same depth, or even seem to realize they are touching a larger topic. Both writers frame the phenomena they address as, and in order to understand them in the context of MacDonald's work you must have some familiarity with him already and follow the entire thread of articles. Graham's essay in particular caused a chain reaction of responses agreeing with her or defending the pleasures of YA fiction. There are certain ideological views inherent in the positions writers take, but the writers for these middle ground websites often frame their arguments as their personal experiences and reactions to situations, and the phenomena themselves as largely without much context. When Mead disapproves of adults reading fiction meant for young people, she views it as a failing of seriousness in our culture, but she stops short of assigning reasons for it. Adam Sternbergh, appropriately enough in a response to A.O. Scott's article on the end of adulthood mentioned in the previous chapter, claims that,

Cultural essays about the death of adulthood are often Trojan horses for a different complaint: the death of seriousness. These essays read as modern analogues to the mid-20th-century jeremiads about middlebrow, which were, similarly, taking people to task for not being sophisticated (i.e., adult) enough in their cultural tastes (Sternbergh).

There are certainly parallels between the two movements—I have pointed out a major one in their distrust of easy pleasure—but overall I disagree with Sternberg. Writers like McDonald always considered the economic, political, and larger social

forces shaping the trends that they examined and wondered about their potential ramifications. Trend pieces of the sort Mead writes typically view reading YA fiction as an adult as some kind of moral deficiency one needs to correct, rather than a phenomenon for the writers to probe and perhaps understand. When we do find context or differing viewpoints on a trend piece, it generally arises from the comments or another article somewhere down the thread. This tendency to personalize criticism that contributes to the lack of real debate or discussion in most popular literary and cultural criticism, because arguments framed as strongly held personal opinion, and gives little illumination to readers who do not already look to analyze every argument they read.

Pedagogy and Pleasure

While popular literary culture lacks actual debate, it does provide us with more book recommendations than we could ever read. Every major news publication has printed a must-read book list, probably several, tailored to their audience, the season, or some other theme. The *New York Times* Book Review publishes several influential bestseller lists, which thanks to a little-known 1983 lawsuit by a disgruntled author, are actually protected by the First Amendment as editorial content. In practical terms, that makes the actual compilation project a trade secret. Many of these lists are not objective reflections of the market, and so are vulnerable to manipulation according to a *Forbes* article by Jeff Bercovici aptly titled “Here’s How You Buy Your Way Onto the New York Times Bestsellers List.” In addition to entire books worth of lists and synopses like *1,001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*, there are more in depth treatments of the joys of literature like Harold Bloom’s *How to Read and Why* or the writing lessons of Francine Prose’s *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*.

Why include these lists and reading guides in a paper on literary criticism? Mainly because they fulfill one of the main functions of literary criticism, yet many critics look at them as a threat, replacing intellectual rigor with a view of reading as pleasure and perhaps self-improvement. Recommendation lists often read like suggestions from a friend, yet they are from a book or magazine you have just purchased, from a person you do not know and whose authority is questionable. Even the writers of more substantial paeans like Prose and Bloom tend to take a dim

view of the theoretical analysis of books, emphasizing the pleasures of language or spiritual rapture, respectively, over the kind of reading that takes into account the book's relationship to the world. Book clubs, especially those with corporate or celebrity connections, serve a similar purpose and have always received similar skepticism. The Book of the Month Club, founded in 1926 by an advertising copywriter (and later ad agency founder, on the strength of the idea) in order to boost book sales for a client, grew steadily and reached its peak in the 1940s and 50s, essentially becoming a brand of its own before that word gained its contemporary meaning. Club selections were regular bestsellers and even launched the careers of some authors, like Richard Wright when they chose his 1940 novel *Native Son* for the club. In 1952, journalist and *Partisan Review* editor Dwight MacDonald savaged the Book of the Month Club as middlebrow, a pale imitation of really highbrow art and taste that represented genuine sophistication.

