Towards a Literary Poetics of Use

Romantic, Aesthetic, Modernist

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Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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Abstract

This thesis attempts to reframe questions about the "use of literature" by asking how literary works themselves reflect on the relation of means and ends—both with respect to literature and more broadly. Its three chapters address moments in the history of modern literature in which key bodies of writing helped to define the literary in relation to the useful as a question. William Wordsworth's poetry suggests an anti-utilitarian line of critique that does not so much dismiss utility as ally poetic thought to unmasterable means-ends relations. The Aestheticism of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, often taken to repudiate the useful in favor of an autonomous aesthetic sphere, instead commits literature, art, and criticism to radical use-making through the production of individuated, i.e., new and unique forms of value. Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction theorizes an ordinary-life poetics that continually offers to reinscribe the domain of ends through attention to an all-embracing but ever labile ordinariness.

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Introduction

From uses of literature to poetics of use

> History itself is the productive force for the creation of valuations.
>
> Wilhelm Dilthey, "Meaning and Historical Relativity"

What is the use of literature? That is all—a simple question. Its syntax is borrowed from Virginia Woolf's tongue-in-cheek statement of another question: the "old . . . the vast, the general question" about "the meaning of life" (*To the Lighthouse* 133). The use of literature, if we believe William Marx's *The Hatred of Literature*, has appeared almost as fraught a problem, with a long history of its own.[1] In both cases, "The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come" (*To the Lighthouse* 133). At the same time, continual attempts to settle the matter of literature's uses have not shaken a tendency to slip into Woolf's more forbidding question. Today as in the nineteenth century, notes Stefan Collini, quarrels over the utility of a liberal

[1] Literature, writes William Marx, has been the continual target of questioning and attack since before the time of Plato (2, 3). The question of use is evoked *passim* in Marx's study as a recurrent component of this embattled history.

education in the humanities for instance appear "inexorably driven to ambitious phrases . . . about the ends of life" (52).

Nor does this thesis escape the tendency entirely: its final chapter takes up Woolf's question "What is the meaning of life?" to discuss how her writing implicates the fictional representation of ordinary life in redefining a domain of ends. Yet addressing the question with more specificity than Collini's "ambitious phrases" will require recasting it, asking what is meant by each of its two terms, "meaning" and "life," in the context of Woolf's literary project. Similarly, this introduction, indeed this thesis as a whole, aims to reframe the question about the use of literature by opening up each of its two terms in order to rethink the possible bases for their relation—asking ultimately how literature implicates itself in reflection on the useful.

For the simple question: "what is the use of literature?" frames the matter as though we were dealing with a stable category of literary objects and a stable concept of what constitutes the useful. The goal then would be to identify the two terms and their properties with sufficient clarity, so as to connect them in a syllogistic relation: literature is X; X is useful; therefore works of literature are useful. The syllogistic form may accommodate any number of intermediate clauses, and premises vary widely in complexity and sophistication. A familiar argument, to illustrate, appeals to fiction's empathy-promoting powers: fiction presents the inner lives of human-like characters; this invites readers to exercise empathy; empathy is important to the wellbeing of self and others; therefore literature is useful.[2] Another line of reasoning common (and usually implicit) in criticism today runs: literary works are historical artifacts marked by the social and ideological forces of their time and place; these forces (if in the past) remain relevant in the present (because persistent or formative); understanding them is

[2] A basic internet search will locate many versions of this argument communicated in popular media. This example is based on an article published by *BCC Future* (Hammond).

necessary to achieving more just social arrangements; literature, therefore, is useful to that end.[3]

The last example forms in effect the template of what Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature* broadly calls "ideological" styles of reading. These approaches situate literature "squarely in the social world," and equate its value with a certain understanding of its social utility (*Uses* 6–7). An opposing camp for Felski groups those who insist on the radical difference of the literary from the ordinary course of things as that which makes it properly itself (*Uses* 4–5).[4] Felski includes here a range of critical approaches to literature and art with fundamental differences between them—Harold Bloom's traditional Romanticism, Marxist critiques of instrumental reason, poststructuralist critiques oriented toward irreducible alterity—because they share a deep-seated mistrust of use as a reductive and debased category. While such stances oppose literature, often directly, to the useful, they tend to entail some general definition of the literary, highlighting certain of its salient properties, and discovering these to stand at odds with certain notions of use.

This thesis proceeds from the premise that neither literature nor the useful need to be defined *per se* to then arrive at the relation between the two. Instead, I will argue that literature defines itself historically in relation to the useful as a question. My approach may be stated as honing the historical sense of what Felski names "ideological" criticism, in order to take seriously the historical constitution of literature as a category and a class of object. This does not only mean attending to the literary work as a historical text permeable to the social and ideological forces of its times—which I take here as a given. It means drawing consequences from the recognition that what literature is and does is a

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[3] This form of justification is articulated in Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski's discussion of typical forms of critical argument in the introduction to their edited volume *Critique and Postcritique* (17).

[4] Felski calls these "theological" styles of reading, while noting that their claims are usually secular in content.

function of how what we have come to call literature was constituted as a category during its (relatively recent) history.

This history may be traced, in a specific sense, not much farther back than the late eighteenth century. As Jacques Rancière is wont to preface his discussions of literature and aesthetics, it was only around that time that these terms came to refer with any specificity to the forms of writing we now collectively call literary and the range of practices we group under the name of art (*Mute Speech* 33; *Aisthesis* ix). Up until that point, "literature" had been "the name of a field of knowledge and not an art" (*Mute Speech* 31). It denoted literate culture and "book learning in general" (Shiner 69). The shift is not only semantic: a new category and type of object had to be conceived in order for diverse arts of writing to become identifiable first and foremost as belonging to one art. Before then works owed the name of poem to their designated place in a system of classification—ode or georgic, tragedy or epic. These were also bound together, and to other forms of polite writing—the epistle, the sermon, the treatise—because of their shared adherence to a rhetorical ideal of language. This is not to mention the fraught history of prose fiction's admission into the genres of sophisticated writing.

The story is more or less a familiar one, and here necessarily redacted. But what does taking seriously this idea of literature's historical constitution have to say for the question of use? Does it mean restricting any attempt at definition of literature and its properties to this historically defined category in order to arrive at a description of its specific uses? This would be only part of the answer: the historical specificity of the category of literature has farther-reaching implications. In seeking to address the question "what is literature?" Rancière warns against the supposition that an object's "determinate properties" may be discovered apart from discourses about it (*Mute Speech* 30). What literature is or does, in other words, is in part a function of what it is said to be and do. While influential ideas about literature, however, are articulated in critical writings and

aesthetic theories, they are also shaped through and within literary works themselves.

This is not to say that poems, plays, and stories only near the end of the eighteenth century start to have so much to say about themselves—much writing in earlier periods is of course highly self-conscious. Yet from this formative moment it would seem that a new—and often oppositional—relationship to “use” comes to form a constitutive part of literary discourse. Important bodies of literary writing become very much preoccupied with the question of the useful just as they appear to lose the solid ground provided by a hegemonic rhetorical tradition. So chapter one will describe William Wordsworth’s attempt to construct another basis for thinking about the useful on the ruins of that earlier poetico-rhetorical edifice.

To ask what literature has had to say about its own uses is already to shift the grounds of the question. But more than this, we will see works of literature in key instances labor to define themselves and the literary in relation to the question of the useful. The history of modern literature will thus appear to generate some of the concerns that continue to weigh on critical discourse today, but it might also promise productive insights into these problems. At the same time, reframing the question in terms of literature’s relation to the useful offers to shift the conversation towards what literary works have to say about use instead of restricting debate specifically to the uses of literary texts.

If literature’s historical constitution opens out one of the terms of the question about the use of literature, then what about the other term? Naturally use is also subject to historicization. The literary works that I will address, in coming to grips with the useful, will necessarily be informed by the parameters of past discourses about utility and value. But use is itself conceptually unstable since it refers to a *relation*: between valued ends and the means understood to serve or promote them. Judgments on the usefulness of an activity or object are therefore regulated by the kinds of ends taken to hold value—either in

themselves as final goods, or because they in turn yield other goods, or other intermediate utilities already recognized as such. This means that judgments about use also depend fundamentally on causal linkages: how a process or activity is seen to bring about a result, or an object or state of affairs to provide the conditions for its occurrence. The works of Romantic poetry, Aesthetic criticism, and modernist fiction which this thesis examines grapple both with the ends that regulate judgments on the useful and with the relation that causally connects a thing to its uses.

Chapter one centers on William Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar," in which the poet sets out to detail the titular Beggar's uses to a community. The poem opposes to a utilitarian political-economic logic a form of thought hospitable to indeterminate, plural, and open-ended means-ends relations. The centrality of this causal poetics to Wordsworth's Romantic poetics becomes clear when we recognize that "The Old Cumberland Beggar" anticipates Wordsworth's seminal "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and the grand project of *The Prelude*. Chapter two repositions the Aesthete's embrace of the useless in the late nineteenth century in relation to deterministic discourses and conforming social forces threatening to engulf the individual and preclude the possibility of the new. The Aestheticisms of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde fashion from materialist discourses new conditions of possibility for individuation, while committing literature, art, and criticism to the continual production of new ends. Chapter three argues that Virginia Woolf, in making ordinary life the proper subject of fiction, commits her writing to the continual redefinition and revaluation of the domain of ends while drawing on the resources of the familiar as well as the new.

Thus "literature in quest and question of itself" ties in key moments its labors of self-definition to reflections bearing on the useful.[5] But literature's

[5] The quoted phrase is borrowed from the title of Pamela L. Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself*.

agon with use by this token appears not as a repudiation of the useful, or the attempt to construct an autonomous sphere of value, but as a productive engagement that in many ways multiplies rather than subtracts possible means-ends relations. We should expect from this genealogizing effort not so much a resolution as a series of illuminations of certain contradictions generated by the historically constituted category of literature. And this history might yet turn up overlooked resources to be mined. This study attempts, at any rate, a different kind of response to nagging questions about the use of literature and its study—imposed often, to be sure, by external pressures, but whose parameters cannot be alien to literary and critical thought.

Literature, uses, values

A flurry of titles that appeared over the past decade or so attest to a felt need to defend literature, the arts, and their study against mounting demands from private and public decision-makers to justify their use or conform to certain standards of utility (see Keen; Bulaitis; Jay; McDonald; Small; Belfiore and Upchurch; Bate). These debates have flared up within the socio-economic climate which many of the works cited describe as the tightening grip of a neoliberal order on all facets of social life. Literature's fraught relationship with the useful, as I suggested earlier, has a longer history. Friedrich Schiller writing in the late eighteenth century saw utility as "the great idol of our age, to which all powers are in thrall," in whose "crude balance the insubstantial merits of Art scarce tip the scale" (*Aesthetic Education* 6–7). While Paul Keen has looked to the first half of the nineteenth century to illuminate the controversies of our own "utilitarian age," Zoe Hope Bulaitis and Stefan Collini both compare current debates to Victorian ones. A volume called *Crisis in the Humanities* appeared in 1964, putting the problem in the "Two Cultures" terms still shaping the conversation today (Plumb; see Keen 5–6; also Snow). And quarrels about literary and aesthetic

value raged in the 1990s in one of many moments of stocktaking with the consequences of “theory” (Herrnstein Smith; Guillory; Connor; Frow).

Rather than survey the range of debates on the uses of literature, I wish here to sketch some basic coordinates of theoretical positions on literature’s relation to the useful in order to carve the space from which this thesis argues. Stances that distance literature and the aesthetic from use or oppose them directly to it continue to appear as key reference points in theoretical debates. One line of argument against such positions regards them as self-deceiving because they allow the aesthetic to be caught unwittingly in instrumental structures. Some critics argue, against any aesthetic isolationism, that literature, art, and their study can and ought to make themselves useful, while others have come to treat it as a matter of course that the aesthetic is ever caught in networks of relation to other things, but that this state of affairs expands rather than limits possibilities for the uses of literature.

Often cited as exemplary of the radical separation of the aesthetic from the useful is the aesthetics of Theodor W. Adorno, yoking art to the critique of instrumental reason (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; Horkheimer and Adorno; Horkheimer). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the tyranny of the useful that Schiller perceived in his day seemed only the early stage of a development that would reach its apogee in their own times. Against the seemingly all-consuming regimentation of life under the allied powers of capital and state, they aligned literature and art with a promise of resistance to imperatives of production and service: the aesthetic as Bartleby’s solemn refusal to participate. So Felski introduces the 2013 special issue of *New Literary History* on the topic of “Use” writing that Adorno “hails the uselessness of the artwork” as the mark of “stubborn resistance to the means-end [sic] thinking of a degraded modernity” (vi). It is not without reason that Adorno is cited frequently to this effect. Yet it is often left out that he and his Frankfurt School colleagues—whatever the success of their critique—aimed to defend use value, in the Marxist sense,

against the depredations of capitalist exchange value (see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 28).[6] For Terry Eagleton, writing in the same special issue on "Use," Marx's concept of use value promises to steer clear of either a narrow instrumentalism or an uncompromising rejection of the useful ("Bodies" 571).[7]

Aesthetic autonomy has appeared to others a deeply suspect pretense that obscures literature and art's inescapable social embeddedness and dooms the aesthetic to unwitting instrumentalization in the service of power. Eagleton has himself argued along such lines (*Ideology*) which extend back to György Lukács' Marxist critique of modernist aestheticism (see Lukács 32). Pierre Bourdieu's sociological critique of aesthetic value (*Distinction*) has also become a crucial reference in this context. Here instead of a space of freedom from instrumentality and commodification, works of literature and art circulate in the space of cultural capital. Dominated by the tastes of elites whose interest is to ensure the continued equivalence of high cultural and material capital, the aesthetic serves a function in the hierarchies of capitalist society. In Bourdieu's sobering account, in other words, literature does not elude the instrumentalizing logic of exchange. Yet Bourdieu also described the autonomous "literary field" as a real historical formation that complicated in practice the ways in which literature relates to other social structures (*Rules*).

Rita Felski positions her recent work against both affirmations of aesthetic anti-instrumentality and critiques of literature's capture within instrumental structures. Felski instead considers it a matter of course that literary works operate within networks of use-making, and maintains that these are not

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[6] Helen Small glosses the Marxist notion of use value as "non-economic consent to a lived need, as against economic exchange value" (11).

[7] Other influential critiques of the regimentation of modern life such as Michel Foucault's, and before him those of Henri Lefebvre or Mikhail Bakhtin, may similarly be applied towards the critique of reductive utilitarian judgment (Foucault; Lefebvre; Bakhtin). Here too the flipside to description of disciplinary forces is the effort to make space for alternative forms of life. When Michel de Certeau attempts to rewrite "consumption" as a tactic of resistance, he effectively opposes a creative form of *making use* to the usages imposed by regimenting structures (De Certeau).

therefore so sinister. To the ideal of disinterested detachment which she associates with Theodor Adorno—going back to Kantian aesthetics—Felski contrasts a model of necessarily interested but complexly productive attachments. The inevitability of attachment entails neither capture within narrow instrumental structures nor a mystified individualism in denial of social determinations. Rather, it forms the condition of possibility for engagement between social actors (*Hooked* 10). Adapting for literary studies the spirit of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, she sets out to trace scenes of relation between people and works of literature and art taking place within connected and overlapping networks, spaces, temporalities, and institutions.

Felski's interventions also help to illustrate how closely debates on literature and use connect to the matter of how we who specialize in the study of literary works go about our business. Felski's 2008 manifesto *Uses of Literature* turned out to represent an early salvo in what became the "method wars" of the past decade. *The Limits of Critique*, which followed it up in 2015, offered a thought-provoking stocktaking with current critical approaches and became the subject of ongoing debate especially surrounding its announcement of a "postcritical" turn. The scholarly study of literature naturally became a focal point of discussion, as a primary arena where those engaged in the debate make use of literature in the course of studying (and teaching) literary texts. But this also goes to reinforce the point that the properties of literature including its uses depend on the ideas we have about it and the discourses that shape and deploy those understandings.

This brings us back to Jacques Rancière and the consequences which he draws from this point. Rancière in effect positions his work on aesthetics also in opposition to notions of aesthetic autonomy and poetic intransitivity taken to sequester literature and art from the social world. He does so, however, through a revisionist account that reinscribes the meaning of aesthetic autonomy within the historical emergence of the categories of literature and art. Rancière asks

what it is about literature that has made it so prone to speculations and confusions about its nature and its place in the world (*Mute Speech* 30). He concludes that the autonomy or intransitivity of literature expresses a loss of confidence in the system of poetics that had previously fixed the place of poetic language—and the modes of its efficacy—in an intricate rhetorical theory.[8] Without this framework for defining where and how the pleasing and instructive arts of language could productively be deployed, by whom, for whom, and to what purposes, literature's standing in the world becomes fraught. Yet the upshot, for Rancière, is that the aesthetic indicates a contradictory condition that opens wide rather than restricts literature's possible relations in and to the world.

My approach to the question of literature and use shares this interest in exploring a positive converse to the familiar opposition between the two terms. If literature, as Eric Lindstrom claims for Wordsworth's poetry, "constructs a space free of direct instrumentality" (112), does this then leave us with other—indirect—forms of instrumentality, or alternative models of means-ends relation? As for Felski and Rancière, this line of questioning leads me to a plural conception of *uses*, inescapable as a category of thought but in practice multiple, contingent, and labile. But my purpose is not to identify a particular set of uses that become clear once a historically specific literary field has been defined. I wish instead to describe some ways in which literary works pose the problem of the useful and reflect on the modalities of relation between means and ends. What I find is that formative works of modern literature forge their self-understanding in productive engagement with the useful as a question.

[8] The reasons for this loss of confidence remain admittedly speculative, but Rancière connects them to a gradual loss of regulatory power over the circulation of writing by an elite for whom rhetoric was not only a science of language but a way of (courtly) life. Hence the democratic promise which Rancière associates with the aesthetic—although the argument could still be made that the aesthetic emerges as a means of retaining that control in a rarefied sphere.

What is literature?

I am proposing to reframe the question about the use of literature by asking how each of its two terms is constituted, in order to open out the space where possible relations between them may be drawn. What is then the "literature" in question, and what are the implications of taking seriously the historical emergence of the category of the literary to designate the practices of writing we have come to call by that name?

Literature, to borrow from Barbara Herrnstein Smith, should refer to "that which is called [literature] in [an] indicated discourse" (34). This does not mean falling back to purely subjective identification, since the indicated discourse is understood to exist objectively—however difficult it might be to delineate its bounds.[9] In this case it pertains, for want of a better designation, to something like a poetico-aesthetic tradition taking root in Europe from the late eighteenth century. This presents far from a unified discourse, certainly not a universal one, and has no rightful monopoly on the definition and use of the word "literature." The point of designating it at all in these necessarily gauche terms is to evoke the limited reference of my object of study—while allowing its limits to be first surmised and then discerned in the course of discussion. In other words, I pretend neither to address all the forms of writing that do go by the name of literature, nor to define any use of the name as the more legitimate. It is also my contention, however, that works of literature, criticism, and theory recognized as belonging to this aesthetic tradition have historically exerted, and continue to exert, an undeniably formative influence on the idea of literature—within literary studies and without.

The literature in question then is this historically constituted category which, while grouping a range of practices under that name, produces the class

[9] John Searle for instance writes that, "roughly speaking, whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide," but "why we take the attitudes we do will of course be at least in part a function of the properties of the discourse and not entirely arbitrary" (59).

of objects and discourses we call literary. The nature and properties of what seems like this particularly contentious class of objects are a function of diverse conditions that shaped the category of the literary in its historical formation. This matrix includes the material circumstances—practices, networks, institutions, social structures—in which literary works have been produced and circulated. It includes, in addition, discourses *on* literature that play their part in forming and articulating ideas of the literary and exert their shaping influence on its products. If we are, however, to rub out the boundary separating literature as an object of discourse from discourses on the literary, then we ought also to pay attention to the essential discursive role of literary works themselves in shaping the category of literature—and informing discourses about it. This last dimension is the focus of this thesis.

I want to draw here four implications from this premise for the chapters to come. First, the thesis about literature's historical constitution informs the scope of this study. In the first chapter, William Wordsworth's poetic reflections on the useful outline a Romantic poetics at odds with the rhetorical paradigm of poetic language dominant until Wordsworth's time. The second chapter turns to Aesthetic criticism in the nineteenth century, addressing the contributions of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde to a self-consciously aesthetic tradition, and the Aesthetes' supposed alignment of art with the useless against all forms of utility. In chapter three, finally, Virginia Woolf's modernist writing implicates the fictional representation of life in negotiating a domain of ends-in-themselves. The study could of course have gone on, but it seemed appropriate, given a necessarily limited scope, to close it at the modernist moment taken to represent the apotheosis of an autonomous aesthetic. Still, the argument could perhaps be made that in the wake of this modernist moment the so-called aesthetic tradition finds its firmer province in the discourses of critical theory.

The second implication is methodological. To recognize a historically constituted discourse of literature does not mean the attempt to discover a stable

idea of the literary to which the individual works studied here conform. This study tacks rather in the opposite direction. When brought to bear on individual texts, the premise of a literary discourse in the process of constituting itself through its works means attending to the singular ways in which these negotiate, intervene in, and transform the parameters of a larger matrix. A key point of Rancière's historico-theoretical account, for instance, is that the idea of literature so constituted turns out to be rife with productive contradictions (*Mute Speech*; *Parole*).

Third, undoing the separation of literature from the discourses bearing on it implicates together literary and critical discourse and calls attention to the reciprocal relations between them. If critical discourses help to produce the properties of the literary—including its relation to the useful—then so do literary works themselves. I am most interested, in a sense, in literature as this peculiar class of object that has so much to say about itself, that puts questions to itself but also shapes the sorts of questions we are liable to put to it, in dialogue with the clusters of discourses that surround it. This entails a stronger recognition of literature's part in informing the critical discourses we now deploy to question its works: that literature may be historically generative of many of the problems that still occupy literary theory, and its works may yet have much to say about these problems—including the question of use.

This leads, lastly, to the implication that literature's relation to the useful may be sought on this constitutive level. If the problem of the useful appears to preoccupy poetico-aesthetic discourse and literary works, then it might be that works of literature help to define themselves and the literary in relation to the useful. This would not mean that individual works must determine their own uses and the parameters of what they have to say about the useful, but rather that literary texts are informed by, speak to, and contribute to shaping an idea of the literary in which use figures as a pointed question. Finally, it will be clear that

this question does not concern only the uses of literature but the category of the useful more generally.

Towards a poetics of use

Use is a relation: between ends taken to hold value and whatever is understood to serve or promote them. As such it presents an inherently unstable category. Judgments about the useful are regulated by conceptions—in practice often preconceptions weighed by a variety of discourses—of the kinds of ends that hold recognized value either in themselves or as intermediates to further ends. But they depend also on modes of linkage between phenomena that allow one object, act, or process to be seen as conducive to another. Given the goals of this study, it seems fitting to avoid any closer definition of use and allow instead context-specific understandings of the means-ends relation to emerge from the literary works examined. It should be possible, however, to give some indications upfront as to what this approach will imply in practice. As a relation that comprises both ends and means, use would seem as conceptually inescapable as value. But as a value term, use in practice is always deployed discursively, so that it makes sense to speak of a poetics of use.

The pragmatist's common-sense view of utility is instructive here. For to think of use simply in terms of this relation, encompassing ends and means and what comes between, leads to the pragmatist's conclusion that "all anybody ever does with anything is use it" (Rorty 93).[10] From this standpoint, the impermeable boundary between the aesthetic and the useful *tout court* simply deprives the aesthetic of all significance—whether in its own right or in relation to other things. So Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes:

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[10] Rorty's statement comes in response to Umberto Eco's wish to distinguish between interpreting a literary text and putting it to use.

> The recurrent impulse and effort to define aesthetic value by contradistinction to all forms of utility or as the negation of all other nameable sources of interest or forms of value—hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental, historical, ideological, and so forth—is, in effect, to define it out of existence. (33)

Instead, Herrnstein Smith sensibly suggests that what is at stake in such claims is really the opposition between something akin to immediate—direct, obvious—and deferred—remote, subtle—use values (127–28, 133).[11] Felski registers this duality in effect in her call to expand the "language of use" beyond "the push and pull of immediate needs and practical interests" and cognates that reek of "the bland boilerplate of bureaucrats and technocrats: functional, instrumental, utilitarian, efficient, serviceable, profitable" ("Introduction" v–vi). In principle, there should of course be nothing inherently objectionable even about this degraded pole of the binary. The upshot is that the powerfully suggestive language of the useful and its cognates, and the valuations that carry in their wake, need always to be anchored in the discourses where they find themselves deployed.

To take the example of utilitarianism, an obvious suspect that will figure in the chapters below: here is a theory of value that posits an ultimate, intrinsic end—happiness, or wellbeing, or some related term—and a consequentialist model assigning value to things insofar as they occasion this final good. Chapter one will examine Wordsworth's poetic response to a utilitarian political-economic discourse that he considers reductive. Wordsworth notably does not reject the useful as such but attempts to reclaim it on his terms. He targets instead the way in which political economy availed itself of a discourse of the useful and to what ends. His poetry not only chafes against a reductive purview of final

[11] Marxist use value may interestingly be said to invert the polarity of these terms by opposing genuine use to a thoroughly mediated exchange value.

goods but also—what will be the focus of the chapter—a logic of relation that purports to fix the causal path that leads from means to ends. More interesting, therefore, than a utilitarian analytic of value *in abstracto* is the way in which its language translates discursively in a given context.

My appeal to a poetics of use is therefore meant to highlight four dimensions to the means-ends relation. First, poetics refers to the sense outlined above that what is at stake is how the useful and related terms articulate themselves discursively in specific contexts. In practice, this means allowing the meanings and implications attached to the useful in the body of texts at hand to suggest the agenda for each of the chapters below. So chapter two reframes the Aesthetes' rejection of utility by placing the useful within a constellation of terms regarded with suspicion in their writings—which include nature, morality, society, the past, and things-as-they-are. The point is not, in other words, to draw on literary texts in order to illuminate an idea of use in the abstract. As a conceptually unstable and contingent relation of means and ends, the useful rather forms a question put to and specified by each (body of) text. Only through such specificity can literary works then be expected to speak to the larger question of use.

The second dimension implied in my use of poetics is as a principle of visibility. In this sense, poetics refers to how discourses and representations construct a sensible world: governing its topographies of the visible and the intelligible, carving up its boundaries, shaping ways of identifying and being affected by objects within it (see Rancière, *Politics* 7; *Aisthesis* ix–x). In chapter three, for instance, Virginia Woolf implicates fiction in the delineation of a sensible domain of ends. This is because distributions of the sensible, as Rancière calls them, imply distributions of value: the areas of experience that present themselves as *loci* where value may be realized. Once again to call on the pragmatists, John Dewey's term in his theory of valuation for continuously negotiated "ends-*in-view*" is nicely suggestive of the implications of labile

boundaries of the visible (Dewey 213, *passim*; emphasis added). What Dewey means primarily are of course the purposive and causal connotations of "in view," and the chain through which the "ends-in-view" in any situation may be the means to further ends: this leads into my next point.

Poetics thirdly refers to an ordering principle of objects in intelligible relations—a corollary to the idea of poetics as a principle of visibility. This includes the relations of means and ends and the causal rationalities that undergird them. So again, as Rancière argues, fictions for instance do not simply invent "imaginary worlds": they also construct modes of "coexistence, succession and causal linkage between events" which grant these the "characters of the possible, the real or the necessary" (*Lost Thread* xxxi; see also *Names* 7–8). This dimension of poetics will be in focus especially in Wordsworth's contestation of a reductive political-economic logic of means-ends relation.

This brings us in full circle to the idea that literature's relation to the useful may be sought on a constitutive level, as the relation of means and ends appears germane to the *poiesis* of forms of intelligibility. We might therefore reasonably expect what literary works have to say about use to seep into literature's discursive constitution. And it may be argued further that, following the loss of confidence in the rhetorical system that had strongly determined the modes of signification and efficacy of the arts of language, literary works become particularly apt to reflect on means-ends relations in unexpected ways. This is not to claim for literature an exclusive meta-value defining its proper purpose as a reflection on use. With Helen Small, I would claim that there is no final, "all-silencing justification to be had" for the functions of literature or its study, but any number of distinct engagements with questions of value and purpose (3). From this standpoint, I set out to examine what a selection of literary works has to tell us about the useful.

Scenes from the regime of literature

Recognizing that the properties of literature are not independent of the ideas we have about it implies eliding the distinction between literature as an object of discourse and the discourses that bear on it. On the one hand, critical and theoretical discourses therefore contribute and have contributed historically to shaping literature as a class and the properties of the objects that belong to it. On the other hand, this means recognizing also that literary works theorize themselves—and the world to which they belong. The "distinction between illustration and theory," as Jacques Rancière writes, loses meaning; the function of a "scene" drawn from the history of a discourse becomes more than illustrative (Rancière and Wójcik). The three chapters that follow theorize literature's relation to the useful through localized engagements at telling moments in its historical formation. The capacious, perhaps ponderous question about literature and use becomes "apt to particularise itself" in each chapter, tracing some of its articulations in literary works that frame and negotiate the question in distinctive ways.[12]

The study opens with the Wordsworth of 1798: at the point commonly identified with the beginnings of literary modernity in English-language writing, William Wordsworth pits poetic thought against a utilitarian political-economic logic of means-ends relations. It closes with Virginia Woolf at the modernist moment assumed to represent the historic apotheosis of aesthetic autonomy, while passing through the Aesthetic rejection of the useful in the second half of the nineteenth century. John Keats might have been the focus instead of Wordsworth, James Joyce instead of Woolf, Matthew Arnold in place of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. And the scope of inquiry could productively be extended further into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—to explore for instance

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[12] I am borrowing again from Woolf: "the vast, the general question . . . was apt to particularise itself at such moments" (*To the Lighthouse*, 133).

literary reflections on the useful in light of the academicization of literature and its study. This thesis does not promise a sweeping account of the question of literature and use but aims to render the question productive in engagement with individual bodies of literary works. The interest of its argument must ultimately reside in the products of these localized engagements and in the resonances that appear across them.

The first chapter begins with Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar," where the poet sets out to affirm the titular Beggar's services to a community against those who would deem the man useless. The poem represents a "foundational text" in an extended line of Wordsworth criticism (Lindstrom 90) that has positioned his work against the rising influence of utilitarian, political-economic, and rationalist discourses on the social in Britain at the time—allied with the expanding regulatory powers of capital and the state. "The Old Cumberland Beggar," in my reading, neither rejects utility altogether nor fails to do so, as some critics have argued, by reintroducing in another guise the utilitarian rationale. The poem disputes a logic of mastery that purports to fix in a determinate knowledge the pathways leading from causes to effect, means to ends. By contrast, the poem intimates plural, nonlinear, open-ended, and unpredictable causalities that multiply rather than subtract possible means-ends relations.

Wordsworth's poetic reflection on the means-ends relation connects to what I call a "causal poetics of thought" implicit in Jacques Rancière's account of the dissolution of the rhetorical paradigm of poetic language dominant up to Wordsworth's time. Seen in this light, "The Old Cumberland Beggar" anticipates in ways not previously described Wordsworth's major Romantic lyric "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and his grand project of *The Prelude*. A causal poetics thus appears central to the Wordsworthian idea of poetic thought as it transpires in these seminal works. But this poetic thought runs up against the problem of affirming the positively proliferating causal

potentials which it otherwise intimates negatively. The solution suggested in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," and which the later poems develop, is the self-verification of thought in the thought-object of the poem: both an embodiment of the relations (on) which it reflects, and in turn a possible object of thought. The upshot is that poetic thought calls for its continual justification through becoming an object of—and *prelude* to—further thought.

The second chapter turns to the Aesthetes of the nineteenth century who rejected the useful outright and allied art and literature squarely to the useless. I set out in this chapter to understand the parameters of this protest against utility as articulated by the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement. The useful turns out to figure in a constellation of other terms of suspicion that include nature, history, society, morality, and things-as-they-are. What these terms have in common is that they were perceived to threaten the subsumption of the individual in deterministic and conforming frameworks—in the context of the advancing tide of physical and human sciences, and an ascendant bourgeois culture that promised to conform the world to its image. The idea of the individual ties in with that of the new, as that which is not simply deducible from what has been, what already is, or prescriptions of what shall necessarily be. This leads me to reframe the Aesthetes' concern as with maintaining the possibility of *individuation*.

Aestheticism radicalizes the Romantic individual—creative, and radically at odds with their time and place—in two ways. First, it rejects any authentic nature that represents the source of the good and the true and embraces fully the virtues of an innovating artifice. Second, aestheticism makes a virtue out of the forces that threaten the Romantic individual, reconceiving these forces as conditions of possibility for processes of individuation. In Walter Pater's aesthetic philosophy, the individual and the *really new* arise from the novel and unique recombination of materials which the physical world, society, and history supply. To art is given the mission—either modest or heroic, depending on who

you ask—of proving the possibility of individuation through the creative arrangement of the rough materials of life, producing ever new and unforeseen values. Oscar Wilde puts criticism in the same relation *vis-à-vis* the materials of art: the critic recognizes the creative act and pays homage to it by using its products to generate something newer still. From this standpoint, aestheticism may be said to radicalize instead of abolishing use. It also extends the implications of Wordsworth's causal poetics, turning the ends and products of aesthetico-poetic processes into means to further and unforeseeable ends.

In the last chapter, a modernist writing of the ordinary modifies the story of modernism as the fulfilment of the Aesthetic break with the world and cult of "making new." Virginia Woolf ties the fictional representation of ordinary life to the negotiation of a domain of ends where value may be realized. Woolf joins a range of writers and thinkers in the early twentieth century who looked to reclaim everyday realities habitually eclipsed, relegated to a realm of triviality and inconsequence, or worse, sacrificed on the altar of "higher" pursuits. But the ordinary or the everyday turns out to constitute not a distinct sphere of existence and experience but an outlook on reality as ordinary through-and-through. The idea of the ordinary, promising the valorization of devalued life, augurs a continual potential for revaluations in an all-embracing but contingent and labile ordinariness.

Woolf committed her fiction to capturing an elusive life that could "enclose everything, everything" (*Writer's Diary* 23). Yet her writing is pervaded by the sense of this life as precisely that which cannot be enclosed. Keenly alive to the value-implications of the modes of visibility that fictions give to a world, Woolf persistently makes the case for revaluing devalued life by attending to the ostensibly insignificant details of the everyday. Yet her novel *Mrs Dalloway* suggests that a significance-investing attention to an all-embracing, undifferentiated ordinariness also risks lapsing into erasures of value and meaning in indifference, or paranoid forms of sense-making; and that the

inclusive potential of the ordinary may yet fall prey to totalizing frameworks and unacknowledged exclusions. In the face of such risks Woolf commits her poetics to the necessarily bounded, context-specific reclamation of *an* ordinary life, which nevertheless remains porous to an expansive ordinariness exceeding those bounds. In theorizing the ordinary, Woolf's attention to layered reconfigurations of the sensible and the significant proves more versatile than obdurate dichotomies of repetition and rupture, the familiar and the new, perpetuation and destabilization, and similar alls or nothings associated with modernism and become staples of our critical vocabulary.

For the contemporaries of Pater and Wilde in the century that awoke to the historical sense, inheritance could appear a fatal shroud and a prophecy of doom (Pater, *Plato* 63; Wilde, *Intentions* 173). Yet Pater and Wilde came to see in the contradictory cultural materials of the past and present conditions of possibility. If, as I have suggested, literary history has ceded a complicated legacy to our own critical discourses, could genealogizing efforts as well turn up some usable materials in answer to the continuing critical *agon* with the uses of literature? The postscript to this thesis will sketch some preliminary reflections on how the chapters on Wordsworth, the Aesthetes, and Woolf relate to persistent questions for the practice of literary criticism. Wordsworth's poetry sheds light on the typical critical impasse whereby negative critique by its own logic seemingly fails to offer any alternative. The Aesthetes' rejection of the useful in the conceptual struggle for individuation prefigures the critical mode which continually censures the replication of a fallen world and places a premium on tokens of rupture with it. Woolf's significance-investing attention to the insignificant details of ordinary life anticipates the problem of "paranoid" critique while also blurring the boundary between the familiar and the new.

Chapter one

Wordsworth, utility, and the causal poetics of thought

> A movement of thought, which is the very converse of mathematical or demonstrative reasoning.
>
> Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*

William Wordsworth's poetry broods over the useful. In *The Prelude*, the poet "deem[s] not profitless these fleeting moods," and alternately evokes himself as "A poet only to myself, to men / Useless" (*Thirteen-Book Prelude* II.331, X.199–200). The programmatic "Prospectus" to *The Recluse* pleads: "Be not this labor useless" (*Poetical Works* 6). Wordsworth's characteristic litotes, affirming even through double negation ("not profitless," "not useless"), bespeak the poet's preoccupation. Elsewhere, the Wordsworthian speaker allies his poetic activity to marginal or forlorn characters apparently in similar need of affirmation or defense: figures like the Female Vagrant, Simon Lee, the Leech-gatherer—or the Old Cumberland Beggar.

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"But deem not this man useless.——Statesmen!" (l. 67).[1] The poet in "The Old Cumberland Beggar: A Description" mounts a defense of his titular character specifically on the terrain of utility. He proceeds to rebuke social schemers devising to sweep away the nuisance of vagrancy, and throughout the rest of the poem he attempts a justification of the Old Beggar's services to a community. In laying out his arguments the poet advances a mode of thinking about the useful which stands at odds with the Statesmen's implied logic governing the latter's judgment of the Beggar as useless. My aim in what follows is not then to read the Beggar as a surrogate for the poet affirming himself and poetry by proxy.[2] Rather, it is to examine the parameters of the counter-discourse on means and ends which the poem sets in play. This, in turn, will shed light on the affinity of the wandering Beggar as a figure from the perspective of Wordsworth's poetic thought on the useful. The poem, in short, embodies a poetic thought marked immanently by nonlinear, open-ended, indeterminate, and thus unmasterable causalities.

Why "The Old Cumberland Beggar"? As Eric Lindstrom remarks, the poem is a "foundational text for a certain major strain of Wordsworth commentary" (90). This critical strain concerns the relation of Wordsworth's poetry to the kindred discourses of utilitarianism and political economy. Does the poem's anti-utilitarian argument offer a radical reflection on unproductivity (Dick 373) or an expression of conservative Burkean anti-rationalism (J. K. Chandler 84–89)? Does it oppose to a crude materialistic economism the merits of sympathetic feeling (Bromwich 24), the affirmation of spiritual value (Harrison, *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 153), or ethical duty towards otherness

[1] All references to "The Old Cumberland Beggar" will be given as line numbers and refer to the poem as printed in Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* 228–34.

[2] A corpus of criticism centering on Wordsworth's marginal figures has often noted their function as analogues for the poet or poetry (See Harrison, "Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'" 25). Some critics like Celeste Langan have censured the assimilation as mystifying (17, 24–25).

(Potkay 33)? Does the poem live up to its supposed anti-utilitarianism or reintroduce through the back door a utilitarian estimation of the Beggar's worth (Koch 23–24)? Does Wordsworth grant the Beggar a "moral life" by recognizing his irreducible humanity (Bailey 163), or does he humanize poet and reader at the cost of objectifying the Beggar (Jarvis 207–08)? Should we read the poet's plea for the Beggar's freedom in opposition to a growing carceral and supervisory social regime (Bailey), or as recruiting poetry to a romanticized liberal "simulation of freedom" (Langan 17)? Is Wordsworth ultimately concerned with the fate of poetry in the balance of an ascendant reign of the quantifiable and the measurable (Dick 365; Harrison, "Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'" 25)?

"The Old Cumberland Beggar" is interesting from the perspective of this thesis because the poem's argument, as I argue, does not dismiss the useful, but imagines alternative criteria for making judgments about it. Therefore if the poem, as Lindstrom concludes, "constructs a space free of direct instrumentality" (112), I am asking whether some form of positive content might emerge as the converse to this negative space: a productive counterpart to what Alex J. Dick calls the poem's "unproductive labors" (365). The poem's anti-utilitarian argument, in my reading, contests not only the ends on which basis judgments are made about the useful, but more fundamentally an entire logic of relation of means to ends, causes to effects. The poem, by this token, intimates a sense of nonlinear, open-endedness, and indeterminate relations which multiply rather than subtract causal and means-ends possibilities. Such a causal logic, Jacques Rancière's work suggests, in fact belongs to a certain idea of poetic thought itself underwriting a modern regime of poetic language—in direct contrast to a classicist ideal of mastery over language's causal powers. Wordsworth's poem thus joins an idle errancy of its own to that of its titular Beggar as it reflects—and reflects on—errant and proliferating pathways from means to ends.

That “The Old Cumberland Beggar” poses such far-reaching questions is borne out by the fact that this modest poem prefigures, in both its form and its concerns, Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”—widely acknowledged as an archetype of the Romantic and modern lyric, and in turn a kind of miniature of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s *epos* of “the growth of a poet’s mind.” Both “Lines” and *The Prelude*, which I discuss at the end of this chapter, attempt to trace sinuous paths leading from inauspicious sources to unforeseen goods. But in these poems, the terrain of causal relations appears to have shifted firmly inward to within the peripeteia, the twists and turns of poetic thought itself. My readings thus ultimately allow a new interpretation of the subjective or inward turn of Wordsworth’s poetry, as a function of its reflection on means and ends. As in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” poetic thought comes to embody in its own movements the shape of tortuous and unpredictable causalities. But a turn inward further provides the apparent solution to an impasse which “The Old Cumberland Beggar” exposes, at the point when the negativity of indeterminate and unpredictable causalities needs to be converted into positively proliferating relations of ends to means. The thought-poem turns itself thus into the product which confirms the process, the destination that justifies the ways from means to ends. But in a further twist outward again, poetic thought thus objectified asks to be verified—(at)*tested*—through becoming object of and prelude to further thought. *The Prelude* turns poetic crisis (the question “Was is for this?” which launches the poem) into the masterwork of the adventures of poetic thought on its way to finding itself—at the cost perhaps of sending poetry into perpetual if also ever productive crisis.

“The Old Cumberland Beggar,” or how (not) to deem useful

If “The Old Cumberland Beggar” is a “foundational text” for a “major strain of Wordsworth commentary” (Lindstrom 90), Alex J. Dick captures some of the

driving ideas of this critical line when he describes the poem as “a metacritical reflection on the limits of theoretical speculation,” presenting a “critical foil to much of economic thought” (Dick 368–69). My aim here essentially is to extend the implications of this claim, and I can set the stage by unpacking three elements within it. First is that the poem constitutes a form of thought (“reflection”), a characterization which as we shall see is itself nontrivial. Second is the idea of a poetic thought operating at the limits of thought (“metacritical reflection”: thought critically reflecting on itself). And this liminality makes productive certain failures of thought—in this case the failure of any definitive (ac)count of the Beggar’s uses—while simultaneously exposing the failures of other forms of thought insensible to their limits. Poetic thought by this token critically reflects *other* forms of thought (another sense of “metacritical reflection”). The third key idea, finally, is that this other thought has to do with economic thought and kindred discourses of Wordsworth’s time.