MacDonald probably would not think much more highly of a club based on the star power of one woman rather than anonymous corporate approval, even if Oprah's Book Club does not sell the books it recommends. The Club, founded in 1996 and shuttered in 2010 before reviving as an online version in 2012, functions instead as part of Oprah's brand—she wants to be your best friend with whom you drink pinot grigio and split a cheese plate at your book club meeting, and you just have to watch her show (and her advertisers) for it to become a reality. Winfrey also believes promoting reading is a good cause, and it generally is, though I can sympathize with critics who believe she promotes a kind of hyper-personal reading focusing on self-improvement and the development of personal taste to the

exclusion of intellectual engagement and debate. If one reads any article or book about the state of literary culture in the early and mid 2000s, it will contain at least a passing reference to Oprah's Book Club, and probably a good deal more than that. Individuals had influenced the book market before, but it is unlikely that anyone has done so to the extent Oprah Winfrey did. Since the online version of the Club launched in 2012, Winfrey has proved she still has the influence to move books—Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* reached number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list and was adapted for film by Reese Witherspoon, but it has not received the same amount of negative attention as the original—but has received less negative attention. Perhaps critics are all satisfied by Winfrey's difficulties in making her cable channel a success and no longer feel the need to approach her so critically, or perhaps now that it is no longer televised they do not feel so galled by a celebrity doling out not just book recommendations, but tips on how to read and receive the work.

Criticism has always involved teaching readers, whether in an academic or highbrow context or in a televised self-improvement one or any other situation. But who has the authority to teach readers, and how they do it, and what readers are supposed to learn has shifted with new methods of distribution and new factors of influence hinted at in the previous chapter. Take Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer*, which also features a list of "Books to Be Read Immediately." A blurb from *O, The Oprah Magazine* calls Prose a "master teacher" and the book list "a mouthwatering treat." The reviewer goes on to urge the reader to try, "the delights of slowly imbibing a book, savoring every word, sentence, and paragraph, tasting

morsels of metaphor.” Now I flatter myself that I enjoy reading more than most people, but these folks sound like they are licking the pages. Cultural critics who disapprove of the kind of reading promoted by Oprah and the writers she patronizes tend to point to this kind description, encouraging readers to consume books like they would food or sex, as indicative of a kind of status-seeking capitalist consumption that stresses pleasure and the flaunting of one’s personal taste. Having read Prose’s book, I simply think it is an overly generous review.

Jim Collins, a professor of English and film studies at Notre Dame, describes his inspiration to write *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, an exploration of the ways new taste hierarchies and forms of distribution shape the way we receive literature, while on a trip to Barnes and Noble with his children,

“I was overwhelmed by the absurdity not of [Barnes and Noble’s] décor but of my presumption to teach my students anything about contemporary literature without taking superstores, blockbuster film adaptations, and television book clubs into account, not just as symptoms of the current state of *culture industry* but as the sites, delivery systems, and forms of connoisseurship that formed the fabric of a *popular* literary culture” (Collins, 2).

Collins sets out to give a picture of the “culture industry,” especially literary tastemaking, as it is, rather than provide a normative view on the market/taste relationship. This mission requires some sociology:

“To recast Bourdieu’s distinctions in reference to the current situation, popular literary culture depends on the development of another field between restricted and large-scale production, in which the delivery systems for literary experiences become increasingly large-scale, but the mechanisms of taste distinction appear to grow ever more intimate as reading taste becomes ever more personalized” (Collins, 33).

You can see an example of the large-scale production/personalized taste relationship in the various imprints all the major publishing houses have, tailored to different sections of the market, much as Dwight MacDonald expected the culture and media industries would eventually do. But few people are really interested in examining the way they consume books. Indeed, one aspect of the trend Collins points out is a distrust of the academic—both explicitly political readings and ones that attempt to challenge the typical passive reception of texts that privileges the author. Francine Prose writes about her brief stint at graduate school in the introduction to her book:

“I soon realized that my love for books was unshared by many of my classmates and professors. I found it hard to understand what they did love, exactly, and this gave me an anxious shiver that would later seem like a warning about what would happen to the teaching of literature over the decade or so after I dropped out of my Ph.D. program. That was when literary academia split into warring camps of deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, and so forth, all battling for the right to tell students that they were reading “texts” in which ideas and politics trumped what the writer had actually written” (Prose, 8).