Critics have noted as a hallmark of Wordsworth’s poetry of the 1790s its dogged eschewal of clear-cut explanations, whether of a moral, metaphysical, political, or economic order, especially in its narratives and descriptions about the poor or otherwise marginal figures.[3] For Toby R. Benis, even in poems like “The Old Cumberland Beggar” where “Wordsworth does provide a clear line of interpretation, the line of argument tends to disagree with the likely terms of debate” (“Poverty” 186–7). Although the poem clearly does provide a line of argument, just how clear it is, *pace* Benis, is open to debate. Its ambiguity, in a sense, that is the failure of a “clear line of interpretation,” is what can unsettle

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[3] For Heather Glen the *Lyrical Ballads* “refuse[] to offer a clear-cut moral directive” (244). For Janet Todd they turn the “stock characters of sentiment” into “enigmatic” figures that do not “yield clear moral generalizations” (143). Quentin Bailey, more recently, has called the “failure to offer a coherent explanation” a Wordsworthian “technique” (10, 9, 139–40). Adam Potkay has also stressed the “recalcitrance” and “irreducibility” of Wordsworth’s objects—human and nonhuman—to “human purposes,” to “narrative,” to “any narrow definition” (71–75). These are current concerns within the so-called “ethical turn” in Wordsworth criticism; see for instance Toby R. Benis’ review of Potkay and Bailey (“Wordsworth’s Ethics”).

the ground of discussion—while also generating contradictions to which I will attend later in the chapter. At the same time, the poet meets the implied terms of debate on this point at least: he addresses the Beggar's utility instead of dismissing the category—on ethical grounds, say—as a relevant consideration altogether. It remains that the poem's argument is best approached by attempting first briefly to reconstruct the "likely terms of debate."

I follow a host of critics who like Alex J. Dick have turned to political economy and utilitarian rationality as foils to Wordsworth's thinking. I cover this ground briefly here in order to emphasize two key aspects within this context: a reductive value discourse, and a logic of containment purporting to fix all relevant parts and relations in a positive knowledge. By contrast, "The Old Cumberland Beggar" envisages means-ends relations which forestall such mastery. My concern ultimately will lie with the idea of poetic thought that underwrites such a reading. Thus I move from the foil of utilitarian political economy to the generality of a poetic thought invested in the nonlinearity, open-endedness, and indeterminacy of causal relations.

In the *Fenwick Notes* which Wordsworth dictated in 1843, we read that "The Old Cumberland Beggar" was written at a time when "The political economists were . . . beginning their war upon mendicity in all its forms & by implication, if not directly, on Alms-giving also" (*Fenwick Notes* 56).[4] The poem itself, composed in early 1798, is explicit in pointing to contemporary contexts and debates on social policy, through its reference to so-called "houses of industry" (l. 172) as

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[4] Wariness is of course due when considering the author's comments on his own work, especially when these are so removed in time—close to half a century in this case—and when one is dealing with a writer whose views shifted notably between the time of his early output and old age. Wordsworth's case is particularly interesting, and problematic in many ways, as suggested for instance by Stephen Gill's discussion of the historical and biographical reliability of *The Prelude* in the introduction to his major biography (*William Wordsworth* 1–10).

well as its direct address to "Statesmen." Details of this context and discourse concerning the poor, vagrants, and other marginal figures in society have been well established and described by scholars.[5] The repercussions of the American and then the French wars, bad harvests and the effects of nascent industrialization contributed to increased economic instability in the late eighteenth century. Unemployment and rising prices exacerbated the plight of England's poor, which became very much on the public agenda in the 1790s. But attempts to provide relief, newfangled or based in the existing Poor Law, were criticized for fostering bad behavior. In response, Parliament affirmed the criminalization of "disruptive activities associated with the poor such as vagrancy (and by implication, begging) and poaching" (Benis, "Poverty" 183). Political economists weighed in on the debate, most prominently Thomas Malthus who argued in his *First Essay on Population* that such arrangements not only incentivized idleness but also subsidized population increase among the poor, thereby "creat[ing] the poor which they maintain" (83).

Wordsworth's argument does, in some respects, meet the "Statesmen's" implied position directly. Against the double charge that beggars and vagrants are not only "useless" but a nuisance, parts of the poem seem designed to suggest that this old beggar in the worst case is quite harmless. This can be seen in the Beggar's characterization as "helpless" (l. 25), going on his habitual route with eyes turned on the ground (l. 45) and feet "scarcely . . . disturb[ing] the summer dust" (ll. 59–60), drawing no complaints from villagers or even the "cottage

[5] To list but a few of the available monographs with differing emphases: Quentin Bailey in *Wordsworth's Vagrants* provides a thick contextualization with reference to law-and-order institutions and discourse in 1790s Britain. Toby R. Benis' *Romanticism on the Road* offers a cultural history of vagrancy which situates Wordsworth's poetry with respect to the reigning political dogmas in England following the French Revolution. Celeste Langan in *Romantic Vagrancy* understands Wordsworth's poetry in relation an emergent liberalism and its attendant political and economic conceptions of the social world. Gary Lee Harrison compellingly maps the ideological coordinates that framed discourse on poverty in late eighteenth-century Britain in *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse*. A short and useful summary is given by Benis in "Poverty and Crime."

curs" (l. 61). Wordsworth's portrayal of this "aged" Beggar, emphatically feeble and unobtrusive in his idleness, may be understood against the background of legal statutes that lumped together the adjectives "idle and disorderly" in order to designate—and criminalize—undesirables seen as in need of institutional control (See Bailey 149). Harrison points out that the characterization of the Beggar accords with an eighteenth-century idea of "model paupers—deferent, grateful . . . and nonthreatening" (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 152).[6] The Beggar's old age, feebleness, and solitariness would, incidentally, exclude him from Malthus's claim about alms and poor relief subsidizing population increase.[7]

But after the description of the Beggar in the first third of the poem, the poet proceeds to offer a whole series of claims for the advantages of the Beggar's presence in a community. Mark Koch is right to stress the poet's assent to "defending the mendicant on the grounds of his utility," but this does not thereby entrap him within "utilitarian logic" and "the discourse of the political economists": the concession may be less and more than Koch implies (18, 23–24). The poem at least purports to offer an alternative mode of thinking about the useful to a crude utilitarian and political-economic logic, by setting out to probe uses which a too-narrow conception leaves out. This has led some critics to read the poem as "an argument for the uses of compassion that sets out to beat the utilitarians at their own game" (Jacobus, *Tradition* 182). For Gary Harrison the poem attempts to show "contra Bentham and his followers . . . that the beggar's

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[6] In his chapter on "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "The Moral Economy of Charity," Harrison links conventions of aesthetic representation to prevailing notions about the deserving and undeserving poor, which concern values of industry and independence together with silence and deference. See especially pp. 143–49.

[7] This is not to suggest that Wordsworth had read Malthus when he composed "The Old Cumberland Beggar": a complete version of the poem dates from between January and March 1798 (*Lyrical Ballads* 228), whereas the first edition of Malthus's *Essay* was only published in the summer of that year. Even so, Malthus's essay can be said to reflect key values marking an influential strand of social discourse, while rationalizing these through a scientific economic theory. For an extended discussion on Malthusian thought as a context for Wordsworth's poem, see D. Chandler.

use must be measured not in economic, but in spiritual terms" (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 153). Certainly, the poet issues a challenge to the likely terms of debate in decrying the "House, *misnamed* of industry" (l. 172, emphasis added), also known as the workhouse: an institution for poor relief where the idle and destitute were to be *put to use*. Disputing the false application of names—a fundamental critical gesture—the poet calls attention to what they conceal.[8]

On the one hand, the name misrepresents the reality of the workhouse (captivity, forced labor, dire conditions, social control). But the poem by the same token also contests reductive assumptions about what constitutes industry, against what Gary Harrison documents as a moralistic fixation on the "industriousness of the poor" based in a "virtue of labor" universalized into the supreme and essential source of value (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 153, 34). The argument about the Old Beggar's usefulness, on the whole, takes issue with the meaning and restricted application of terms like utility, industry, or production. What is at issue for Wordsworth is the conflation of the useful, and the value judgments that its identification entails, with a certain sphere of activity to the detriment of others. Confusing the useful with a narrow conception of production, such as the workhouse production of commercial goods, leads to the uncritical valuation of certain forms of activity while overlooking both their damage to individuals and communities and the benefits which other forms of activity—or simply of being—might afford.

Malthus, to go back to political economy, claimed that provisions allotted to the dependent poor improved the conditions of "a part of society that cannot in general be considered as the most valuable part," at the expense of "more industrious and more worthy members" (84). Given natural and technical limits on the production and supply of goods, Malthus argues, allocating provisions to

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[8] Samantha Webb has commented on this point, writing that "as Wordsworth's refusal to accept the nomenclature of the 'House, misnamed of industry' illustrates, the poet and the 'statesmen' are dealers in language" (29): language is a ground of contestation.

those who cannot afford them constitutes artificial tampering with the distribution: it further restricts the supply for everyone else, inflates prices, and deflates the value of labor, thus hurting other workers and pulling them into dependency. The receiver of parish assistance may therefore be considered "as an enemy to all his fellow-labourers" (86). The logic applies to organized forms of poor relief as well as to the alms given to the Old Beggar (in money or provisions, as Wordsworth's preamble mentions). In contrast to this Malthusian picture of competitive enmity, Wordsworth would emphasize the desire of even "the poorest poor" to perform acts of charity, and the satisfaction which they receive from such acts (ll. 133–61).

Note Malthus's characterization above of the dependent poor as a less "valuable part" of society compared to the "more industrious" and therefore "more worthy." Such conflation of industry and worth, reducing value to a narrow notion of economically productive activity, is a crucial component of this eighteenth-century discourse, as Harrison shows (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 34). Wordsworth, in attempting to provide alternative norms for judging the usefulness of the Old Beggar, takes issue with precisely this logic. He does so not by denying industriousness or usefulness as values, but by disputing their false application as labels and seeking a more expansive understanding of them.[9]

As Mark Koch puts it, when Wordsworth insists on a "pulse of good . . . Inseparably link'd" to all "created things" (ll. 73–9), the "quality of 'good' that the poet attributes to all things is in fact a quality of usefulness": Wordsworth "acknowledges usefulness as a measure of worth" and "turns toward an explication of the beggar's value and utility within the community" (Koch 24). The argument would seem straightforward enough: while not economically productive in the obvious sense, the Beggar's presence and activity are useful in

[9] For Harrison, "Wordsworth does not attempt by any means to deconstruct the oppositions between industry and idleness, nor does he escape from assigning the highest value to the industrious poor" (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 104).

other ways to the community—in the spirit of "Man shall not live by bread alone." But beyond an effort to make count the Beggar's overlooked services, the poem will suggest that these in fact elude accounting. This is not only because they do not lend themselves to a measured count (as suggested for instance in Harrison's distinction of spiritual and economic terms). Something more than the evidently unquantifiable nature of the ends served by the Beggar's presence marks the difference of the poem's account from a vulgar economic or utilitarian calculus: the poem suggests an alternative logic of means-ends *relations*. In the poem, the precise nature of the Beggar's useful services and the mechanisms through which he renders them remain riddled with uncertainty. Alex J. Dick deduces from this uncertainty an alliance of the "unproductive labors" of poet and Beggar, as the factor which upsets "the limit of what economics considers productive and therefore worthwhile" (368). I would further argue that the poem's insistent multiplication and entanglement of means-ends relations suggests a productive flipside to the negative critique of economistic containment and mastery, without eliding the ambiguities that persist in the poem's account of means and ends.

As I will be suggesting later on, a close look into "The Old Cumberland Beggar" will leave us with contradictions which raise the question whether Wordsworth's argument ultimately represents another example of a typical critical impasse: a challenge to reductive assumptions that fails to articulate a coherent positive alternative. The short answer, I think, is yes. But the long answer will lead to insights that connect the argument about the Old Beggar to questions at the heart of Romantic poetics. To get there, I will first examine the kinds of ends privileged in the poem's argument about the Beggar's usefulness, in implied opposition to narrowly economic production, and how the poem goes about its account of the relations binding together means and ends, causes and effects. Describing the poem's scheme of ends and means-ends relations will then lead

me to questions of poetics, namely the status of poetic language as a form of thought.

My procedure will be to lay out an initial reading of the poem and then to complicate it by raising questions about the poetic conditions that enable it. This reading pits the poem's mode of reasoning about the Beggar's usefulness against a rigid and reductive logic associated with utilitarian thinking and political economy. The operative oppositions here are between the reductive and the expansive, closure and open-endedness, determinacy and indeterminacy, linearity and non-linear relations, singularity and polyvalence, control and freedom, mastery and errancy. Such a reading turns out to rely on a formalist idea: poetic language must embody a shape or turn of thought, to bear in its form the mark of proliferating relations which the poem can neither pin down nor exhaust in positive knowledge. The poem's formal vagrancies, we might say, at the same time presents an analogue to the poem's subject, the Old Beggar and his "uses." An economistic "Statemen's" logic dismisses as useless processes that escape its bounded reckoning, and wields its "broom" (l. 69) to sweep them out of sight or capture their energies in the supervised confines of the workhouse. To the poet, by contrast, the Beggar's aimless career itself presents a principle of utility and the image of an alternative mode of causal valency.

The reading that I offer shares coordinates with a body of Wordsworth criticism which has looked to the figure of the vagrant as a privileged avatar for thinking through questions of freedom.[10] For critics like Quentin Bailey, Wordsworth's representations deftly avoid stock narratives in order to defend vagrants against the stereotypes of conforming, exploitative, and carceral discourses. For others like Celeste Langan, on the other hand—following the influential historicist critics of the 1980s—Wordsworth recruits his vagrants to an escapist, ideological simulation of freedom that masks the real conditions of

[10] It is enough to survey again the titles cited in note 5 of this chapter to get a sense of the centrality of vagrancy in Wordsworth criticism.

a nascent liberal order in British industrial, capitalist modernity. Others still, like Toby R. Benis and Gary Lee Harrison, taking a middle position of sorts, call attention to limited or "marginal gains" (Benis, *Romanticism*) achieved in Wordsworth's portrayal of the vagrant poor, within a conflicted relation to the ideological parameters of the time. My aim here is not to commend or censure Wordsworth's treatment or exploitation of the theme of vagrancy per se. I propose to show how in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" the question ties in with a reasoning on means-ends relations, which will also appear central in the later poems which do not treat vagrancy per se.

Anti-utilitarian thought, or Wordsworth's vague rant

The poet of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," then, imagines alternative ends by which to judge the usefulness of the Old Beggar, setting out to detail the latter's "no vulgar service[s]" (l. 124) to a community. The Beggar elicits or provides an outlet for charitable acts and sentiments; he represents a living "record" (l. 81) of charitable deeds and communal relations; his presence sustains a "kindly mood" (l. 84); he disposes others "insensibly" to "virtue and true goodness" (l. 97); as a "monitor" (l. 115) he allows others to be cognizant of their own advantages; he induces worthy feelings and thoughts (l. 106); he inspires the "lofty minds" of philosopher-poets (ll. 97–108).

Something more than the evidently unquantifiable nature of these services, and the difficulty of their assimilation to a standard conception of economic activity, marks the difference of the poem's account from a vulgar economic-utilitarian calculus. The Beggar would seem productive not so much in spite of his idleness and inactivity but by virtue of them. His activity consists mainly in drifting on his rounds, stopping and starting haphazardly, randomly running into villagers and passers-through. He serves others by receiving from them, or through his sheer presence in their ken. Even when he drops and scatters some

of his crumbs of meal for the birds to peck, which has been read as repeating and passing on something of the charity he has received, the gesture seems involuntary or automatic.

The resonances of the Beggar's inactivity are far-reaching, and their extent will be clearer below in relation to a Romantic conception of poetic thought opposed to an active principle of poetic speech. For now, the main thing is to note that the Beggar's passive influence renders it difficult to identify clear and distinct lines of cause and effect. In fact, my summary list above of the Beggar's services understates the entanglement and blurring of relations on the whole in the poem's account. And the interconnection and mutual dependence of its terms prevent distinction between means and ends. Is the "kindly mood," for instance, a value in itself, or insofar as it conduces to charitable action? Sustained by the Beggar's living "record" of "Past deeds," this mood appears at once as origin and result of "acts of love," a phrase which itself elides feeling and action (ll. 81–92). The poet does not stop there but proceeds to multiply and modify terms and relations, as if to remedy ambiguity or supplement a lack. He soon refigures the function of simple "record" into the "silent monitor" which, though still passively, admonishes others to look into themselves. Yet this again is submitted to revision: "and perchance / Though he to no one give the fortitude / And circumspection needful to preserve / His present blessings . . . / . . . he, at least, / And 'tis no vulgar service, makes them felt" (ll. 119–24).

The reservation attached finally to the Beggar's active influence is critical. Any causal connections, the closer we look, between the Beggar and his reported services, are only ever so obliquely submitted on his behalf. "Habit," the "mild necessity of use," is what "compels" the villagers to those acts of love when they encounter the Beggar—for "reason" to sanction them *ex post facto* (ll. 90–93). It is the villagers that "behold" in the Beggar a record and a monitor (ll. 81, 114), or find in him an outlet for their natural charity (ll. 135–46). "Lofty minds" only "perchance" glean from him some "mild touch" of inspiration (ll. 97–108). The

Beggar everywhere is passive, an inert(ial) figure drifting into plural relations by virtue of his sheer presence rather than any active causal powers.

Tangled means-ends relations, and the nebulous causal valency of the Beggar, both make their mark in the poem's overall tentative tenor. Modifiers pepper the poet's argumentation ("perchance," ll. 103, 119; "must needs," l. 116; "I believe," l. 125), and an abiding sense of provisionality is felt in the turns of the poem's blank verse, almost nervously aggregating reasons, continually modifying, revising, supplementing. The poet's account remains as if necessarily incomplete. I will return to these self-revisionary qualities of the poem—which are more familiar to criticism in the "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." I want to note here that they can be seen to serve the poet's argument in its bid to count uses that escape delimitation, as a reflection of the entanglement and complexity of causal relations, and in suggesting an incomplete, tentative (ac)count that may ever be expanded, there being still further possibilities of ends and causalities which the poem does not attempt to exhaust.

The poet's hesitancy thus becomes recruitable to the poem as "metacritical reflection," as Alex J. Dick calls it, distinguishing its discourse of means and ends from a logic of containment and mastery associated with utilitarian political economy. If political economy, as Philip Connell maintains, represented "the dominant form of social analysis" in Wordsworth's time (Connell 6), it was in Clifford Siskin's words as "a primary site for the totalizing and rationalizing of the social," by way of "writing systems that presented society as functioning as a coherent System" (Siskin 163). System, as a knowledge *form*, could then portion phenomena along defined "boundaries," and fix relations "of parts and wholes," following a "logic of containment" (Siskin 29–30, 37). Political economy, as the specialized knowledge system of value and production, accordingly purports to isolate all relevant parts of productive processes within the bounds that it observes. What falls outside the latter becomes invisible,

inconsequential, or aberrant. This is why what Alex J. Dick terms political economy's "systematic enclosure" banishes "unproductivity" as "that which must be excluded from the system to be a functioning whole corresponding to a theoretical ideal" (367–68, 372).[11]

Metaphors of enclosure and containment have extended resonance for the topics raised by "The Old Cumberland Beggar." Contextualizing critical accounts of Wordsworth's poetry refer relatedly to various forms of state, institutional, and private powers which operated strategically and discursively to control populations, resources, and social and national spaces, through surveillance, policing, land enclosure, "social reform" schemes, and other efforts to orchestrate social life according to a rationalized order. Marginals seen to have no defined place in this order were criminalized through vagrancy statutes and subjected, for instance, to physical containment as in the workhouse. This has led Quentin Bailey to refer alike to Benthamite reform schemes and state apparatuses of surveillance, census, and law and order as "totalizing systems" to which Wordsworth's sympathetic representations of vagrant characters stand in direct opposition (Bailey 11).

The Old Cumberland Beggar then is precisely the kind of figure made to appear as a redundancy to be discarded, or aberration to be coopted, from the standpoint of a closed and abstract discourse that puts a premium on utility and production. The poet seeks, in the first instance, to *make count* what another economy of ends and means occludes. Moreover by shying away ultimately from any definitive tally of the Beggar's services—the Beggar's "record" is not the

[11] System itself proves, as Siskin shows, an adaptable form extending past rigid containment and schematic reduction. Marjorie Levinson, censuring the abuse of "system" as a categorical term of opprobrium, sees in (Romantic) poetic thought a thinking of systems as "models of complexity, fluidity, self-revision, and internal, diversely scaled, and self-interactive determination: in essence, the antithesis of the anomaly-eating monster" conjured by some commentators (133). My attempt to describe an active reconfiguration of means-ends relations, opposed to "systematic enclosure" but not stopping at negation, joins Levinson on this point. Note the emphasis in Levinson's description namely on a complexity of *relations* and *movements* of thought.

accountant's ledger—the poem runs counter to any "methodological economy" and presents a "reminder of the impossibility of tracing or knowing the cycle" of productivity (Dick 395). Thereby the poem's reasoning runs counter to a regime of knowledge, and of visibility, which reduces the useful and productive to a narrow quantifiable sphere at the expense of all that eludes the economist's attention, interest, or measuring rod.[12]

But if ends prove impossible to count fully this is also because means-ends relations interlace, multiply, overflow the poet's account. And again the poem reflects this by blurring the causal chains through which the Beggar affords his services, by retaining the revisions and uncertainties of its reasoning on means and ends instead of resolving or ironing them out—keeping on hand within the end-product the multiple options explored, subjected to doubt, modified. The reading that I have laid out rallies the vagrant Beggar, on behalf of whom the poet refuses the confinement of the workhouse, in a Wordsworthian "vague rant" opposed to economists' and Statesmen's discourses of epistemological and institutional mastery. On the one hand, this means that the poem defines its counter-discourse negatively, against the claim to isolate and fix means and ends in a positive and assertive knowledge or system. At the same time, while critically reflecting the limitations of one form of thought, poetic thought makes productive its own dwelling at the limits of thought. The positive converse to this negativity, as we shall see, becomes thought's gesture toward a different knowledge of means-ends relations: the causal pathways which the Beggar may tread cannot be fixed because they are plural and proliferating, vagrant like the Beggar himself.

[12] Richard Adelman and Catherine Packham interestingly hold up the "invisible hand" as a paradoxical "marker of how, at its very outset, the problematic of representation, of visibility and invisibility, lay at the heart of economic discourse" (12). Economic science does not simply reduce its object to its visible, quantifiable parts, but as a statistical science it is invested in revealing or positing hidden processes that shape visible phenomena. Its preoccupation with the visible and countable by this token appears itself selective.

Shaky grounds and privileged ends: towards poetic thought

The reading above should not, I believe, appear very surprising in itself from a critical standpoint. Its main claim to distinction—from existing criticism of the poem and from a recognizable, if highly transposable, critical formula—lies in its central gambit that there is a positive converse to the virtue it makes of ignorance: that the recognition of uncertain and unmasterable means-ends relations leads not to subtraction but multiplication. But this leaves much to be said (the merit, we might say, of a so-termed "problem poem"). To halt interpretation at this point—however open-ended and productive its promise—would still be to accept a kind of facile certainty. For one thing, as I discuss below, the poet for all his tergiversations signals a clear investment in proving for his subject the quality of good that is a quality of usefulness (Koch 24), and his apparent efforts to guarantee uncertain means-ends relations produce further problems which should not be elided. For another, my reading raises the question of the conception of poetic thought which subtends it, allowing the poem to be read less by the straightforward argumentation it appears to offer initially, than by the twists and turns of a peculiar mode of thought that it intimates: this will be my ultimate focus. It so happens that the poet's efforts to ascertain utility lead him explicitly to foreground poetic thought, even within his economy of means and ends. What is surprising about the poem is that it thereby places the question of means and ends at the heart of poetics, in a way that prefigures some of Wordsworth's most emblematic Romantic poetry.

These concerns make it essential to reiterate and make explicit the interpretive procedures that my reading has employed up to this point. "The Old Cumberland Beggar," setting out to extend the category of utility to include unrecognized goods, embraces the difficulty of accounting positively for means-ends relations and recruits it into its aims: judgments about the useful elude the economist's reductive view of immediately visible, containable, priceable ends,

products, or effects. Such a solution involves relativizing the poem's speech. It reflects back on the status of the poem's argument, making less important what it says positively about the Beggar and his usefulness, to the advantage of what it does not say, fails to say, implies it might not be able to say. Words, however, as Frank Kermode put it, "are so used to being discursive that it is almost impossible to stop them discoursing" (Kermode 136). Thus far the poet's explicit claims clued us in initially to his main concerns. Certain ambiguities in the terms of his argument then led our attention to a shape of discourse, which then modified its sense with broad and important bearing on the poem's thematics. Now I will turn back again to certain elements of the poem's argument that further complicate the picture, and these will lead again to territory that sheds light on the relativization of poetic speech to which I have referred.

A crude question: if the Beggar's influence eludes definite (ac)count, how then can the poet maintain that this influence tends toward the good? The suspicion lingers whether the best this negativity might offer is a holding off of judgment, the poet caught between the double negative—"deem not" (l. 67)—and the desire to affirm a "pulse of good" (l. 77). I have already discussed the indeterminate terms, the fits and starts, the qualifications and revisions that couch the speaker's claims as to the Beggar's capacity to effect anything at all. To these I now return, and set them alongside the poet's sporadically solemn pronouncements: "'Tis Nature's law . . ." (l. 73), "No—man is dear to man" (l. 140), "we have all of us one human heart" (l. 146). That such self-assured, categorical claims jar with the poet's circumspection elsewhere does not negate but accentuates the overall effect: categorical assurance ever undercut by self-revisionary doubt. But such appeals to metaphysical laws and truths, jarring also with the poet's attempts at naturalistic and psychologistic explanation, betoken at the same time the difficulties of guaranteeing and legitimating the paths from means to ends which he sets out to trace.

"'Tis Nature's law," Wordsworth's speaker proclaims:

That none, the meanest of created things,
Of forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good, a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul to every mode of being
Inseparably linked.

(ll. 73–79)

Therefore no human can be considered useless or discardable. Setting aside the possibly unsavory association of the Beggar with "vile" forms of life, the appeal to "Nature," organicist and metaphysical, explains neither any functions that the Beggar serves nor how exactly he serves them. It does not recur in the argument except—in a more perverse light—at the very end of the poem: "As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd, / So in the eye of Nature let him die" (ll. 188–89). The order of nature justifies the life of the Beggar: that he happens to and continues to be. It also determines when he must cease to be. It is a form of automatic justification: that which is, must be, until it is not.

Wordsworth offers up "habit," the "mild necessity of use," as the mechanism hitching past, present, and future "offices of charity" and securing their association with the Beggar. Though "reason" would deem such deeds right and good after the fact (ll. 90–94), it is the force of habit that ensures their occurrence "Where'er the aged Beggar takes his rounds." The appeal to habit is similar to the previous one to Nature: it relies on a standing or customary order of an organic community as a guarantor of the sought-after connection between cause and effect. The role of habit is even undermined in a later part of the argument, where the speaker devalues the simple observance of customary morality and "inevitable charities" and demands something more (ll. 125–46). At this point the Beggar is said to afford the villagers the possibility of acting on

their human need to be charitable. Again, the origin of the desirable effects is moved outside of the Beggar. The usefulness of the Beggar is grounded in unknown origins in the distant past or an inherently charitable (human and nonhuman) Nature.

Tellingly the argument closes on the poor villager who adds, to the moral and psychological rewards of satisfying her innate charity, her “hope in heav’n” (ll. 148–54). The “benignant law of heaven” (l. 160) together with heavenly reward promise to fix both origin and ultimate destination in the causal chain guaranteeing the Beggar’s place in a scheme of means and ends. This appeal is only the most blatant, then, in a series of reachings after metaphysical grounding which clash with the naturalistic and psychologistic tenor elsewhere of the poem’s tracing of the Beggar’s utilities. Although appearing, furthermore, to provide grounding and cement, these elements, pointing to receding roots and eschatological destinations, rather open out the causal structure at both ends.

Are we then left with the poet’s bare word? We are, but in a peculiar sense. This is because a privileged element appears to emerge in the poem’s economy of means and ends, that promises a way out of the impasse and a sealing of the circle: that is poetic thought itself, and its corollary the poem-as-thought.

I have noted the poem’s attenuation of the Beggar’s active influence, consonant with the overall characteristic passivity of his representation. The Beggar, as mentioned, is only obliquely associated with action, which seems to originate somewhere else: the villagers behold him on his way and it is “habit” that compels them to act (ll. 90–92). In his capacity as “record,” however, the Beggar “keeps alive”—what nevertheless must be a pre-existing—“kindly mood” (ll. 83–84). Again as a “silent monitor” the Beggar, though he might not incite to action, “at least” makes something “felt” (ll. 115, 119–22). This much for the villagers, whereas in a passage at the center of the poem the poet credits the Beggar for “That first mild touch of sympathy and thought” (l. 106) sparked

in "lofty minds / And meditative" (ll. 98–99). I want to get to this cameo of poetic thought in the poem's scheme of ends and means. First, however, a word about feeling and sympathy as important categories in Wordsworth criticism, and my focus on thought as the more general category of interest here.

A considerable body of critical work has dealt with the relation of Wordsworth's poetry to discourses about feeling. The cultural and intellectual context of Wordsworth's time involved an "upward evaluation of emotion" in the form of a "cult of sentiment" (Bell 2) just as theories of sympathy had become prominent in moral philosophy.[13] For Michael Bell, an "investigation of the moral life of feelings" was a key constituent in Wordsworth's poetic (98, 94). And in the twentieth century a traditional line of Wordsworth criticism looked to the category of feeling as a connecting power linking poet and reader sympathetically to other persons and things.[14] Already, however, by James Averill's *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (1980), we see alongside the power of sympathetic response a critical interest in the distance and detachment of "the Wordsworthian spectator" (9). And later critics would more and more call attention to staged failures of sympathetic feeling in Wordsworth's writing, while critics participating in the so-called "ethical turn" of literary criticism have located the peculiar moral significance of his poetry precisely in its resistance to sympathetic identification.[15]

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[13] As Michelle Levy has it, "Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) represents the culmination of more than a century of philosophical writing about sympathy, and indeed the apotheosis of sympathy as a driving force in moral theory" (545).

[14] Robert Mayo, placing *Lyrical Ballads* within contemporary poetic trends, takes for granted that the poems offer up marginal, destitute, or forlorn characters for sympathetic identification (see for instance pp. 495–96). John Beer speaks of a "vibrant response of the heart" to outward landscapes, animate or inanimate, leading to "an enlarged sympathy, which will come to include human society as well" (33–34).

[15] On the failures of humanitarian sympathy, including in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," see for instance Jarvis or Levy. For criticism that locates the significance of Wordsworth's poetry of encounter in its resistance to sympathy, see Bailey, King, Yousef, or Spargo. Gary Harrison comparably to James Averill takes a middle road, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of sympathy in Wordsworth, while also noting the effects of spectatorial distance (*Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* 54–55).

Critics have also been interested in the relation of feeling to thought in Wordsworth. For James Chandler, "any full account" of feeling in Wordsworth's poetry "must engage with the question of how feeling and thought are interconnected" (J. Chandler 166–67). Adam Smith's classic formulation of moral sympathy, it is worth recalling, considers moral feeling to be mediated by the faculty of imagination.[16] Wordsworth in the manifesto-like "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* also maintains: "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts" (*Prose Works* 146); while feeling too becomes an object of and a spur to reflection or meditation, as captured in Wordsworth's much-quoted definition of poetry's "origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity [sic]" (177). In "The Old Cumberland Beggar," in addition to the "mild touch" that joins "sympathy and thought," feeling and thought become indistinguishable when the Beggar's influence finally is summed up in the phrase "pensive thoughts" (l. 163).

Granted substantial ambiguity in the poem when it comes to the categories of feeling and thought, my purposes will require neither the rigorous distinction of the two nor any insistence that feeling for Wordsworth must therefore be considered a subsidiary of thought. I would suggest, however, that critical attempts to define or elucidate these terms, for instance with reference to theories of moral sympathy, can elide interesting ambiguities. "Ethical turn" critics, by contrast, have in the past two decades taken an opposite line, arguing that Wordsworth's poetics insistently confronts us with recalcitrant alterity that defies the possibility of sympathetic identification: therein lies its ethical significance. While such a critical stance puts ambiguities and contradictions back in focus instead of resolving them, it can sometimes appear to halt thought at their threshold, or to convert the recognition of thought's limits all too

[16] The opening of his chapter "Of Sympathy" in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* reads: "our senses will never inform us of what [our brother] suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations" (11).

automatically into an ethical good. I would venture, at any rate, wishing to abide a while longer with the ambiguities of Wordsworth's poetic thought, that critical focus on feeling and sympathy, whether in the positive or the negative vein, has certainly meant lesser attention to the category of "thought" itself, at least in the case of "The Old Cumberland Beggar."

"Still let him prompt," the poet entreats in conclusion to his discourse on the Beggar's utility, "the unletter'd Villagers / To tender offices and pensive thoughts" (ll. 162–63). The pensive thought of the lettered poet, however, seems to make a privileged place for itself in the economy of means and ends that it lays out. Having appeared first in the function of witness ("I saw an aged Beggar in my walk," l. 1), and then as public orator (addressing "Statesmen" in the imperative mood, l. 67), later on he makes his cameo in the capacity of thinker:

> Some there are,
> By their good works exalted, lofty minds
> And meditative, authors of delight
> And happiness, which to the end of time
> Will live, and spread, and kindle: minds like these
> In childhood, from this solitary Being,
> This helpless wanderer, have perchance receiv'd, . . .
> That first mild touch of sympathy and thought.
> (ll. 96–106)

If decorum counsels indirection, unmistakably these are minds among which the poet would count his own, or hope to be counted. Being himself acquainted as a child with this particular wanderer ("Him from my childhood have I known," l. 24), he attributes to the Beggar—if only "perchance"—his own early gleam of

pensive thought.[17] What may be affirmed with more immediate evidence, however, is the meditative thought which has taken the Beggar presented to us for its subject, and is embodied in the poem before us. The dim original spark is doubled in the present, and in the *presence*, of the poem itself. This apparent facticity of the thought-poem as material evidence of thought's productive encounter with its subject will be key.

The poet, then, inserts himself into a relationship with the Beggar under the sign of "mind" —the purview of which includes, incidentally, sympathy and thought. It is interesting that we never in fact read of the poet partaking in the "tender offices" elicited from the villagers. Does he omit such details out of a sense of modesty? That may be, but he is decidedly less modest about that other kind of "good works, " which appear to be called forth particularly from him and his class: that is the fruit of meditative thought, poems such as this, and others perhaps to come. The category of thought then gains in resonance, as it makes its way into the poet's economy of the useful and the good, while pointing to itself as properly poetic activity—an association which, as we shall see, is nonobvious.

These resonances find curious culmination in that laden phrase "pensive thoughts," with which the poet concludes his summing up of the Beggar's influence. Although "pensive" blends a note of feeling with thought, the locution nevertheless still reads tautologically something like "thoughtful thoughts."[18] On the one hand, this overdetermination supercharges the category of thought as of especial importance. Yet on the other, overdetermination betrays indeterminacy. The adjective does not so much specify the noun as unspecify it. Redundant

[17] Interestingly a later version of the poem would increase the distance by a modicum, reading: "*even such mind*, / In childhood, from this solitary Being, / *Or from like wanderer, haply have received*" (emphasis added on variations). Wordsworth's *Fenwick* note would say of the Beggar: "Observed & with great benefit to my heart when I was a child" (148).

[18] "pensive, adj. 1. Sorrowfully thoughtful; gloomy, sad, melancholy. 2. More generally: full of thought, meditative, reflective." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/140265. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

excess signals lack or demurral from defining a content for the thought induced by the Beggar. "Pensive thought" is about as nebulous a phrase as the "still, sad music of humanity" in the "Lines," singled out by Adam Potkay as the most enigmatic in Wordsworth's corpus (98). It leaves thought emphatically vague, without any specific content, except insofar as the poem itself is thought: albeit thought that turns in on itself, blurs reasons and conclusions, causes and effects, means and ends—and remains in this case, as we shall see later on, conflicted about its own status as thought.

It would seem, then, that an aspect of this thought involves reflection on, and testimony to, its own origination and process, as in the poem's explicit tracing of itself to the Beggar who moves the poet to thought—dimly in a distant past, more certainly in a(n) (iterable) present. Poetic thought's reflection on itself was, to be sure, part of what made possible the initial reading which I offered, locating meaning in the shape and process of the thought-poem. At the same time, thought's concern with its origination and process, and with its relation to its object, links it to the question of means and ends, causes and effects, and the paths that separate and join them. What is more, if poetic thought finds its original spark only dimly attributable to the Beggar, its doubling in the present and presence of the poem at hand presents a less mistakable connection: that of thought to its object of thought. The thought-poem by this token appears to count itself among the goods—if it is (a) good—which it traces to the Beggar. In other words, the poem presents itself as a piece of material evidence for the defense—proving, to put it crudely, one use at least of the Beggar—while at the same time promising, through the fact of its presence before us as a material good, to seal the circle of causal indeterminacy.

Once again to recapitulate and reflect on underlying assumptions. "The Old Cumberland Beggar," setting out to defend its titular character against the charge of uselessness, advances a series of claims about services the Beggar provides

which escape the economist's or Stateman's crude calculations of productivity and utility. But at the same time, the poet's discourse dramatizes its own inability or its unwillingness to pronounce the last word on the ends that the Beggar's existence serves, or the precise mechanisms through which it can serve them. In this way, according to the reading presented, the poem provides a counter-discourse to epistemological and practical mastery over means and ends, causes and effects, and what Alex J. Dick calls the "cycle" of production (395). On the flip side unmasterability leads to the proliferation rather than subtraction of causal valencies, of possible means-ends relations.

When the poet, however, attempts in places to legitimate and ground the uncertain means-ends relations in which the Beggar may be imbricated, to guarantee their tendency toward a good, he rather opens out the chain at both ends and accentuates the poem's uncertainties and self-revisions. And the Beggar comes off at best, like the "pensive thoughts" he is said to afford, as an empty vessel, itself lacking any specific content, waiting to be made use of, loaded with uses derived from ulterior, indeterminate sources. Yet at the same time, the poetic thought that emerges embraces those uncertainties and self-revisionary movements. At once over- and underdetermined, laden and privileged through association with the poet's own activity, the thought-poem hints at itself as one product that can justify in part the ways from means to ends: retaining in its own form the logic of unpinnable relations, then offering itself as exhibit and material product of those unpredictable processes.

What does it mean, however, for the poem to stand as a form of thought, and what allows it to enact such a metacritical, self-reflexive operation? I have so far taken my cue from the poet's self-presentation in the poem as a figure of thought, as though there were a natural propriety between poetry and thought, and the poem as a species of thought-object. It is time now to shift the discussion to the level of poetics, to attend to the status of poetic thought and its import for the matter at hand. Poetry's relation to thought may appear straightforward: the

poem as a product of thought; as in itself a form of thought in writing; in turn, being thus embodied, as a possible object of further thought. Yet Jacques Rancière's work suggests that a modern regime of poetics, which starts to take root around Wordsworth's time, grounds itself in a specific and transformed relation of thought to poetic language. Even more interestingly, this mode of relation turns out itself to rest on a transformed causality. The modern poetics which Rancière describes thus resonates significantly with a Wordsworthian poetic thought invested in the indeterminacy, nonlinearity, and open-endedness of causal relations. Indeed it posits these qualities as the principle of the thought-poem's mode of existence and efficacy.

The causal poetics of thought: from *active speech* to *thought-writing*

The implication of poetics in a model of causal relations goes back to Aristotelian poetics and classical rhetoric, which—in a specific context of their reading and transmission—were foundational to the classicist literary cultures of England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and against which Wordsworth set himself in open reaction.[19] For Jacques Rancière the displacement of a classicist system of poetics at this juncture founds a new paradigm, which transforms the status of poetic language. This transformation, Rancière's account implies, rests on a transformed conception of the causality assumed to govern the poem internally as well as its outward mode of being in the world. At the heart of the classicist system is what Rancière calls a model of "active speech," based in the rhetorical powers of language to instruct and delight, to convey an idea or produce a definite effect, and where poetic language

[19] Wordsworth's commitment of poetry to the "real language of men" for instance in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, as with his emphasis on the natural and on "spontaneous overflow," was in many ways aimed against the legacy of Augustan neoclassicism epitomized for Wordsworth by Alexander Pope (*Prose Works* 138, 150–52, 178, 187–88). See Robert J. Griffin's *Wordsworth's Pope* for an extended discussion of how Wordsworth's writing positions British Romanticism *vis-à-vis* the figure of Pope.

is thereby subordinate to thought's designs. By contrast, the new paradigm institutes an idea of poetic language as coincident with thought and released from prior design. The causal valencies of poetic language, in this mode, are paradoxically multiplied. In what follows I will briefly rehearse key aspects of Rancière's account in order to home in on the causal implications of the modern poetics he describes, before connecting them back to theorizations of Romantic and Wordsworthian poetics and poetic language.