Prose, like many avid readers, casts her relationship to books in terms of love or passion. But she does not consider that people who read differently might express the same passionate love for literature in different way—to her, academic debates are “warring camps.” Hers is a rather sweeping indictment of all of academia, and not at all unusual in popular books on reading, which perhaps illustrates the gap between regular readers and those who have made the analysis of culture their lives’ work.

Compare Prose’s approach to educating the reading public to the one Terry Eagleton takes in *Literary Theory*, a sort of field guide to the major theoretical

camps of the 1980s. It was his bestselling book at 300,000 copies (impressive for a historical overview of literary theories), and like Prose's book includes a list of recommended reading in the back. "This bibliography is designed for readers who wish to follow up all or any of the various fields of literary theory dealt with in this book. Works under each heading are listed not alphabetically, but in an order in which they might best be tackled by a beginner" (*Theory*, 223). The headings, in order are Russian Formalism, English Criticism, American New Criticism, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, Structuralism and Semiotics, Post-Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Marxism. Eagleton clearly desires to educate his readers about critical theory in a way that will not intimidate them, and his methods do not appear all that different from the type Prose and her ilk use. But Eagleton is a rare writer seeking to make theoretical discourse accessible, and assuming the public (or at least one section of the public) will want this access.

This supposed division between readers into the analytically minded and the pleasure seeking has a longer history than one might imagine: in the 1920s and '30s, I.A. Richards, one of the preeminent intellectuals of his day, began to make the study a language a science. One of his more popular works, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, attempted a kind of quantitative analysis of reading, believing that, "The arts, if rightly approached, supply the best data available for deciding what experiences are more valuable than others. The qualifying clause is all-important however" (Richards, 28). He too insisted on teaching,

"First, to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture whether as critics, as philosophers, as teachers, as psychologists, or merely as curious persons. Secondly, to

provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry (and cognate matters) and why they should like or dislike it. Thirdly, to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read” (Richards, 3).

A few decades later, fellow English academic C.S. Lewis regarded Richards as a literary puritan, the type who “applies to literature all the scruples, the rigorism, the self-examination, the distrust of pleasure, which his forbearers applied to the spiritual life; and perhaps soon all intolerance and self-righteousness” (Lewis, 10). Lewis challenged the idea that reading great literature in the proper way is morally or politically relevant. Pleasure is the only legitimate end, to his mind, but a specific kind of pleasure, one focused on the beauty of language. C.S. Lewis dismissed all of the attempts by critics seeking to elucidate a sort of relationship between art and life, bemoaning that, “literature becomes for them a religion, a philosophy, a school of ethics, a psychotherapy, a sociology—anything rather than a collection of works of art” (Lewis, 86). This is perhaps ironic coming from a man best known for writing a series of Christian allegories for children, but one of the clearer statements of such a view nonetheless. Of course, Lewis’s view is somewhat easier for an affluent Oxford professor of medieval literature to hold than for people in less sheltered circumstances. And in our day and age, many writers want their work to reach beyond the most rarefied circles. They want make something beyond an object of beauty or pleasure.

Little Magazines and Hobbled Idealism

“The chief negative aspect is that so far our Renaissance, unlike the original one, has been passive, a matter of consuming rather than creating, a catching up on our reading on a continental scale,” writes Dwight McDonald in his seminal essay “Masscult and Midcult” (MacDonald, 57). But MacDonald is no longer entirely correct. As the book club trend discussed in the previous chapter demonstrates, our society does in fact consume literature, perhaps in a rather passive way in the sense of its disengagement from the formal values and political meanings that MacDonald cared about. But as the subtitle of Francine Prose’s reading guide, *“A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them,”* suggests, readers frequently make the leap to writing in unprecedented numbers. Poet Annie Finch remarks that,

“The work of creating, maintaining, and revising literary tradition has always been carried out largely by creative writers, whether through editing, reviews, translation, literary criticism, letters, conversation, or teaching. The truth has been somewhat obscured in the past several decades, as teaching young creative writers has become the prevalent day job of most creative writers, often to the displacement of these other more traditional day jobs” (Finch, 2).