Rancière describes the modern poetic regime as founded in the "term-for-term reversal" of four key principles which governed the classicist paradigm previously dominant in (Western) European letters (Rancière, *Mute Speech* 50). The "principle of fiction" defines for poetic representation a distinct structure of rationality. The "generic principle" upholds a hierarchy of poetic genres defined by their proper subjects. The "principle of decorum" fixes to each class of subject an ideal code of language and conduct. The fourth principle, finally, upholds an ideal of "active speech." My focus will be on the first and the last of these, which together encapsulate the causal stakes in the status of poetic language in the modern regime described by Rancière.[20]

"Fiction," writes Rancière, refers not to "the invention of imaginary worlds" but to a "structure of rationality" (*Lost Thread* xxxi). This understanding introduces a causal idea to the internal logic of the poem, since the classicist principle of "fiction" defines the poem as an "arrangement of actions," according to the strict and necessary "concatenation" of "causes and effects" (*Edges* 1–4; *Mute Speech* 43, 60, 118). Dramatic writing is exemplary in Rancière's account

[20] The four principles are introduced in *Mute Speech*, pp. 43–49. The question of causal rationality in Rancière's work on poetics is largely eclipsed in criticism by that of the aesthetic processes of political subjectivation. The second and third principles identified by Rancière have tended to receive most critical attention because they speak most directly to those concerns. Rancière has developed on the centrality of causal rationality to poetics in *The Edges of Fiction* and *The Lost Thread*, but here I tease out unexplored implications especially from his earlier *Mute Speech*. It is worth noting that, in "The Politics of the Spider" (the article adapted later as a chapter in *The Lost Thread*), Rancière contrasts Keats to Wordsworth on the basis of a subjectivation that is itself function of inhabiting causal rationalities (242, 245).

in *Mute Speech*, given the privileged status of the stage in his primarily French sources, as in Aristotelian poetics—hence the nomenclature "fiction." But the causal rationality in question finds an analogue in the inferential structure of argumentative reasoning—the strict and necessary progression of reasons and conclusions—at play (and in question) in a poem like "The Old Cumberland Beggar."[21] The transposability, in fact, of the structure of causality Rancière calls "fiction" is such that the latter migrates to the explanatory models of social scientific discourses (thus including Wordsworth's target political economy) just as it breaks down as a principle of poetic representation (*Edges* 5).

Second, the principle of active speech introduces causation at the level of the poetic utterance itself. The ideal of active speech refers to a rhetorical paradigm of language—so central to English letters up to Wordsworth's time. Drama again provides in Rancière's sources a privileged site for the "staging of the act of speech" and its rhetorical power (*Mute Speech* 47–48). The stage here not only provides an ideal site for the "affirmation of speech as action," but for bringing together author, character, and ideal audience, who have in common that their "true business" is the art of "speaking worthily," being "men [less often women] who act and who act through speech" (47). Rhetoric, then, is more than the figures of speech and compositional techniques employed in impressive or persuasive linguistic performance. It refers to the "manner of living" of a class of subjects who come for "instruction in speaking worthily" and see their active ethos ideally represented for them on the stage. In contrast to such an audience of *quality*, Voltaire would lament the degeneration of theater-goers in his time into a nondescript mass, merely a "certain number of young men and young women" (*Mute Speech* 47–48).[22]

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[21] An "entire system of signification," Rancière writes elsewhere, depends on its "modes of causality and inference" (*Flesh* 148).

[22] In England John Dryden's and others' attempts failed to produce a reformed classicist drama with the peremptory status of the French. But English literary culture had no less an elaborate system of poetic genres, likewise based in Aristotelianism and classicist models, in increased

Based in an "ideal of efficacious speech," poetry in this understanding draws from "the scene of oratory" the "values that define the power of poetic speech" (*Mute Speech* 48). Rhetoric posits the controlled deployment of language in order to produce determinate effects—to persuade to an opinion, induce an action, elicit an emotion, or simply convey an idea. "Action" in the strict sense, Rancière explains, signifies "not the simple expenditure of energy" but "the use of the appropriate means to ends" (Rancière, "Politics" 242).[23] The rhetorical power of language, in other words, is in effect a causal one. And the perfection of rhetoric as an art and a craft of language thus presupposes—at least as a regulative ideal—the possibility of mastery over its causal powers. This mastery in turn will presuppose the determinacy of causal chains of transmission.

The rhetorical model thus makes explicit the properties of the causal poetics governing poetic language and its representations. The "horizontal axis of the message transmitted to a determinate auditor" is also the causal path of the definite effect produced by agent on patient, the end effected through appropriate means (*Mute Speech* 63). The chain of transmission is linear. It begins and ends at fixed, known points: "Every word has a well-determined point of origin and point of destination" (102). Its path, in principle, is a knowable path. Linearity, closure, and determinacy thus form the conditions for active speech as the possibility of mastery over the causal powers of language, just as they define the strict concatenation of cause and effect in the rational structure of the poem and its representations. And this duality itself goes back to Aristotle's foundational *Rhetoric*: the rhetorician who masters the means of persuasion commands the

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dialogue with French classicism after 1660, and reaching an apogee with the Augustan generation. The supremacy of rhetoric in this tradition, the understanding of poetic language as rhetorical performance and display, enshrines the principles Rancière describes.

[23] Hence also the general implications of the principle of "fiction" which defines the poem as a representation of "action."

inferential structure of argument as the verisimilar arrangement of premises and deductions—and masters also the rational structure of her subject of discourse.[24]

The idea of active speech forms, then, the bridge between the causal logic which the principle of fiction embeds internally within poetic representation, and the ideal causality that governs poetic utterance itself and its mode of being in the world. Together the two principles posit the possibility of mastery over the causality of language: both to grasp subjects of discourse or representation within a rational causal structure and to wield the power of language to effect definite ends. The possibility of this mastery presumes linear, bounded, and determinate causal relations—a logic which found an antithesis in "The Old Cumberland Beggar." For Rancière that which displaces the ideal of active speech, to found a new poetics in the principle of "writing," is the unmastered errancy of the mute letter (*Mute Speech* 50).

Writing for Rancière in fact names none other than an impossibility of the mastery of active speech: "the specific mode of visibility and availability of the written letter overturns any relation by which a discourse might legitimately belong to the person who utters it, to whom it is addressed, or to the way in which it should be received" (*Mute Speech* 93–94). Writing is "orphaned utterance," "not directed by a father who is capable of guiding it in a legitimate way to where it can bear fruit." This is the meaning of Rancière's eponymous "mute speech": speech deprived of "the power of living speech, that is, the speech of the master."

The antithesis to the active power of speech, however, is not a dead-end of causality: it implies not the subtraction but the multiplication of causal valencies. The paradox of mute speech is that its muteness renders it all "too talkative": it "drifts all over the place . . . incapable of distinguishing whom it should or should [not] address" (*Mute Speech* 93–94). The "tracing of the mute

[24] See Kennedy I.2: 1355a–b, 1356b. The analogic rational structure of argument and of action links in this sense Aristotelean rhetoric and poetics.

letter" stands "in strict opposition" to the figure of lines leading "quite precisely, and for a single purpose," from defined "origin" to known "destination" (104). Its paths bifurcate unpredictably, proliferate to no determinate end. Causation and means-ends relations are as much at issue as communication: poetic writing running adrift becomes "available for any use," able to be "appropriated to anybody's ends" (87, 94).[25] Of course, language shaken loose from the authority of its emitter is a commonplace of twentieth-century critical theory. But in tracing this condition to the foundation of a modern poetic regime, Rancière also foregrounds its sense as the dissipation of causal mastery over poetic language and over the causal structure of its representations.

The causal poetics of the errancy of the mute letter strikingly evokes the Wordsworthian alliance to the wandering Beggar. The muteness and inertia of the Beggar wandering adrift are those of the mute letter, paradoxically multiplying their valencies. The poet unable or unwilling to fix relations in a definitive (ac)count moreover reflects in the structure of his poem their nonlinearity, open-endedness, and indeterminacy. Adopting the form of reasoned argument, based in the logical progression of reasons and inferences, the poem presents a sinuous course of thought, riddled with stops and starts, repetitions, modifications, and revisions, leaving off its catalogue of the Beggar's uses in provisionality and inconclusion. Setting out, at the same time, in the oratorical posture of a public address to "Statesmen," what effects does the poet's rhetorical performance purport to produce—to what opinion persuade, what action induce, or what message convey? From the "Statesmen" the poet urges suspension of judgment ("deem not") and a foregoing of action ("Let him pass"); from the rest of us, nothing seemingly more definite than a "pensive thought" to match—or extend from—his own. And if the poem advances a distinctive logic of means-ends relations it does so more through a movement of thought enacted than a

[25] Translation modified to match more closely the original French (*Parole* 82).

message conveyed. This leads me finally to the question of the relation of poetic thought to language.

The regime of writing for Rancière entails "a different idea of the relation between thought and matter" (*Mute Speech* 43). Whereas the paradigm of active speech stipulates an "intellectual part of art" (thought) that "commands its material part" (language), by contrast the mute letter brings about their fusion, "the necessary union between speech and thought" (49, 57). John Dryden's "orthodox" view of the "primacy of 'thought'" accorded the latter logical precedence over language: "having found ('invented') the 'thought,' the poet is faced with the problem of expressing it" (Fujimura 195–96). This orthodoxy refers to the classical "poetico-rhetorical" scheme, as Rancière puts it, of *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* (*Mute Speech* 145).[26] Thought in this scheme provides the idea which language puts into words, and constitutes the intellectual activity that submits this poetic expression to its design (meaning both structure and purpose).

The "edifice" of invention-disposition-elocution "collapse[s]" in the regime of writing onto "the single level of *elocutio*" (145). This does not mean that thought disappears from the equation, with the suppression of the intellectual parts of invention and disposition. Rather, the union of speech and thought renders thought coterminous with the "material part" (49), that is language, in a sort of *thought-writing* immanent in "the new object of the poem" (43). New possibilities open for poetic language as it escapes its subservience, no longer bound to prior idea or rhetorical design: the thought-poem "presents, on its very body, the physiognomy of what it says" (63). Here is another meaning of the

[26] "The first happiness of the Poet's imagination," writes Dryden, "is properly Invention, or finding of the thought; the second is Fancy, or the variation, driving or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject; the third is Elocution, or the Art of clothing and adorning that thought so found and varied, in apt, significant and sounding words" (Dryden 98).

paradoxical inertia of "mute speech": its power is a function of its qualities of being, of embodiment, at the expense of the saying and doing of active speech.

This relation of poetic thought to inert materiality finds peculiar expression in a trope of the "petrification" of literary language, linking poetry to the "muteness of stone," which Rancière traces in his sources.[27] In fact, the affinity of poetic thought to inert materiality, and to stone especially, reverberates in Wordsworth's poetry and has been noted from Wordsworth's early reception. Shelley's satire "Peter Bell the Third," for instance, attributes to the early Wordsworth a power of "Wakening a sort of thought" in the world of "things" and of "sense" (Shelley 353). Walter Pater noted that Wordsworth's poetry, "raising nature to the level of human thought," conversely "subdues" the latter to "the level of nature" (*Essays* 123). More recently Paul Fry has located in a commitment to the "minerality of being" the core of Wordsworthian ontology, whereas Adam Potkay has discussed Wordsworth's "Ethics of Things" (Fry 10; Potkay 72–89). And Mary Jacobus has likened thinking "in and through lyric poetry" to thinking "in and through things," characterizing poetic language itself following Wordsworth as "a mute insensate thing" (*Romantic Things* 3, 63, 117). This kinship of poetic thought to the inertness of matter, for Jacobus as for Rancière, paradoxically multiplies the powers of both: the "silence of mute insensate things" turns out to be "not silent at all but vocal."

The paradox, again, informs the affinity of Wordsworth's thought of means-ends relations to the passive inertia of his wandering Beggar. William Hazlitt, dubbing Wordsworth the "prince of poetical idlers, and the patron of the philosophy of indolence," was also early in noting the virtual nonhumanity of Wordsworth's characters (qtd in Simpson 33; Fry 6). And critics have continued to note the approximation of Wordsworth's figures to natural objects or parts of the landscape in which they are described—Robin Jarvis likening the Beggar to

[27] See *Mute Speech* 41–43, 59–60, 75, 82.

"the stone pile on which he is seated" (Jarvis 208), whereas for David Sampson the old man "vacillates between the animate and the inanimate" (Sampson 46). Passivity and inertness now appear as the conditions for a paradoxical valency, an (in)animacy that multiplies the mute letter's potentialities as opposed to the restricted, unidirectional power of active speech.

Stone and rock, as Jacobus writes, are key emblems in Wordsworth of the thing-like materiality of poetry, and their appearance invariably leads into "the realm of the epitaphic" (*Romantic Things* 151). Some remarks on epitaphic inscription will help conclude this part of the discussion and anticipate the next, since inscription constitutes a privileged site for the embodiment of poetic thought in dual alliance with inert materiality and the errancy of writing. Geoffrey Hartman's classic essay identified inscription as the prototype for "a principal form of the Romantic and modern lyric" ("Wordsworth, Inscriptions" 399–401). In Wordsworth, Hartman argued, inscription—poetry staging the surface on which it is ostensibly inscribed—is generalized into a form of *viva voce* meditation incorporating the process of inscribing a scene in a virtual present. Poetic language becomes coterminous with a process of thought, just as this thought fuses itself to the materiality of writing and its media. For Andrew Bennett this materiality conditions the detachability of inscription (Bennett 85–89), and Jacobus links rock and book in a "trope for the power of the printed page" through which "the poem leaps from reader to reader, crossing space and time"—again joining Rancière's errancy of writing (*Romantic Things* 153–54).[28]

To these Romantic origins Hartman traces the modern dictum that "a poem should not mean but be": to the "history" of a poetics that attempts to "absorb 'truth' into the texture of the lyric" ("Wordsworth, Inscription" 407). Indeed it is such absorption that enables the reading of Wordsworth's meta-reflection on means and ends as presenting in Rancière's words "on its very body," a

[28] See also Jonathan Culler on the "iterable *now* of lyric enunciation" (289).

"physiognomy" of their relations (*Mute Speech* 63). Frank Kermode described in modern poetry—from Romantic to modernist—a desire to have words stand with "the same sort of physical presence 'as a piece of string'" (Kermode 161). If, for Paul Fry, the "designification of material things" signals "avoidance of thought and its estrangements"(Fry 159, 181), this is best understood in terms of that commanding relationship of thought to language: the "mereness" of objects, as Hartman responds, need not "favor non-meaning" ("Paul Fry's *Wordsworth*" 9, 18). Inert presence then betokens severing from the mastery of active speech, allowing the poem to "live, and spread, and kindle" ("The Old Cumberland Beggar," l. 103), along plural, indeterminate paths.[29] Simultaneously poetic thought is primed to model in its very contours this causal logic.

Poetry thus reflects on means-ends relations by turning a model of causality into the immanent property of poetic thought. The "'truth'" of the "piece of the string," however, is also that of being—to borrow Fry's words—"just there" (201). This *thereness* leads to another function of poetic thought's turn inward: the verification of indeterminate causality in and through the facticity of poetic thought embodied in the object of the poem.

Begging questions: back to the "problem poem"

Critics have, as noted, on the one hand remarked on the Old Cumberland Beggar's passivity, his inertia, his lack of human traits, as though he were almost a natural part of the landscape. On the other hand, the Beggar has often been read as a figure for poetry. The foregoing analysis has given us a basis for connecting these two aspects: the affinity of the poet for the figure of the inertial, wandering Beggar emerges as of a piece with the affinity of a poetic thought to the paradoxical valency of the mute letter, which itself assimilates the qualities of

[29] This passage from the poem incidentally grants poetic thought the longevity of the apparently ageless Beggar, as well as an errant life of its own.

things. The possibility of the Beggar to figure poetry becomes precisely a function of his thing-like status, and the basis of the assimilation has very much to do with the causalities in which the poem is invested and (on) which it is reflecting.

But now that we have in mind two opposing modes of the causality of poetic language, that of active speech and that of thought-writing, we may return to "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and in fact find elements of the poem itself pointing in both directions, mounting an interesting tension between the two modes. Frank Kermode continues to remark that however modern poets wished to silence words, the problem remained that words "are so used to being discursive that it is almost impossible to stop them discoursing" (161). Kermode's words may well be read as an expression of the verbosity of mute speech according to Rancière. But Kermode meant also to say that one mode of being and operation of poetic language does not completely suppress another.[30] In our context this would mean that poetic language could still appear to discourse as active speech: after all, if words can say and do many things, surely they might also sometimes appear to say one thing, or one thing at a time.

In this section, I will suggest that part of the "problem" of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" is imputable to an apparent tension between the modes of active speech and of thought-writing. This tension correlates with the one noted early in this chapter, between the poem's investment in asserting a quality of usefulness while undermining a position of authoritative knowledge of causalities. I will move to argue in conclusion that Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," and in maximal form *The*

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[30] Rancière's history of the regimes of art does not suppose complete rupture but only the dominance of one regime or other, within a sphere (loosely defined and with permeable boundaries) of discourse and practice. Though the aesthetic regime taking root does, in Rancière's account, produce a new class of aesthetic objects, even modifies the perception of older works of writing and the arts through the new categories of literature and art in the singular, it cannot be seen to banish older models completely, not even from modern aesthetic practices themselves (See Rancière, *Mute Speech* 8–9).

Prelude extend the "solution" intimated in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," whereby poetic thought at once absorbs causalities into its own texture and offers itself as an embodied means for their verification.

First to rehearse some terms of the controversy around the poem, to show how they do raise the question of the status of poetic speech, and the relation between form and content. For Paul Fry, Wordsworth's recognition of the "ontic unity of all things, including human things" is a "radical" vision of metaphysical "equality" (6), while Wordsworth's ethical vision for Potkay and Bailey acknowledges the alterity of things, human and nonhuman, irreducible to human exploitation (Potkay 71–72; Bailey 89). These readings, however, come in response to a line of criticism, traceable also to the earliest reception of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," disturbed by a perceived objectification and dehumanization in Wordsworth's characters. Charles Lamb, for instance, thought that the poem surreptitiously substitutes the poet's or reader's desires for the beggar's own (209). For Edward E. Bostetter in the twentieth century, the poem callously instrumentalized its titular character (55). Robin Jarvis has provided perhaps the most concentrated critique in this line, warning against the impulse to "humaniz[e] the speaker (and implied reader) of the poem at the cost of de-humanizing the beggar himself," and against the "physical and mental neutralization of the beggar" requisite to set him up as "a proper *object for contemplation*" (207, 208, emphasis added). To regard the Beggar as a figure for poetry, in this context, would itself seem a problematic abstraction from real material, physical, and mental conditions, in the service of a writerly fixation on writing, or that of "lofty minds / And meditative" on their own thought.

What can redeem the poem, from another perspective, is allowing it to stand as an alternative to a whole "habit of thought" of which economic-utilitarian discourse forms a part (Lindstrom 92), and which would subject beggar and poem alike to reductive logics of utility. Then the poem bears also

on conditions and discourses affecting the Old Beggar, without disjunction between the latter and poetic concerns; rather putting poetic thought in the Beggar's service than the other way around. It is on such a basis that Alex J. Dick joins "poetry, poverty, and charity," as "unproductive labors" on behalf of which the poem undermines a broad logic of "systematic enclosure" (367, 369, 366, 372). This way of reading, as I pointed out earlier, involves relativizing the poem's language: including the objectionable claims seen by some critics as callously objectifying, but also its whole series of positive arguments for the Beggar's usefulness. In fact, Alex J. Dick goes so far in this relativization as to read "The Old Cumberland Beggar" as an outright if "atypical . . . dramatic monologue," putting on display with "pervasive irony and self-reflexivity" the flawed discourse of . . . "an economist" (369)! Though my initial reading did not venture so far, it nevertheless rested on a similar relativization, such that the poem speaks of the useful less through its catalogue of the Beggar's services than by intimating the incompleteness of its account of means-ends relations that are proliferating and indeterminate.

And yet, as we have seen, a problem remained. We have allied the poem globally with a negatively defined habit of thought, opposed to a positivist utilitarian value discourse, all the while acceding on some level to the poem's positive claims about the Beggar's value, in order to rally the poem locally to his defense. Critics have, as we have also seen, sometimes made the problem go away through dismissing considerations of utility: in some cases halting at a negative critique of instrumental reason, in others locating some positive value outside of use, to render futile the question of means and ends. By contrast, recognition of a mode of poetic thought which absorbs into its own properties a different conception of means-ends relations, opposed to a narrow instrumentality but only to embrace plural, indeterminate, and open-ended causalities, has given added reason not to dismiss use-relations altogether, and a conceptual way out of the impasse between negativity and positivity. To

appreciate how this kind of internalization is perfected in later poems by Wordsworth, we must first notice the remaining conflicts in "The Old Cumberland Beggar."

Charles Lamb complained to Wordsworth that "The Old Cumberland Beggar" read too much like "instructions . . . too direct and like a lecture," and expounded on the fault in poets who presume to "teach you how to think upon [a] subject" (209). John Keats a generation later would generalize this critical temper: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if you do not agree, seems to put its hands in its breeches pocket" (58). Stephen Gill's response to these and later critiques of Wordsworth's didactic tendencies (or, for some, occasional lapses) still raises interesting points for our context. Gill concludes that the critical distinction when it comes to didacticism in poetry is really between poems—including "The Old Cumberland Beggar"—which lay bare their design and offer their data to our judgment, and others that seem to impart judgments without offering data of sufficient interest ("Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket" 400). In a sense we carry further Gill's "Attitude to the Didactic Poet"—to borrow the second part of his essay's title—when our judgment relativizes the poet's speech and takes the shape of its reasoning as primary data. Still, elements in the poetry raised for early and later readers the specter of didacticism and jarred with critical attitudes that increasingly found the latter alien to the literary. These elements warrant attention: as poetic signs and conventions of language potentially associated with a mode of active speech not (maybe never) fully banished.

Stephen Gill registers that while the opening description of the Old Cumberland Beggar has been generally well-regarded, "the poet's declamation"—the argumentative body of the poem on the Beggar's utility—was often deemed "badly written" ("Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket" 388). "The description of the old man is good," Gill rehearses another common objection,

"but can we not make up our own mind about his significance?" (389). The poem's reception thus seems long to have taken note of tension within it between description and argumentation—with judgment favoring the former. This tension occurs most visibly at the structural or architectonic scale of the poem as a whole: the poem opens with a predominantly descriptive introduction (ll. 1–66: "I saw an aged Beggar in my walk, / And he was seated by the highway side . . ."), launches into the argumentative "declamation" (ll. 67–154: "But deem not this man useless.——Statesmen! . . ."), and returns to "the grassy bank / Of highway side" (ll. 185–86) in an epilogue mixing description and homily (ll. 155–89: "Then let him pass . . ."). But the tension of description and argument, as I will suggest, makes its mark even on the poet's "declamation" itself, to put in question the status of the reasoning which the poem lays before us.