Writing has become a dream job, probably due in part to a romanticized image of the writer’s (or artist’s) life. But there must also be some deeper reason for the surge of interest in writing, to the point where people will pay to learn how or forego paid work in order to get a foothold in their chosen industry. Writing and other creative professions have become callings or vocations rather than jobs, and as such people who pursue them are not expected to concern themselves with making money, but

this model cannot sustain itself if we demand a certain level of fairness. In 2013 radical intellectual Yasmin Nair wrote a blog post, “On Writers as Scabs, Whores, and Interns, And the *Jacobin* Problem,” which attracted attention by calling out leftist publications for their poor payment of writers and heavy reliance on unpaid or underpaid interns, and going so far as to chastise writers who work for free, accusing them driving down wages for writers who actually need them. Editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* Evan Kindley defended the magazines, stating that,

similar concerns were raised frequently throughout the golden age of the American little magazine (roughly 1900-1960) [...] Literary and political magazines alike, from *Hound and Horn* and the *Kenyon Review* to *Dissent* and the *New Left Review*, have long been dominated by academics: partly because they could afford to work for free, and partly because they cared enough about American intellectual life to start and contribute to such unprofitable ventures (Moonlighting).

He further claimed that,

The vitality of small publications like *Jacobin* (and *The Rumpus*, and *The New Inquiry*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *n+1*, and *Avidly*) is closely related to the ways they have managed to evade or short-circuit the established journalistic market. These venues allow people to write and publish pieces (usually for little to no money, it’s true) that they would not otherwise be able to publish, either because they would be assigned to more established, credentialed writers or because no established publication would accept them at all (Moonlighting).

Of course, little magazines are not really short-circuiting the established journalistic market, but they are not trading in money. They trade in prestige and writing credits that Progressive publications

More common than this kind of self-reflection on the part of little magazines is an ambivalent attitude toward the wider culture. A.O. Scott, profiling the editors

of *N+1* and *The Believer* in the early 2000s observes,

“Nor, based on their pointed, closely argued and often brilliantly original critiques of contemporary life and letters, would you accuse them of indecision, though they do sometimes display a certain pained 21st-century ambivalence about the culture they inhabit” (Scott, “The Believers”).

This ambivalence is especially clear on *The Baffler*'s FAQ Page, which includes the “question” “Can't you just self-medicate like everyone else?” While the editors refuse to give a mission statement, they do describe their work:

“America's New Information Economy stands exposed as a business fraud, environmental menace, and thought-killer. That's why we're continually lofting new salvos into the ether, like our cheerfully titled anthology, *No Future for You*, and upcoming pep talks. But in addition to landing productively unproductive jabs, we enjoy kicking back and mulling over the eternal questions too, like sex, play, and friendship, to cite the themes of recent issues.”

Thus *The Baffler* (really its editors), passionately as it believes in the innate importance thought, and writing, and art, must humorously and bitterly acknowledge the lack of practical effect their “productively unproductive jabs” have. On the other end of the spectrum, *Jacobin* states as its “Raison d'être,” “*Jacobin* is a leading voice of the American left, offering socialist perspectives on politics, economics, and culture. The print magazine is released quarterly and reaches over 6,000 subscribers, in addition to a web audience of 400,000 a month.” This brief statement is then followed by a series of laudatory blurbs from the *New York Times*, Chris Hayes, and *Left Business Observer*. One feels a little depressed reading *Jacobin*'s blurbs—they read so much like any other slick magazine, and one wonders neo-Marxist stance is simply a posture. I do not mean to say that editors and writers for magazines like *Jacobin* do not believe what they say, but Nair's

conflict with the magazine makes it clear that even relatively successful little magazines cannot function according to the standards of the ideology to which they ascribe.

The difference between magazines may be one of age: *The Baffler* has existed in some iteration since 1988, and its editors know the chances of its changing the world are slim. *Jacobin* was founded in 2009 by then-George Washington University sophomore Bhaskar Sunkara, and had early connections to Occupy Wall Street—specifically organizing a panel on it in an attempt to bring about a discussion of the movement’s ideology (we all know how that turned out) (Schuessler). Sunkara also writes for *Vice*, so there is more overlap between these sites than you might imagine. Even the distinction between little magazines and snarky pop culture sites is becoming rather blurred. Giles Gunn claims that “Philosophy become criticism, like criticism become philosophical, is a precarious and marginal enterprise in the world of multinational corporate capitalism” (*Culture*, 4). This is a common refrain among critics, who often draw on Marxist or neo-Marxist ideas when discussing the relationship between commerce and art. It is not that writers fear giant corporations censoring helpless writers, but that the corporations would have no need to do so. For self-identified progressives, who must acknowledge the privilege involved in dedicating their time to something as non-essential as literature. Many of these leftist little magazines draw inspiration from the *Partisan Review*, and one can see how which in severing itself from the pro-Stalinist communists, maintained intellectual independence but had far less heft.

Thus it often seems like we must choose between engagement with the world on the one hand and intelligent discourse on the other.

Cultural critics once had loftier dreams for their work. Beginning in the 19th century and lasting into the 1950s, many intellectuals hoped that literature, or high culture more generally, could provide a space to develop new normative structures to replace those offered by increasingly unsound religious and political authorities. In the *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture*, UC Santa Barbara professor in English and global studies Giles Gunn claims that,

as recently as a century ago, in the writings of Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold no less than in those of Emerson or Whitman or William James, cultural criticism assumed the duties once delegated to theology and then to philosophical ethics, to keep alive the sense of the normative and its bearing upon beliefs and practices no longer felt to derive their legitimacy from traditional religious sources (*Culture*, 5).

Writing in the 1980s, Gunn mourned what he could only see as this lost relevance to the culture, a common pose in an era where cultural and media studies were still young, and intellectual discourse seemed so far removed from regular life and media consumption that the gap might never be bridged. Whatever the flaws in popular criticism, today we at least have more bridges between intellectual circles and general discourse. The view upheld by everyone from Carlyle to James managed to hobble into the 1950s, at which point the failing old man could no longer be sustained. Rene Wellek countered the contemporary view—one that Wellek attributed to a certain critical pedigree consisting of Matthew Arnold and the previously mentioned I.A. Richards—

That poetry will more and more take the place of the supernatural religion in which modern intellectuals can no longer believe. [...] A more impressive case can probably be made for the view that poetry cannot long take the place of religion since it can scarcely survive it. Religion is the greater mystery; poetry, the lesser (Wellek, 197).

Art would not provide the culture at large with mystical experiences, though some artists would try, and criticism would not develop new dogmas to offer stability for everyday life.

By the 1960s, writers no longer mentioned literature or other arts as replacements for traditional religion (whose intellectual and moral influence did not disappear, despite claims that the rational and educated could no longer accept them, but now simply jostles with other philosophies for followers), but they still called on criticism to make sense of society at large. Susan Sontag claimed in an article initially written for the *Partisan Review* in 1963 that,

“Modern discussions of the possibility of tragedy are not exercises in literary analysis; they are exercises in cultural diagnostics, more or less disguised. The subject of literature has pre-empted much of the energy that formerly went into philosophy, until that subject was purged by the empiricists and logicians” (Sontag, 132).

Sontag addresses tragedy in this particular article, but anyone who has read her essays in *Against Interpretation* knows that she always addressed the work of art, her experience of it, and its cultural and historical context, often in fairly brief articles. Rarely does popular criticism or even more highbrow writing address the element of experience of a work of art and its engagement with the world at the same time today. Despite her immense influence on modern writers' style, they miss something of her substance. (She might take exception to that distinction between

style and substance, but I mean something slightly different from the form vs. content dichotomy she opposed. I will not argue the point right now, however.) My own nostalgia for a certain type of criticism has become evident here. To often we have the false choice of aesthetic pleasure or intellectual appreciation, not realizing that works of art at their best welcome both.