Rancière highlights a "leitmotiv of nineteenth-century criticism" in inimical reaction to the emerging aesthetic paradigm: a recurrent opposition of descriptive art as inferior to demonstrative art. Barbey d'Aurevilly thus protested that the realist "only wants painterly books," as opposed to "any book whose purpose is to prove something" (*Mute Speech* 42). "The Old Cumberland Beggar" is a poem that appears to fit the latter bill. In fact, as a whole, the poem can be seen to fit the classical rhetorical scheme of argument. Wordsworth's short prefatory note, introducing "the class of Beggars to which the old man here described belongs," is the *exordium*. The opening description is the *narratio* presenting the topic of discussion. The poet's declamatory claim: "deem not this man useless," offers the *propositio*. Then follows the *confirmatio*/*confutatio* in the series of arguments. The *peroratio* gives the conclusion and call to action. To read the opening description thus, from a rhetorical standpoint as preparing the ground for the start of the argument proper, would be to subordinate description to argument.[31] Yet we have seen how commentators from the poem's

[31] By extension, recalling Rancière's terms, to subordinate materiality to "idea."

early reception through the twentieth century found the opening description its most poetically felicitous component. In fact, the kind of reading with which I have been concerned in this chapter, as I will explain, views the poem in its entirety including its "argument" as essentially in the descriptive mode. And not without a clue from the poem which (a detail often forgotten) bears the heading "A Description"—a mark perhaps of its author's own indecision.

The poet's direct address to "Statesmen," kicking off the *propositio*, appears to place us in the scene of oratory, and evokes an "active" employment of speech. The imperative mood, pointing back to the emitter of speech, draws a line from the latter to a specific audience, here explicitly named. The name of "Statesmen" does not denote only an address but a quality, since it points to a class of people equipped to receive the message and act on it, a class whose "true business" is to speak and to effect public action through their speech. Thus the address initiates the directed employment of rhetorical, persuasive energies, designed to change minds and influence action—state action, no less.[32] Imperative address, then, stages a scene of active speech with a determinate speaking position, in possession of a message and its medium, guiding it to a determinate and qualified destination.

But already problems arise. The "message" is itself perhaps threatened internally by its negativity. The poet's claim is less persuasive than dissuasive—"deem not"—and it redoubles this negativity in its predicate—"deem not . . . useless." It aims not to make up minds to an opinion but to unmake them, offers less a call to action than to ceasing the hand from action—the Statemen's "broom still ready in your hands / To rid the world of nuisances" (l. 69–70). Its concluding injunction is to "let him pass" (l. 155). Repeated eleven times in the peroration is this jussive "let"—which Eric Lindstrom has called "the ineffectual

[32] And if "Statesmen" are indeed those who effect things through speech, then the poet's address is all the more efficacious, the distance separating the language of the poetry and that of public action that much shorter.

gesture of a 'useless fiat'" (Lindstrom 111)—even unto the limit of "let him die" (l. 189).

As lyric apostrophe the address to Statesmen is also of course "overheard" by another audience—who, unnamed and having potentially no specific quality, nor definite address, in the context of the printed poem may be thought of as the true audience. The apostrophized "Statesmen" in fact are only named in the sentence following the initial exhortation, which at first appears to address readers without distinction, the "Statesmen" being deferred further by a double em-dash: "But deem not this man useless.——Statesmen! ye / . . . / . . . deem him not / A burthen of the earth" (ll. 67–73). This structure of overhearing, to be sure, does not of itself necessarily signify a derailment of the path of communication. As derived from the conventional dramatic situation, it is by no means incompatible with an "active" relationship of speech to a double but well-defined address (say, characters addressed on stage and audience in house).[33] It can become something different, however, in the context of the printed book of lyrics, and not least when its effect is compounded by the devices of a writing that undercuts in other ways the linearity, determinacy, and closure of a causal-communicative model.[34]

The poet's address to Statesmen, then, at once points to an "active" use of speech, directed by its competent emitter toward its proper destination and proper effects, and carries the germs of its destabilization. Reflecting on the structure of argument promised by such *propositio* also exposes a tension between two ideas of thought itself at work. The poem's argumentative register connects, on the one hand, to an idea of thought as reasoning: the logical

[33] I refer again to Rancière's account of the classicist dramatic ideal. Voltaire lamented a contemporary theater audience made up of an indistinct "certain number of young men and young women," as opposed to Corneille's audience of generals, preachers, magistrates, "men who act and who act through speech," who not only could delight in the staged performance of rhetorical skill but glean "instruction in speaking worthily" (Rancière, *Mute Speech* 47).

[34] See also Jonathan Culler on the lyrical structure of "overhearing" as a form of "triangulated address" (8, 186–243).

concatenation of reasons and conclusions, analogous to the rigorous chain of causes and effects in the logic of action (with both mirroring internally the outward, rhetorical efficacy of active speech). Attempting, however, to trace the poet's argument, we have found it to blur reasons and conclusions, and the causes and effects on which it reasons. Moreover we have seen the poem make open show of its contradictions, ambiguities, and hesitancies, in the twists and turns of thought, its "ifs" and "buts" and "perchances," the impulse to self-revision not revised or ironed out but retained and on display in the text before us. The poet hands all of it to us entire: the multiple options explored, doubted, modified, all remain part of the full picture and illustrate a process as well as a content of thought.

If such things appear to us a matter of course, of a piece with poetic writing and the spontaneity of lyric, we should not therefore fail to observe the status which we impute thereby to poetic thought. Lyric collapses the temporality of thinking, from the priority of an "idea" which finds expression in and arranges the parts of speech to its design, to a (virtual) coincidence of thought, utterance, writing. Thinking unfolds (as if) in the present of the poem, a thought externalized in language so as it assumes a concrete presence before our eyes (a present and a presence that are, in Culler's terms, "iterable"). The curious consequence is that the poet's "argument" becomes itself of the order of a description: the poem simply renders to us a process of thought. It is this peculiar status that allows or invites us to read the poem rather through what it shows than what it tells—to borrow the common critical idiom—or in Rancière's terms through what it displays in its "physiognomy"; and thus to draw our implications from the shape, the contours and movements of that thought.

To be sure, significant form is of itself no innovation of a new poetics, and elaborate invention in the manipulation of meter, rhythms, sounds, and syntax for sense and for effect was common fare for eighteenth-century poets and readers. Alexander Pope, thus proclaiming in his *Essay on Criticism* the dictum

that "sound must seem an echo to the sense," proceeds to illustrate: "the smooth stream in smoother number flows," but "The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar" (*Selected Poetry* 10). Pope's example, however, points to an essential difference. Form here follows and "echoes," amplifying sense and effect, and—whether as a fitting ornament or a necessary consequence—follows from and serves the idea or invention which engender it. In the case of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," we found form to pull against the grain of supposed propositional content, producing the distance that allowed us to relativize the poet's outright claims. We could say that the "physiognomy" of the poem bore the sense of what the poet could not say outright, but through embodying a manner of thought could show or betray—the logic of unmasterable causalities.

A corollary of the transformed relation of poetic thought to language is thus that its possible meanings or even its truth shift from the level of propositional content to that of an outward mode of being.[35] The shift is of a piece with the transposition of the poem from a rhetorical argument into "A Description"—a process of thought rendered rather than a series of reasoned claims advanced. And further, the idea of a poetic language coincident with poetic thought implies that the poem is itself the thought rendered to us, and submitted in turn as an object for our contemplation. Interesting consequences follow when poetic reflection on the question of the useful thus becomes a function of the poem's very manner of being—and of its being *as a poem*—and then in turn comes to bear on the poem's possible imbrication within means-ends relations in its own right—i.e., the poem's outward causal life.

[35] On thought transferred from "interiority" to "exteriority" see Rancière, *Mute Speech* 60, 75, 81, *passim*. It is worth noting the metaphor of interiority in the recurrent classicist metaphor for language as vessel or habit in which thought is housed or dressed, as in Alexander Pope's and Samuel Johnson's pithy maxims: "Expression is the dress of thought" (Pope 9), "Language is the dress of thought" (Johnson 418).

The upshot of this might be conceived of as a form of retreat: poetry, in this case, drawing back from its ostensible subject the Beggar to occupy itself with its own existence and its own logic. The question arises whether what Rancière calls an externalization of thought to the surface of poetic language does not in reality amount to an elision of the external in a self-contained interiority. Notwithstanding the transposability of the "habit of thought" thus embodied, which might then be brought to bear again on discourses and conditions affecting the Beggar, Wordsworth's poem does betoken such a retreat. We can see this when the poet insinuates his poem into the economy of means and ends on which it reflects, and when he privileges the pensive thought associated with his own poetic activity. The more disturbing token perhaps is the conclusion that abandons the Beggar to the elements. In the final part of this chapter, I will consider how Wordsworth's seminal "Lines," as a poem descended from "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and as concerned with the question of means and ends, appears to fulfil this inward turn, definitively shifting the terrain of the causal relations in question within poetic thought itself. This shift, moreover, can be seen to perfect the logic whereby the poem offers itself as the end-product justifying the causal pathways traced by and within poetic thought. It is this logic that finds maximal form in Wordsworth's epic *Prelude*, which produces the masterwork of poetic thought as the psychodrama of "the growth of a poet's mind."

"Lines": the sinuous paths of poetic thought

The "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" were published in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, submitted as a last-minute postscript while the poems were going to print in the summer of 1798. Although "The Old Cumberland Beggar" would not appear in print until the second edition of 1800, its genesis goes back at least to June 1797, and a full draft of the poem existed at

least some months prior to the composition of the "Lines." In fact, the verso of a loose sheet from a draft of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" bears a fragment of what would become the opening description of the scene near Tintern (Little 70; see also Austin 193n11). Of fifteen blank-verse poems of differing length which appear in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*,[36] the two moreover bear the most formal resemblance. Yet the kinship of these poems has hardly received critical notice. The parallels between the poem about the Old Beggar and the latter one about the poet revisiting the banks of the Wye River extend beyond similarities in verse form and length (they are respectively 189 and 160 lines long). The two poems, akin in terms of architectonic structure, lyric situation, and poetic strategies, are ultimately commensurate also in subject matter.

"The Old Cumberland Beggar" fits the bill of the "Greater Romantic Lyric" described by M. H. Abrams in his classic essay, of which the "Lines" are exemplary (527–60). Both poems open with descriptions that frame the setting and moment of lyric utterance, launch into prolonged reflection, and return in conclusion to the initial scene. Both poems adopt an argumentative register in their middle sections, which to some critics have smacked of didacticism (See Gill, "Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket" 386)—albeit much less glaringly in the "Lines." The latter poem even ends in hortatory peroration, featuring a milder repetition of the eerie jussive "let" amid the natural elements: "let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk; / And let the misty mountain winds be free / To blow against thee" (ll. 135–38).[37] Both poems stage twice-seen scenes: the Wye Valley is revisited after a five-year interval, while the Beggar known in childhood is witnessed anew. In both poems, the poet ponders uncharted benefits

[36] The thirteen other blank-verse poems in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* are: "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree," "There was a Boy," "The Brothers," two "Inscriptions," "Lines written with a Slate-Pencil upon a Stone," "Nutting," the five "Poems on the Naming of Places," and "Michael."

[37] All references to the "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" will be given as line numbers and refer to the poem as printed in Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* 116–20.

derived from unlikely or inauspicious sources. In this case, however, the source is the poet's past experience and the benefits derived have all to do with his own mind and the development of his poetic sensibilities: the first-person pronoun predominates, and the terrain of causal relations traced has shifted decidedly inward.

For Abrams the outer scene, sparking the poet's "meditation," leads him to look inwards in self-absorbed cogitation, before being roused again in the conclusion—where he turns outward to address his sister ("For thou art with me here . . . dear, dear Sister," ll. 115–22). In "The Old Cumberland Beggar," on the other hand, the opening description becomes the springboard for an outward address to "Statesmen." This would seem to mark a difference from the inwardly meditative quality which Abrams highlighted in his conception of the Greater Romantic Lyric. And yet even in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" we have seen the poet's discourse approximate the status of a meditation, as a free-flowing process of thought. This interpretation, the poem's kinship to the "Lines" can serve rather to support and throw into relief. The crux of the matter rather might be conceived in terms of the opposition between "active speech" and a poetic language of "thought-writing"—though the meditative register might be farther consolidated in the latter poem.

The "Lines," like the "The Old Cumberland Beggar," center on a claim about means and ends, causes and effects. The poet reflects on what he has "owed" in the five interceding years to the "forms of beauty" beheld on his first visit to the Wye Valley (ll. 24, 27). He has derived from them "sensations sweet" (l. 28) and "tranquil restoration" (l. 31), respite from world-weariness (ll. 51–58); they have inclined him to "little, nameless, unremembered act / Of kindness and of love" (ll. 35–36); opened to him "more sublime" visionary experiences (ll. 37–50); developed his sensibility to the chastening "still, sad music of humanity" (l. 92–94), and to the power which joins and "rolls through all things"

(ll. 94–103); finally they have yielded an experience which the poet now hopes to share with his sister (ll. 112–22).

As with "The Old Cumberland Beggar," the "Lines" multiply the benefits traced from an unexpected source, in a persistently tentative register. This poem is better known in criticism than its forerunner for the self-revisionary thought process which it puts on display: this feature of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" is here amplified. Modifying locutions, qualifications, conditionals, double negations, advances and retreats, the visions and revisions and the characteristic twists and turns of syntax stamp this blank verse even more pervasively: "such, perhaps / As may have had no trivial influence" (ll. 32–33), "Nor less, I trust / . . . I may have owed . . ." (l. 37), "If this / Be but a vain belief" (l. 50–51), "I dare to hope" (l. 66), "I would believe" (l. 88), "perchance" (ll. 112, 147). The poem likewise grapples with tangled and mutually dependent causalities which the sinuous movements of its "Lines" reflect. This complexity reverberates perhaps in that great central image in the poem "Of something . . . deeply interfused" (l. 97).

The claims of "thought" here permeate the poem thoroughly. The word itself appears ten times, with six instances of the word "mind" to boot, including "elevated thoughts" and "lofty thoughts" (ll. 96, 129) recalling the "lofty minds / And meditative" of "The Old Cumberland Beggar." And well it might, since the subject of the poem, the causal pathways traced, all belong to the journey of poetic thought itself. We see again here the continuity of feeling and thought encapsulated in the locution "pensive thoughts" in the other poem, or the "influxes of feeling . . . modified and directed by our thoughts" in the "Preface" (*Prose Works* 146), when the poet refers to "sensations sweet, / . . . felt along the heart, / And passing even into my purer mind" (ll. 28–30). But once again remains the nagging indeterminacy, the undefined content of the thought induced, except, as with its poetic forerunner, insofar as the poem itself stands for this thought. "The still, sad music of humanity" to which the poet claims to

become attuned (l. 92) has been called Wordsworth's most enigmatic phrase (Potkay 98), but just as evasive surely is the sublime vision "into the life of things," which yields the sense of a vague "something far more deeply interfused" (more than what?). The phrase appears to refer both to thought and matter, the natural world and "the mind of man," traversing "All thinking things, all objects of all thought" (ll. 97–103).

The poet of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" had attributed to his titular figure benefits to a community at large. Here the poet meditates on the influence of his remembered, aesthetic experience (of "forms of beauty") on the development of his thought and poetic sensibilities. The "Lines" similarly trace plural and interconnected cause-effect and means-ends relations, intimating a complex picture of non-linearity and indeterminacy which cannot be mastered or fully pinned down. That these relations now find their locus decidedly within the poet's mind or poetic process extends the implications of the previous poem. The "Lines," embodying in a movement of thought the logic of those relations, also afford a more direct verification of these relations since they themselves belong to the movements of poetic thought, and since the resulting poem thus presents itself as a live and tangible product of those movements—a logic of *retro*spective and *intro*spective justification of means through ends, externalized in the object of the poem before us, which *The Prelude* will effect on a grand scale.

To illustrate we can examine the mode in which the poet of the "Lines" answers his own repeated doubts, by mustering the facts of his mental experience (ll. 23–58). He begins, almost in Cartesian fashion, with the raw *is*-ness of a mental fact (albeit couched in a double negative): "Though absent long, / These forms of beauty have not been" absent from his mind (ll. 24–25). "I have owed to them," he ventures next in a first causal claim, "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood" (ll. 27–28). As though recoiling at the creeping of causality into his language (although his claim remains in a sense at the level of immediate, felt,

first-person experience), circumspectly he proceeds: "such, perhaps, / As may have had no trivial influence / . . . / . . . Nor less, I trust, / To them I may have owed another gift" (ll. 32–33, 36–37; note the tentative register and the persistence of the double negative). Soon again he hedges: "If this / Be but a vain belief" (ll. 50–51), only to respond immediately with a (literal) doubling down: "yet oh! how oft, / . . . / How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye! . . . / How often has my spirit turned to thee!" (ll. 51–58).[38]

Against the uncertain modality of "may," the poet doubles down on the declarative present perfect: I have turned to thee. Doubt as he might his attribution of effects to sources—that he has the innocent Wye to thank for all these unexpected bounties—he can assert as a matter of (mental) fact that time and again he has indeed turned to those sources. But more interesting is the recognition that the poem before us in itself constitutes such a turn, palpably realized. And this at the same time as the poem stands a monument to the turnings of thought in pursuit of erratic paths of causes and effects, sources and destinations. The poem offers itself thus doubly as material evidence of the processes which it traces within its lines, their issuance in a product that is at once an embodiment of those processes. Poetic thought, in all its meanderings, offers the image of means-ends relations while presenting in itself their product.

Securing the proliferating and non-determinate lines of causal relation in this way would seem then to come at the cost of a retreat into self and mind. Such retreat is betokened in the appeal to "tranquil restoration" from world-weariness and "The dreary intercourse of daily life" (ll. 31, 132). Yet the poet looks outward again from that position, not only in signaling his attunement to the "still, sad music of humanity" (l. 92), but specifically and concretely when in

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[38] Consider also the poet's claim that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" (ll. 122–24), reminiscent of the appeal to "Nature's law" in "The Old Cumberland Beggar." Here, however, the claim is less bold—"this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature . . ."—compared to the declaration of categorical law in the other poem. Interestingly the claim here is first made in the retrospective past tense instead of the timeless present.

conclusion he turns to his Sister beside him. And he does so with a hope and an appeal, that her experience might prove an extension of his own. He sees in her at present something of "What then [he] was" (l. 77), on his first visit: "in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes (ll. 117–20); and he prays "in after years" that untold bounties will follow for her as they did for him, when "thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms" (ll. 138–41). The appeal, in other words, is for the Sister's experience—or that of the kindred mind, since we are here again dealing with a form of triangulated address—to become a further verification and an extension of the logic of proliferating and unexpected goods derived from an unexpected source. Thus poetic thought, taking upon itself to embody plural and indeterminate means-ends relations, offers itself not only as an end to justify them but as an object of contemplation: a potential means to indefinite further ends, productive of further thought, asking ever to be verified by becoming a prelude to further thought.

Conclusion: "The history of a Poet's mind . . . shall justify itself"

The logic of the verification of thought by thought finds maximal form in *The Prelude*, the poem of the adventures of poetic thought on its way to finding itself. The psychodrama of "the growth of a poet's mind" announces itself in a question: "Was it for this?" which opens the *Two-Book Prelude*, and which the poem's successive versions expand to answer in the affirmative (*Prelude* 43). The four words encapsulate a drama of causes and effects, of ends to justify means. The preposition sets in causal relation two pronouns of indeterminate reference. The copula looks back on an accumulated experience ("it"), as in the retrospection of "Lines," anchored by deictic "this" to the present. "This" is the poet(ry) that an accumulated experience has produced and promises further. But "this" becomes also the poem present before us, the monument of poetic thought

in quest of the "origin and progress of [its] own powers" (Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 2).

"Was it for this?" is a question of poetical crisis, poetry interrogating itself as to the "good work" that would exalt it, justifying its promise and its pursuits. Rather than the grand philosophy of *The Recluse* "on Man, Nature, and Society," *The Prelude* as we know grows into its own fulfillment. Poetic thought produces the philosophical poem by tracing in its own sinews the surprising pathways that lead it to itself. But the "growth of a poet's mind" grows to think not only itself but a world—however mistakable. It does not so much substitute "picture *in* the mind" with "picture *of* the mind" (McGann 87) as produce a thought in and of the world; and not the thought of a transcendent(al) mind but a material thought-object.

Poetry thus comes professing nothing less than a form of thought, materialized but transposable, "detachable," and, as thought-object further available to thought, even for appropriation to ulterior ends. Nor do any propositional and denotative contents of language disappear but remain as part of the materials which poetry offers up. But thought thus materialized offers no guarantee beyond such availability, asking perpetually to be tested, made use of, extended. As in conclusion to the "Lines" the poet had turned to another in "cheerful faith" (l. 134), so in *The Prelude*:

> It will be known by thee at least, my Friend,
> Felt, that the history of a Poet's mind
> Is labour not unworthy of regard.
> To thee the work shall justify itself.
>
> (*Thirteen-Book Prelude* 323, XIII.407–10)

If we have come some way from the anti-utilitarian context of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," this has been the point: reflection on means and ends leads

to defining questions for poetics. “The Old Cumberland Beggar” had to absorb into its texture the nonlinearity, indeterminacy, and open-endedness of causal relations, rendering these into immanent properties of poetic thought. The “Lines” develop the preoccupations of the previous poem, to locate in the thought-poem a resource for the verification and justification of indeterminate causalities made available otherwise through negation. In *The Prelude*, finally, the self-recoil of poetic thought offers up the sinuous object of thought in order to justify the ways from means to ends, but also to prelude their extension—although, perhaps, always only perchance. Though the coil might wind decidedly outward, the potentials of poetic thought multiply perhaps at the cost of an ambivalent turn inward that makes—indeed has made—of poetry’s relation to the world a seemingly perpetual crisis.

Chapter two

Ends to no end: Aestheticism and individuation

> I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*

"All art is quite useless." So Oscar Wilde with characteristic confidence put the matter in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (4). The present study had to run up against the movement in modern literature and criticism that pitted the aesthetic most starkly against the useful. If the goal of this thesis has been to probe literary history for constitutive engagements that do not throw out utility with the bathwater of a narrow utilitarianism—that contend on the terrain of use rather than simply desert it—does not the Aesthete's peremptory dismissal of the useful frustrate this premise? The starting point of this thesis has also been that the question of literature's relation to use depends on the specific identification of the terms thus juxtaposed within the discourses at hand. This chapter sets out, therefore, to describe the parameters of the "use" in question in Wilde's and other writers' Aesthetic *(non) credos*.[1] What, in other words, is the utility that the Aesthete rejects—and what might be said to remain in its place?

[1] I use the capitalized form to designate nineteenth-century British Aestheticism and the Aesthetic Movement, as opposed to more generic references to aesthetics or aestheticism.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that anti-utilitarian critiques carry a negative and a positive dimension. They tend to target conceptions of goods and utilities which may be qualified as "restricted," but do not escape—never can escape, in Herrnstein Smith's stronger claim—"some sort of positivity" on the flip side that is re-describable as a kind of utility (127–28, 137). Some of the most recognizable statements of Aesthetic doctrine make no secret of proffering an alternative means-ends relation however couched in apparent paradox. The cry of "art for art's sake" (Swinburne, *William Blake* 91; Pater, "Poems by William Morris" 110)—the English version of "*l'art pour l'art*"[2]—places art in the position of means and end. For Walter Pater, "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (*Renaissance* 153). At the same time, these statements cannot be understood apart from the set of negations (implicit already in Pater's "nothing but") that regularly accompany or frame them. So art for art's sake is Algernon Swinburne's riposte to art as "handmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality" (*William Blake* 90).

Engagement with an Aesthetic negotiation of use must therefore work through a matrix of negations. If "all art is quite useless"—notwithstanding Wilde's cultivated facetiousness and taste for provocation, which must be kept in view when interpreting his claims—then we would do well to characterize the "use" that art should therefore do without. A constellation of other terms that the writers and critics of the Aesthetic Movement regarded similarly with suspicion should illuminate the term, and lead to better understanding of any "positivity" that might lie on the other side of anti-utilitarian negation. The panoply of suspect notions for the Aesthete included moralism, nature, society, fact, representation, public opinion, authority, and history. The question will be to home in on the

[2] Often attributed to Théophile Gautier who theorized the notion in the preface to his *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the motto does not appear as such in Gautier's text but goes back to Victor Cousin's *Cours de philosophie* (224) and Benjamin Constant's *Journal* (7).

connotations that might connect these terms together and to the useful, in order to get at the implications of their repudiation.

Kate Hext has advanced a revisionist reading of Walter Pater's aesthetic philosophy which redirects attention from beauty to the individual as the central question of Pater's thought (1). Indeed, examining the set of terms which the Aesthetic critic contests alongside the useful on behalf of literature and art will point to matrices of determination that present material or conceptual threats to the possibility of individuation. The individual in this context refers to that which is not fully determined by, and therefore deducible from, everything that is not itself.[3] In an intellectual climate in which the natural sciences—physical and biological—and the new human sciences—of history and society—undertook to explain the human world and its developmental processes, and an ascendant bourgeois culture promised to form the world according to its standards, many writers saw as pressing the need to safeguard the idea of the individual in concept and practice. For the Aesthetes literature and art were uniquely poised to take on such a mission.

In such light, Aestheticism represents not a flight from the world but an intellectual engagement with social and historical conditions. Neither is the Aesthetic response defined by the construction of an independent or otherworldly aesthetic realm that denies those conditions: as we shall see, Wilde and Pater especially sought to absorb varieties of materialist discourse in their aesthetics to describe the conditions of possibility for the formation of the individual from the materials which history, society, nature, and culture supply.

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[3] Theodor Adorno—a later aestheticist though he used aesthete as a term of disparagement—allies art to such an idea of the individual: "every aesthetic work is an individual product and so always an exception in terms of its in-dwelling principle and general implications, whereas anything which fits in with general regulations disqualifies itself from a place in the world of art" ("Reconciliation" 190). This relates to what Adorno elsewhere terms the "nonidentical," which among other things designates use value as opposed to the principle of equivalence governing exchange value: "what defies subsumption under identity—the 'use value,' in Marxist terminology" (*Negative Dialectics* 11, 146).

The Aesthetic individual by implication is distinct from the Idealist individual—universal, autonomous, and existing *a priori*. Individuation instead is processual, and depends on the continual possibility of something different to emerge from the materials of what already exists—through "the concurrence," in Pater's words, "renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (*Renaissance* 150).

What does this notion of the individual have to do with use? On the other side of anti-utilitarian critiques, for Herrnstein Smith, tend to lie use values that may be characterized as "diffuse, deferred, remote, subtle, complex, multiple, heterogeneous, and/or, for these or other reasons, difficult to measure or specify" (127–28). Implicit is a set of opposed terms that would include the immediate, the obvious, and of course the commercial (measurable in monetary terms). We may add to Herrnstein Smith's list the unique and the new as opposed to the interchangeable, the commonplace, the already existing, that which conforms to a current standard. The idea of the individual as that which is not deducible from all else—and, consequently, individuation as the formation of what is not from what is—refers to these dimensions of the unique and the new. Thus when Pater writes of a "philosophy, with the individual for its standard of all things . . . with a certain incapacity wholly to accept other men's valuations" (*Marius* 35), this entails also a perspective on value informed by the concern with individuation—placing a premium on novel and unique forms of value.

The useful figured within Aesthetic discourse in a constellation of suspect terms that signified forms of determination by what exists. Aestheticism thus committed art, against the thrall of predetermined values, to the production of new ones. This mission could be imagined on a grand scale, as in Thomas Carlyle's heroic view of poetry's mythopoetic function synthesizing the "highest Aim" of the creative *Zeitgeist* in its historical progress, or Matthew Arnold's prediction that poetry would provide new values for humanity to replace traditional sources no longer tenable (Carlyle 10–11; Arnold, *Essays* 3). The

Aesthetic view of art appears at once more modest and more radical, embracing constant flux to recognize a continual potential for the production of new forms of value, while embodying in art—and in criticism—the logic of individuation that makes this possible.

Walter Pater, whose work proved foundational for British Aestheticism, grappled throughout his career with the problem of the individual faced with the determining pressures of history, nature, and society. Yet Pater's prevailing philosophical skepticism led him to seek a conceptual solution avoiding Ideal or metaphysical guarantors for creation or progress. He attempted to absorb the materialist language of natural science, and suffused his writing with a historical sense which Peter Allan Dale has called the most conceptually thorough-going of his generation of critics (7–8). Pater, in other words, reads in the concurrence of forces parting on their ways not a tragic predicament but a comic, if fraught, condition of possibility. Pater's influence and language are palpable in the work of his most prominent disciple Oscar Wilde, who would raise the pitch of the Aesthetic protest against the conforming pressures of British society, public opinion, and genteel authority, and take up the mantle after Algernon Swinburne of *épateur des bourgeois*.

Both Wilde and Pater found in art an exemplary logic of individuation based in the potential to form novel and unforeseen goods out of the materials—physical, linguistic, referential, ideational, or formal—thrown up by nature, society, culture, and history. The Aesthetic attachment to form may be seen in this light, since form allows the arrangement of available materials in novel configurations to produce ever new objects. As also the fundamental indifference of the work of art to its materials—the beauty or exceptionality of the work standing for instance in no direct relation to its subject which may be mundane, trivial, even ugly or repugnant. For Wilde, moreover—citing the precedence of Pater's work—criticism had to stand in the same relation to art as the work of art

to its materials. The critic, Wilde argues in "The Critic as Artist," employs the materials offered up by the work of art in a creative process of her own.

It is no accident, therefore, that this chapter deals primarily with the Aesthetes' critical writings. If the Romantics established the lyric as the essential genre of modern poetry, and the English novel had its origins in Defoe via Richardson, Austen, and Dickens, criticism is perhaps the major genre of writing to consolidate in the second half of the nineteenth century with something close to its modern concerns, its strong historical sense, and its integral relation to philosophy and what we now call "theory" (see Habib 4–5). The moment of Aestheticism, more importantly, may be said to institute or begin to legislate the criticality of literature and art themselves, i.e., their function *vis-à-vis* the supersession of the current state of the world. But Wilde at least does so less by recruiting art to the purposes of the critic than the other way around: requiring the critic to embrace the critical spirit of art. If the artist proves the possibility of the new emerging from the materials available to art, the critic must be able to recognize the event of creation, actualize it in engagement with the work of art, and promote the process by allowing something of the same order to take place in the work of criticism.

In what follows, I begin by examining a constellation of terms alongside the useful against which Aesthetic discourse positioned art. These terms include history, nature, representation, fact, morality, authority, custom, public opinion, and society, and they have in common reference to deterministic concepts and conforming pressures threatening to engulf the individual. Aesthetic writers, by contrast, tie art to the possibility—and desirability—of individuation. I proceed to examine the implications of an Aesthetic commitment to the individual for the question of the useful as a relation of means and ends. The Aesthetic individual appears not as a universal subject enthroned above or apart from the social, the historical, or the material world, but as an end that, if at all possible, must emerge from these as the conditions of its possibility. Wilde's "The Critic as Artist"

finally underscores the Aesthetic commitment of art to individuation as the production of novel and unique forms of value. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, describing her theory of the contingency of value, refers to processes of valuation “having *no* ‘end,’ neither *telos* nor *terminus*” (144). “Art for art’s sake,” rather than sever literature and art definitively from use or founding the aesthetic as a *cul de sac* of means-ends relations, becomes the motto of a radical *use-making* in which art becomes the means to ends without end.

Art against world? Antinomian Aestheticism

The “Aesthetic Movement,” so designated by the critic Walter Hamilton in *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), was not an organized or self-identified group working to advance a shared aesthetic program. It refers to a loose set of writers and artists, of greater and lesser renown and influence, who became associated in the late nineteenth century with championing the sensuous qualities of art over practical, moral, and mimetic imperatives. Hamilton’s study appeared shortly after the production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s hit comic opera *Patience* (1881), which spoofed the type of the “aesthete” represented in the opera’s caricatures of Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Wilde’s celebrity had already traveled from Oxford to London, and reached the United States in a lecture tour engineered as publicity for the American run of *Patience* (Ellmann 151). Better known than Wilde at the time, Swinburne had been the notorious target together with Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1871–1872 of the critic Robert Buchanan’s moralistic invective against “Fleshly Poets” (Buchanan 19–20), and he responded in a scathing pamphlet of his own (*Under the Microscope*).

The 1870s had also seen poles of oppositional alignment form in response to the libel suit of James Abbott McNeill Whistler v John Ruskin (1878), over the claim to artistic status of Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Gold* (see Gal 17). Writers and artists sympathetic to Whistler’s formalism, anti-naturalism, and

assertion of artistic freedom could be ranked in the Aesthetic camp, whereas Ruskin's respectable authority and his mimetic view of art stood for all that the Aesthetes abhorred. Swinburne, incidentally, had been a close friend of Whistler whose 1865 *Symphony in White, No. 2* bore a poem by Swinburne on its frame.

Somewhat apart from this often-boisterous crowd stood the more furtive, though no less influential figure of Walter Pater. The Oxford don caused one of the earlier Aesthetic controversies because of the perceived amoral hedonism of the "Conclusion" to his 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (see Donoghue 46–54). Considered one of the original Aesthetic critics, Pater's standing for the Aesthetic generation that followed is evidenced by the prevalence of Paterian motives, sometimes direct quotes (acknowledged and not) in the lectures of Wilde's American tour (Wilde, *Essays*). He would remain well-regarded as a critic and a stylist—"the most perfect master of English prose now creating amongst us" (Wilde, *Intentions* 113)—and would be cited as a key influence on the modernism of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (e.g., Moliterno; Meisel). Pater's theoretically foundational Aesthetic thought, as we shall see, is characterized throughout by preoccupation with the question of the individual. The stakes of the question will first become apparent by taking a broad view of the concerns that animated Aesthetic critics including Swinburne, Whistler, Pater, Wilde, and later disciples of Aestheticism like Arthur Symons.

Walter Pater was an important purveyor of German philosophical and aesthetic thought in Victorian intellectual life. Among his earliest published writings are an essay on Johann Joachim Winckelmann, one of the founding figures of philosophical aesthetics, and an essay on S. T. Coleridge who was himself an early importer of German philosophy to English thought. Pater appears to have owed his appointment in Oxford to his knowledge of German; he spent considerable time in Heidelberg, and his readings in German literature and philosophy have been well-documented by critics (Hext 10–11; Inman). More important than the finer details of a system of thought here is its particular

interest to Pater, what he made of it in his writing, and the relevance that it bears therefore to the Aestheticism of Pater and his peers. And it appears then that the understanding of art in relation to the conflict of freedom and necessity forms a cornerstone of this interest. This much is made clear in the closing passage of Pater's essay on Winckelmann as in the opening pages of his essay on Coleridge (*Renaissance* 148–49; *Essays* 1–3).[4] Kate Hext suggests that the Kantian creative imagination presented a tempting solution to the skeptical empiricism towards which Pater inclined while fearing its dissolution of the individual into a bundle of sensations in flux (46). Pater was dissatisfied, on the other hand, with Hegel's answer, as he read it, to the individual's relation to nature and society in terms of an adequation of the singular to the progress of a universal and ultimately rational Ideal: such a conception jarred with Pater's sense of the "confused, imperfect, hap-hazard character of man's actual experience in nature and history" ("The History of Philosophy," qtd. in Hext 11).

The problem of the individual became particularly pressing as the natural and human sciences made their mark on Victorian intellectual discourse, and in the context of a rapidly expanding, conformist bourgeois culture. The individual seemed to face a hostile world: under attack from all quarters, in concept and in practice, by deterministic and conforming pressures. For Frank Kermode in his classic study *Romantic Image*, Aesthetic writers (looking forward to modernists) radicalize the Romantic trope of the poet-artist at odds with a (fallen) world. The question is: what world? For there is much to suggest that Pater, Wilde, and others associated with the Aesthetic Movement sought no world to escape to besides the material, social, historical one. The world they sought to repudiate referred to a mode of conceiving the world and to certain forces within it, which they associated with determinism, conformism, and the peremptory standards of

[4] Cf. Friedrich Schiller's commentary on Winckelmann and the *Laocoön*: "how accurately the phenomena are presented in which animality and humanity, nature's coercion and reason's freedom, reveal themselves!" (*Essays* 55).

a status quo. The Aesthetes' terms of suspicion—which include history, nature, representation, fact, custom, authority, public opinion, morality, and society—signified at least in part these parameters of a world, against which they persisted to pit their Aesthetic conception of the work of art.

Peter Allan Dale's *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History* still provides a helpful introduction to the intellectual problems posed to Victorian critical thought by the "historical sense" which came to the fore in the nineteenth century (2). Dale describes Thomas Carlyle's central preoccupation as with vindicating the human "capacity to *act* and to *make*" in the midst of "history's all-devouring ocean" (Dale 58, 88). This leads Carlyle to assign poetry the heroic mission of embodying for a people the highest expression of an inherently creative *Zeitgeist* at a moment of its historical progress (Dale 61–64). Matthew Arnold's fatalist turn of thought, on the other hand, leads him to reject this heroic vision and espouse a stoical retreat of the private self away from the vicissitudes and "contamination" of history and public action (Dale 96–97, 101–2, 119)—"Sink in thyself! There ask what ails thee, at that shrine" (Arnold, *Poetical Works* 448). Still, when Arnold reinvents himself as a social critic championing the social obligation of the artist and critic, he gives literature and art—in their historically variable forms—the core function of catering to innate affective needs and a constant human impulse towards inner harmony of being (Dale 159–65). Pater's more radical historical sense would admit neither of these metaphysics. Nevertheless, throughout his career his writing is centrally concerned with finding a conceptual way out of the morass of historical determination which threatens to engulf the individual.

History then appears as a first problem term in Aesthetic discourse. Pater opens his essay on Coleridge drawing the distinction of modern thought from ancient as the "cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute.'" Human character in this light appears shaped by "remote laws of inheritance, the

vibrations of long past acts," and "the character of the age" which sways the individual "this way or that through the medium of language and ideas" (Pater, *Essays* 2). Wilde also, in one of his earliest writings, evokes the intellectual dread that contemporaries attached to the "intrusion" of "conceptions of law and order" from "physical science . . . into the domain of history": The "very first requisite for any scientific conception of history," the "doctrine of uniform sequence," stands in apparent conflict with "a certain causeless spontaneity which men call free will" (Wilde, *Essays* 43–45).[5] Later on, Wilde could himself refer to the past as potentially an "intolerable burden," and echo to his American audience the Emersonian sentiment that "absence of tradition . . . may be rather the source of your freedom" instead of—Wilde citing Ruskin—an impediment to cultural life (Wilde, *Essays* 140).[6] The true work of art, he would maintain in his late writings, is ever to become "what Art has never been" (*Soul* 65).

Pater to the end of his career maintained his concern with the determining pressures of history. In a passage of his late lectures on *Plato and Platonism* worth quoting at length, he reflects that we enter the world clothed

> in a vesture of the past, nay, fatally shrouded, it might seem, in those laws or tricks of heredity which we mistake for our volitions; in the language which is more than one half of our thoughts; in the moral and mental habits, the customs, the literature, the very houses, which we did not make for ourselves; in the vesture of a past, which is (so science would assure us) not ours, but of the race, the species: that *Zeit-geist*, or abstract secular process . . . making use of, and casting aside in its march, the souls of countless individuals. (Pater, *Plato* 72–73)

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[5] The source is Wilde's undergraduate essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism," submitted for the Chancellor's English Essay Prize at Oxford in 1879 on the subject of "Historical Criticism among the Ancients."

[6] Wilde alludes in the next paragraph to Walt Whitman, who was also highly regarded by Swinburne at the time (*William Blake* 300; *Essays* 22).

These lines invoke a whole taxonomy of determinants associated with historical inheritance—physical, biological, linguistic, cultural, social, material. Yet Pater with typical ambiguity hovers between a rueful or truthful, skeptical or edifying tone: unclear entirely as to whether he is painting a regrettable, if unavoidable, recognition or aiming to qualify it ("fatally shrouded, it might seem"; "so science would assure us").

The language of inheritance, "race," and "species" set alongside *Zeitgeist* and "secular process" speaks of course to the shadow of Darwin over Victorian thought, and of natural history and physical science more generally. For Wilde also the "scientific principle of Heredity . . . has hemmed us round with the nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom" (*Intentions* 173). "And so," he continues, "it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual" (*Intentions* 173). T. H. Huxley was an important public communicator for the lay Victorian public of evolutionary theory and its conceptual consequences. "I do not know," he writes, "that any one has taken more pains than I have, during the last thirty years [the 1860s to 1890s], to insist upon the doctrine, so much reviled in the early part of that period, that man, physical, intellectual, and moral, is as much a part of nature, as purely a product of the cosmic process, as the humblest weed" (*Evolution* 11). The problem, as he puts it, resides in the apparent paradox that "ethical nature, while born of cosmic nature," should be "at enmity with its parent," while the conception of "natural process . . . every stage of which is the effect of causes operating according to definite rules . . . excludes that of chance" (*Evolution* viii, 6). So since 1868 Huxley commented on the fear that "matter and law have devoured spirit and spontaneity": "this great truth weighs like a nightmare, I believe, upon many of the best minds of these days. They watch what they conceive to be the progress of materialism. . . . The advancing tide of matter threatens to drown their souls; the tightening grasp of law impedes their freedom" (*Method* 159–60).

Of course, the scientific threat to the individual came from physics as well as biology. Pater was early to adopt a scientistic language in his writing tinged with his native inclination to skeptical empiricism. In the essay on “Coleridge,” the “relative spirit” is not only historical but “has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of inductive sciences,” bringing the “moral world . . . ever in contact with the physical” (*Essays* 2). In the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, “our physical life” is a “combination of natural elements to which science gives their names,” and “processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces” (150). We shall see later in the chapter what Pater makes ultimately of the “perpetual motion” of elements that makes up physical and conscious life. No doubt he is registering the pervasive sense of natural and physical process as tokens of deterministic relations, and the flux of heterogeneous materials as a conception that dissolves the individual’s illusory autonomy. Ever willing to adopt the scientific idioms of his time, Pater would conjure in one of his *Imaginary Portraits* another great prophecy of doom heralded by Victorian science: the heat death of the universe, promising the “slow disintegration by which nature herself is levelling the eternal hills” (98–99, 110)—suggesting an exact antithesis to the inherently creative progress of a universal *Zeitgeist*.