Embracing the Present

Susan Sontag, reflecting on the essays written in the early to mid '60s and collected in *Against Interpretation*, reflected that “What I didn’t understand [...] was that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgression” (Sontag, 312). Sontag regrets this shift in sensibility, and Lehmann shares her desire for some kind of genuine transgression in art, lamenting that “the weary spectacle of faux-transgressive arts controversies—themselves telling instances of the massification of former high culture—are treated as epic clashes of American taste communities, a heartbeat removed from *Inherit the Wind*” (Lehmann, 4). But what exactly should writers and artists transgress? And can Lehmann really claim that the changes in technology and distribution that made mass culture possible perhaps had some positive effects? David Shields, in his almost manic desire to embrace the present, points out that,

“The first great wave of popular [mass] culture included newspapers, magazines, novels, printed sheet music, records, children’s books. Not only did authors and artists benefit from this model but the audience did, too: for the first time, tens of millions of ordinary people were able to come in regular contact with a great work” (Shields, 18).

Shields is one of a wave of contemporary writers seeking to understand our present sensibility as it stands, rather than make a knowingly futile effort to correct it according to a past standard. In Alex Ross’s piece for the *New Yorker*, he presents Walter Benjamin as a model for this type of critic/intellectual, one that could embrace life as it is, accepting joy and pleasure and the possibility of subversion, while aware of very real problems, and Theodor Adorno as a necessary

“Many readers will sympathize with Benjamin, who managed to uphold a formidable critical tradition while opening himself to the modern world and writing in a sensuous voice. He furnishes a template for the pop-savvy intellectual, the preferred model in what remains of literary life. Yet Adorno, his dark-minded, infuriating brother, will not go away: his cross-examination of the “Work of Art” essay, his pinpointing of its moments of naïveté, strikes home” (Ross).

In truth, few people fall into one camp or the other. Ross’s picture of the intellectual striving for Benjamin and being pestered by Adorno (or for some the other way around) has a greater ring of truth to it than a strict delineation between camps.

After all, we are loath to identify too strongly with ideology, or a particular worldview. Critics hate to seem out of touch, and the best way to seem in touch is to make your audience hyperaware of your individual voice and anxieties, sometimes resulting in a bouncing between positions, a constant undercutting of the critic’s authority before the reader can get to it. “To oppose the juvenile pleasures of empowered cultural consumers is to assume, wittingly or not, the role of scold, snob or curmudgeon. Full disclosure: The shoe fits.” (Scott, “Adulthood”). Or take Collins, who warns his readers early on in *Bring on the Books for Everybody*,

“If you hope this will be an expose of the Evils of the Culture Industry, or a snappy remix of “I Sing the Culture Electric,” go no further, because this book just isn’t for you. Think of these first few pages as the thirty-second sample of a song you get to hear at iTunes—if you don’t like it so far, you’re going to hate the rest of it” (Collins, 8).

Are these hip openings really necessary? Why does an academic presumably interested in broadening readers’ perspectives tell us not to read something if we might disagree with it? However relevant the thirty-second iTunes sampler is to his

interest in new forms of consumption, his rather flippant attitude toward a subject he considers important enough to write an entire book about is puzzling.

Something about the way we live has changed though, as much as we change our minds about the present, and that is the way we live through media in a way that would be impossible without personal computers and smartphones. According to 2009 NEA study, *Reading on the Rise* (the follow-up to a 2004 study, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*), increased television consumption had not significantly affected the amount that people read, despite the study's writers assumption of a basic antagonism between the two. In fact Americans are actually reading more for the first time in decades, as well as consuming more television and other electronic media—particularly avid readers also tend to watch significant amounts of television (Collins, 15-16). The study bases its counts on hours television watching per day and number of books read per year, but one could imagine what the numbers would look like if internet-surfing, especially for the avid media consumers, were added to these tallies. What stands out in the studies is the sheer number of hours (around five or six per day, depending on the grouping) Americans spend consuming various media—books and other writing (whether in paper form or on a screen) as well as moving images. Factoring in work or school, sleep and the like, most of us spend very little time away from media. We live our lives in books as well as on screens.

In Giles Gunn's view there are two approaches to literary criticism. The first, that "The central business of criticism is to understand the influences of life upon literature and of literature and the other arts upon life," something akin to what this

thesis attempts to do, although I have skipped over the actual art to the people who write about it, as opposed to trying to find waves that connect life to art. To Gunn though, the dominant type of criticism though is

the view first expressed by Paul Valery and later canonized by T.S. Eliot, that criticism lives, or should live, in the service of art, and that art exists either to create a realm of experience that is indifferent to life, as one side of modernism supposes, or to create a realm of experience that is a substitute for life, as another side contends (*Culture*, 18).

Our media apparatus, including a lot of our literary and cultural criticism, forms a sort of parallel world to the real one, a “substitute for real life” the modernists never intended where we live vicariously through characters, or ponder the state of our culture, or maybe discuss these issues with people we do not actually see in our “real” lives, which take up less and less of our time. Critics and theorists attempting to come to grips with this new world tend to emphasize the breakdown of sign/referent relationship in a way I believe is relevant. Gunn writes in “Who’s Zoomin’ Who? Academic Pluralism, Critical Public Discourse, and American Civil Religion,” that our culture has lost its sense of grounding:

“Simulation describes a culture in which, as Mark Poster [a UC Irvine professor of history and film and media studies, with an emphasis on critical theory and Foucault] has noted, objects and discourses have origin, no ground or foundation, no real reference but themselves. It is a world that could only have been produced because of the technological breakthroughs of late corporate capitalism, where the media come to dominate the forms of production, where controlling the flow of information becomes the key to power, and where symbols, or “symbolic capital,” become the chief commodity of consumption” (“Zoomin’,” 219).

Shields takes a similar view and applies it to literature, claiming that “After Freud, after Einstein, the novel retreated from narrative, poetry retreated from rhyme...”

(Shields, 19). Yes, some of them did, namely the modernists and post-modernists. But (post) modernism often seems like more of an aberration than the preceding and succeeding eras. Narrative structures may have altered, but they still retain a recognizable form. Annie Finch can tell you all about form's comeback in poetry. In this generation, we do not feel the earth shift under us, because we were born free-floating. "Living as we perform do in a manufactured and artificial world, we yearn for the "real," semblances of the real" (Shields, 81). Maybe some people do long for reality, but I do not know what that is anymore. Like Camus says we all live as if we do not know we will die; we live as if reality is not in fact all the things we have learned in media studies—mediated, fractured, ephemeral. We know we live in a foundationless world, but we continue to function as if that were not the case. I am not saying that the idea that our conception of reality differs from those of previous generations in essential ways is incorrect. I have no idea, because like my peers I cannot remember an age before simulation, television, the Internet—before all of the phenomena discussed in this paper. We do not experience the sense of dislocation and anxiety in the same way as older generations who can, because this is all we know. If we miss a simpler era, it is one we know only second- or third-hand.

In such an unstable world, spiritual concerns appear every so often in the form of mourning a lost certainty. Giles Gunn discusses the relationship of religion to literature as one of "spiritual displacement:" myth develops into fictive forms; those fictive forms attempt to become something else that will replace the lost myths. "Wherever one enters this history of displacements, one still finds traces of

the sacred, and this deposit of sacred traces has not failed to attract the attention of recent critics,” he writes (*Culture*, 174). Gunn’s extended metaphor offers a view of literary history and theory like strata, with layers. We need a different metaphor for a culture without foundations or even solid ground beneath us, one that acknowledges we are floating in space, in what physicists used to believe was the only material that permeated the entire universe: ether. I end this paper with a quote from Susan Sontag in “Against Interpretation,”

“None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it did. From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art” (AI, 5).

Not only do we feel the need to justify art itself, but also writing about art (literature, culture, media), in what looks like it will become an infinite layering of analysis and justification. Or, to remain true to my own metaphor, bouncing around in the ether, refracting off one another, and mostly at home here, if incredibly anxious.

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