“Nature” also figured apart from such philosophic and scientistic speculations as an Aesthetic bugbear in connection to the mimetic view of literature and art, associated with the respected authority of John Ruskin. Where Ruskin allied art fully to the imitation of nature, many Aesthetes opposed the two in the starkest terms. Nature in Ruskin’s metaphysics constitutes the supreme source and model of beauty and rightness (both truth and moral order). The artist’s task is therefore to imitate and showcase nature’s perfections, at best to “see more than we could ourselves, and bring nature up to us and near to us” (*Modern Painters I* 46). And the artist who follows this injunction becomes “guided, almost forced, by the laws of nature, to do right in art” (*Modern Painters IV* 113). This mimetic view

underwrote Ruskin's slight to Whistler's painting—"flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (Whistler, *Gentle Art* 304)—over which Whistler sued for libel. We may therefore read in direct contradiction Whistler's dictum in the *Ten O'Clock* lecture that "Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent even, that it might almost be said that Nature is usually wrong" (*Ten O'Clock* 14). Wilde joins the cry in "The Decay of Lying," denouncing truth, "pleading for . . . Lying in art" (*Intentions* 5), pitching art directly against nature: "What Art really reveals to us, is Nature's lack of design. . . . Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" (*Intentions* 1–2).

Similarly, Swinburne's denunciation of an art that would be the "servant of fact" is understood against Ruskin's opinion that "the representation of facts" is the "first end of art" (*Modern Painters I* 45–46). Pater, for his part, proposes in his essay on style that the writer becomes an artist as her aim "comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact," but of her individual "sense of it" (*Appreciations* 9).[7] Wilde's protest against the "shackles of verisimilitude" suggests larger stakes to the question: "concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life" slips into capitulation to "the sordid perils of actual existence" (*Intentions* 139, 167–68). His Sidney-esque defense of an art that "builds out of [the facts of life] a world more real than reality itself" (*Intentions* 193) echoes Watteau's plaintive "dream of a better world than the real one" in Pater's imaginary portrait, the wish to realize "something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all" (*Imaginary Portraits* 34–35, 44).

The imitation of nature as of life appears in this context to imply not only the tedium of repetition but either a trivial or problematic replication of what is. The subtext of the Aesthetic disaffection with nature is the Ruskinian implication of the rightness of what is, elevated even unto a prescription of what ought to be. Yet even where life or nature do offer up something good or beautiful, which

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[7] Virginia Woolf will also take on "mere fact" in her critique of an ossified novelistic realism, for instance in "Modern Fiction" and her essays on biography (see chapter three below).

Wilde indicates is a rare occurrence to "wait and watch for," the artist exists "not to copy beauty but to create it in your art" (*Essays* 209). So Swinburne celebrates that "one more beautiful thing is achieved, one more delight is born into the world" (*Essays* 360–61)—and Arthur Symons, a generation later, that "a beauty which had never been in the world came into the world" (235). In either case, Wilde's taunting call "to see the object as in itself it really is not" (*Intentions* 146), a direct negation of Matthew Arnold's maxim ("to see the object as in itself it really is," *Essays* 1), also reads against Ruskin's foil as a call to untangle *is* from *ought*. Art's aesthetic, visionary function thereby is neither to confirm nature's rightness, nor merely to disclose its wrongness, but to fashion out of what is right and wrong in life and nature something new and good.

Wilde's rebuff to Nature, anti-Romantic gesture on the face of it, then in fact radicalizes the Romantic disaffection with a fallen world. If "the world is too much with us" (Wordsworth, *Poems* 150), nature gives no shelter from its corruption, authenticity no relief from its falsehoods.[8] The answer? In "Decay of Lying": no "return to Life and Nature" but more, and better culture; more, and better falsehoods (Wilde, *Intentions* 18). So in "Critic as Artist" Wilde prefers the "artificial," "self-conscious" spirit to any spontaneous, unselfconscious art of a primitive golden age that might be closer to (human) nature: Nature lags "always behind the age" (*Intentions* 122–25, 216). "As for the infinite variety of Nature. . . . It is not to be found in Nature herself" but in "imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness" (*Intentions* 2). Life being, like Nature, "a thing narrowed by circumstances," "terribly deficient in form," it is "through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence" (*Intentions* 167–68). Yet the Romantic mistrust of culture is retained in an Aesthetic discourse that intensifies the suspicion of commercial society while doing away with any proto-Romantic appeal to a lost communal organicity. For

[8] Cf. T. S. Eliot: "The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief" (Eliot 53).

the Aesthete accused of taking refuge in an art aloof from the social, "society" indeed emerges as a key term of suspicion—within the matrix of determinants that threaten to subsume the individual and ensure conformity and repetition.

Habit, which to Wordsworth seemed to guarantee the social bond, is for Pater "relative to a stereotyped world" (*Renaissance* 152). The Epicureanism of Pater's titular Marius becomes challenged when he detects in himself a lingering "deference, an 'assent,' entire, habitual, unconscious, to custom—to the actual habit or fashion of others" (*Marius* 164). Yet Marius never abandons a "vein of 'subjective' philosophy, with the individual for its standard of all things . . . with a certain incapacity wholly to accept other men's valuations" (35). The same threat to selfhood, arising from social and ideological mediation, recurs in Pater's unfinished *Gaston de Latour*, in which Gaston questions whether he is "a less independent ruler of his own mental world than he had fancied," deriving his thoughts and even perceptions "mediately from other people's impressions about [things], that he needed the pledge of their assents to ratify his own" (*Gaston* 40). Wilde would turn this doubt into wry judgment: "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation" (*De Profundis* 85). As for Pater who—in *Marius* especially but through all his fictions and critical studies—conjured an ideal of the individual ever in motion with respect to her time, society, mores, and available systems of thought, for Wilde the ideal type "will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. . . . Through constant change, and constant change alone, he will find his true unity" (*Intentions* 191).

If Pater's "Conclusion" could be read as a manifesto for aloof and leisurely aesthetic self-cultivation—away from "strenuous social commitment," also associated with Ruskin's views (see *Renaissance* xv)—Wilde would elevate the pitch of remonstrance to astringent antagonism, decrying in "Critic as Artist" the "tyranny of [a] dreadful social ideal" (*Intentions* 169). "England," his spokesman

Gilbert observes, "has invented and established Public Opinion, which is an attempt to organise the ignorance of the community, and to elevate it to the dignity of physical force" (*Intentions* 210). Wilde would modulate Gilbert's note of intellectual aristocracy, and his invective against philanthropic commitment to society (*Intentions* 179), in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* published soon after. Here the critique of "altruism" is specified as one of officially sanctioned "altruistic virtues," bandied to bludgeon the individual into conformity—and ultimately defeating their supposed purpose (*Soul* 1–4, 31–33).[9] Wilde's brand of "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism" (*Soul* 5). He celebrates individualism—which he equates fully with art: "Art is Individualism"—because it is "a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (*Soul* 47). Opposing art to "a dreadful social ideal" and to actual social existence in Victorian England, Wilde therefore regards the individual as synonymous with creativity and the possibility of the new against forces of conformism.

The question of use here comes to the fore since the Victorian standards from which Aesthetes sought to divorce art were invariably tinged with a moralism dictating how art should serve society. Ruskin's injunction to imitate nature, as we saw, entailed this moralistic element since the perfection of nature for Ruskin carried a moral order which the artist was meant to reveal intact. "All falsehood" in art, therefore, "must be a blot as well as a sin, an injury as well as a deception" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters I* 47). It is this morally charged category of "truth" underpinning Ruskin's mimeticism that Wilde targets in "The Decay of Lying," not least in his deliberate choice of "lying" as his word for the fabricating artifice which is the path to a different kind of truth. In "The Critic as Artist," he tellingly joins the "sinner" to the "dreamer" as creative agents socially

[9] See chapter three for Virginia Woolf's similar critique of officially sanctioned abstractions such as duty and self-sacrifice.

reviled. "Society, which is the beginning and basis of morals. . . . often forgives the criminal, it never forgives the dreamer" (*Intentions* 130, 169). The moralist, spokesperson of "Public Opinion," distributes judgments from the standpoint of service to the version of society that they represent. This forms part of the subtext of Whistler's complaint about a viewing public that has been taught to ask of the work of art whether it "shall or shall not, *from a social point of view*, better their mental or moral state" (*Ten O'Clock* 9, emphasis added).

So Swinburne's celebration of Blake's independence from "established opinion and the incarnate moralities of church or household" is no more a simple token of Swinburne's irreligion than proselytism for Blake's eccentric visions (*William Blake* 90). Its target is the public manifestations of "a religion which has for Walhalla . . . some prison fitted with moral cranks and divine treadmills of all virtues," with "no place among its heroes for the most energetic of mere artists" (*William Blake* 86). Swinburne's concern is evidently his own

> epoch given to *preachers (lay, clerical, and mixed)* who assert . . . that you may demand, nay are bound to demand, of a picture or poem what message it has for you, what may be its moral utility or material worth? 'Poetry must conform itself to' &c.; 'art must have a mission and meaning appreciable by earnest men in an age of work,' and so forth. *These* be thy gods, O Philistia. (*William Blake* 89, my emphases)[10]

The Aesthete's contrarianism, finally, is pleasingly exemplified in the long title of Whistler's 1890 scrapbook, on his trials with moral authority and public opinion, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies: As Pleasingly Exemplified in Many Instances, Wherein the Serious Ones of this Earth, Carefully Exasperated, Have*

[10] Walter Hamilton records in *The Aesthetic Movement in England* the use of "Philistines" to refer to the Aesthete's antagonists.

Been Prettily Spurred on to Unseemliness and Indiscretion, While Overcome by an Undue Sense of Right.

The controversy over Pater's Conclusion" revolved around the perceived amoralism of its hedonistic principles. Wilde, for his part, would boldly decorate his Aesthetic view with the badge of immoralism, declaring in "Critic as Artist" that "All art is immoral" (*Intentions* 169). In light of the Aesthete's unease about deterministic processes, the moralist appears as a visible and active arm of—what is the more fearful prospect perhaps—passive and subtle forces of social conformism and determination: conscious and prescriptive where the other is automatic and descriptive, legislated and enforced where the other is discovered as par with natural law. As Swinburne writes of "Nature and Religion": "two fetters of life . . . an obscure material force on this hand, and on that a mournful imperious law" (*William Blake* 118–19). To the Aesthetic generation natural and social history alike loomed as obscure material forces which threatened to shackle or preclude individuality. At the same time, an expanding bourgeois society fastened its grip on cultural life and seemed to appoint its guardians to police public tastes and mores and ensure their conformity. These conditions form the intellectual and cultural climate in which the Aesthetes vehemently opposed the aesthetic to the useful.

Wilde's categorical claim that "all art is quite useless" (*Picture* 4) needs to be read within the set of Aesthetic protestations surveyed in this section: "Art is our spirited protest [against] Nature" (*Intentions* 2); "the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been" (*Soul* 65); "all Art is immoral" (*Intentions* 217); "Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a [socially] disturbing and disintegrating force" (*Soul* 47). I have sought to build a sense of the burden of ideas pressing on these bare and mordant statements. If the overriding theme has been the Aesthetic concern to safeguard the individual, what then are the implications of this defense of individuality for the question of use and means-ends relations? This will be the subject of the next section. In

forging their contrarian views of the aesthetic, Aesthetes entrenched art primarily against any discourses that would bind it—through prescription or description—to the standards of what is and has been. In so doing they placed a premium always on the new and unique in the sphere of values. The Aesthetic individual, therefore, ties in conceptually with the *really new*—both being unlike, not determined by, not deducible from anything else in existence—so that it will be proper to speak of *individuation* as a core concern of Aesthetic discourse.

"For one's self, or not at all"? Art for the individual

So far, we have seen the Aesthetic concern with the individual emerge negatively against the backdrop of a panoply of suspect terms smacking for the Aesthete of conformity and determinism: "Individualism," in Wilde's terms, as a "disturbing and disintegrating force" inimical to "monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (*Soul* 47). What then is the individual under threat from these pressures, and what are the positive terms of its Aesthetic defense? If the Aesthete's rejection of the useful is to be understood in relation to a matrix of suspect terms conceived as threats to the individual, what implications does the Aesthetic concern with the individual then bear on the question of use?

There are two aspects to the Aesthetic preoccupation with the individual from a value perspective, entailed in Pater's statement of a "vein of 'subjective' philosophy, with the individual for its standard of all things" (*Marius* 35). The first is simply that all value must be judged from the standpoint of the individual: judgments on the useful regulated by ends defined by and for the individual subject. The individual presides over the identification of those valued ends synonymous at any time with her interest and well-being (whatever those might be, since their criteria are individual), and is empowered to select and deploy the means proper to realizing those ends. The individual subject becomes both the

source and destination of the means-ends relations that subtend the useful. We can see here the basis of the moral outrage at Pater's "Conclusion." His critics latched on to the amoral implications of an individualism that would lead astray "minds weaker than [Pater's] own" to the expedient pursuit of "momentary enjoyment"—given also Pater's emphasis on the chaotic nature of experience moment to moment (see Donoghue 55–56). Both these offending emphases, however, emerge rather as conceptual results of Pater's skeptical empiricism.

The second facet to an Aestheticism "with the individual for its standard of all things" is a premium placed on individuation in the sphere of values. The individual in this sense no longer refers to the individual subject but in general to individualized things. With respect to the useful, this means a special value attached to individuated, i.e., new and unique objects and qualities: unforeseen, not simply replicating already existing goods, not defined by an established standard of utility or of worthwhile ends. The production of new and unique goods, in other words, becomes itself a privileged end—in art, but in all areas of life and experience as well. This does not mean that the individual is fully a good in itself—that all individuated things are valuable because of their singularity—only that the Aesthete accords a privilege to goods that are novel and unique.

In Kate Hext's revisionist reading of Pater's aesthetic philosophy, the individual stands as the central question in place of art or beauty (1). This section will show that an Aesthetic discourse on the beautiful is conjoined to a discourse of individuation in the sphere of values. Beauty thus recurs as a paradigmatic experiential good from the point of view of the individual closely linked to the singularity and novelty of its particular manifestations.

The "vein of 'subjective' philosophy" that animates Pater's Aestheticism finds expression in his preface to *The Renaissance*. He announces the central tenet of his criticism through the set of questions:

> What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the æsthetic critic has to do. (*Renaissance* xxix)

Pater starts out from Arnold's definition of the function of criticism—"to see the object as in itself it really is"—and amends it: "In æsthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (*Renaissance* xxix). Although Wilde turns Arnold's statement on its head in "The Critic as Artist" ("to see the object as in itself it really is not," *Intentions* 146), elsewhere he retains Pater's formulation: "certainly the first step in æsthetic criticism is to realise one's own impressions" (*Intentions* 66).

It becomes apparent in Pater's preface, and still more in the "Conclusion," that the individual's impression constitutes not just the first step but the last, the ultimate end in engagement with works of art—or any other phenomena. "As in the study of light, of morals, of number," he continues, "one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not at all" (*Renaissance* xxix). What was a starting point becomes "always the chief question which a critic has to answer": "What is the peculiar sensation, what is the peculiar quality of pleasure, which [the] work has the property of exciting in us, and which we cannot get elsewhere?" (*Renaissance* 33). Finally, it is not any "fruit of experience, but experience itself," as Pater recapitulates in the "Conclusion," that "is the end" (*Renaissance* 152). Therefore "the theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest in which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us" (*Renaissance* 153).

This individual, experiential basis grounds the famous final sentence of the "Conclusion" which comes as Pater's gloss on the "love of art for its own sake": "For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (*Renaissance* 153). This statement at least of the Aesthetic maxim by Pater clearly does not extricate the aesthetic object from means-ends relations nor cast it necessarily as a final end. It allows art to stand as a privileged means to an end stated only as this undefined "quality" experienced as a good. Having just cast aside the "fruit" of experience, Pater moreover is not averse to reusing the word in expressing that sought-after end, as long as it refers similarly to an experiential quality: "Only be sure . . . that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness" (*Renaissance* 153).

Beauty—or the experience of beauty—is of course a key "quality" for Pater and the Aesthetes. Yet the very first lines of *The Renaissance* take up the matter only to forgo any attempt "to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms" (xxix). This is because "beauty, *like all other qualities presented to human experience*, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness" (emphasis added). Beyond the relative or subjective nature of judgments on the beautiful, Pater's refusal to deal with the concept in its generality is of a piece with the basis that he takes in the individual and the experiential. He refers ever to "the peculiar sensation," "the peculiar quality of pleasure," "pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind," "a special, a unique, impression of pleasure," "a single sharp impression" (*Renaissance* xxx, 33, 151). The "true student of æsthetics" deals with "this or that special manifestation" and "has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself . . . metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere. He may pass them all by as being, answerable or not, of no interest to him" (xxix–xxx). "Our education becomes complete," Pater concludes, "as our susceptibility

to these impressions increases in depth and variety. . . . a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects." We begin to see that Pater's Aesthetic concern with the individual is not limited to the experiencing subject but extends to the individual object and even to the singular impression.

Pater took seriously the questions raised by his critics about the seemingly absent moral sense of his individualism and focus on the pleasurable experience of beauty. He went so far as to suppress the offending "Conclusion" from the second edition of *The Renaissance*, reinstating it only after publishing *Marius the Epicurean* where he claimed to address the matter more fully.[11] The novel is Pater's attempt to reconcile ethics within his Aesthetic vision, concluding that the ethical is part and parcel of the aesthetic (see Gagnier 57). Marius' life of "sensations and ideas," without shaking his sense of the individual as standard of all things, leads him to develop an aesthetic sensibility to the experience of others, taking in "all the conditions of life" (*Marius* 221).[12] "Not pleasure" merely, "but a general completeness of life, was the practical ideal. . . . a life of various and select sensation" to which "the most direct and effective auxiliary must be, in a word, Insight" (*Marius* 102).[13] On this basis Marius dismisses "the charge of 'hedonism,'" and extends an individualist "criterion of values" on behalf of all individuals (107).

Pater's Aesthetic outlook effectively anchors value in ends defined by and for individuals. Although beauty is particularly prized in *The Renaissance*, we see that Pater ranks it with "all other qualities presented to human experience," referring to it as an experienced, "peculiar quality of pleasure." In expanding on

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[11] Pater added a footnote referring the reader to that fuller examination while echoing the language of the critique he received: "I conceived it [the 'Conclusion'] might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall" (*Renaissance* 150n1).

[12] Cf. Wilde: "If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism"; and "to know anything about oneself one must know all about others" (*Intentions* 156, 172).

[13] "A true Epicureanism," Pater writes elsewhere, "aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism," including "the moral sense" (*Essays* 162).

the moral implications of his individualism, he frames the good doubly in terms of the qualities of individual experience, and according to those ends and values which the individual can make her own. Marius' "maxim of *Life as the end of life*" (102), generalizing the Aesthetic motto of art for art's sake, extends the Aesthetic "temperament" to bear on other ends beside the experience of beauty in art while underlining the experiential basis of the good for Pater: it entails "refining all the instruments of inward and outward intuition" in the service of "our actual experience in the world." Marius proceeds to call this "an art—an art in some degree peculiar to each individual character." Nothing here suggests that the beautiful object lies outside of means-ends relations or bars the path to further ends; the object is submitted, instead, simply to an individualist and experiential "criterion" of means and ends. Marius' maxim makes clear, moreover, that its formula is recursive and not simply tautological: experience in the continual service of experience as well as an end-in-itself.

Pater's Epicurean individualism is the conceptual result of his skeptical empiricism. That is his starting point, which he attempts to work out in aesthetics and ethics alike. If in *Gaston de Latour* the philosopher had "one subject always in prominence—himself," so throughout Pater's career one overriding theme is retained: "this undissembled egotism" is but a consequence of "the recognition, over against, or in continuation of, that world of floating doubt, of the individual mind, as for each one severally, at once the unique organ, and the only matter, of knowledge . . . in its absolute loneliness" (*Gaston* 105). The "Conclusion" already announces this persistent theme:

> the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience . . . is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality, through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual

> in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (*Renaissance* 151)

For Pater, in other words, the individual as "standard of all things" and "criterion of values" flows from the incontrovertible experiential priority of the individual: that the good is only ever experienced by the individual subject.

And yet Pater does not go so far as to claim on the basis of this experiential priority the ontological priority of the individual. More accurately put, he goes farther. His quasi-phenomenological "analysis goes a step further still" so that objects are "dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force . . . suspended" and "loosed into a group of impressions" (*Renaissance* 151). These impressions in turn become "unstable, flickering, inconsistent" and in "perpetual flight," so the accent falls on the individual impression changing moment to moment. But as a result, the perceiving subject is destabilized in a "continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (152). Pater's skeptical starting point, while binding him to the experiential standpoint of a perceiving subject, generates an apparent conflict with the view of that subject as the sovereign and self-consistent source of valuations. Embracing this implication, Pater hints rather at a rudimentary materialist conception of the individual—as opposed to an Idealist assumption of an individual subject existing *a priori*—which the next section will examine further.

The second facet to an Aesthetic outlook "with the individual for its standard of all things" is a premium placed on individuated qualities—individuation itself as a standard. The Aesthete privileges individuated qualities, unique and non-interchangeable, above fungible goods that may be substituted without loss, realized by other means with no difference in result, and that conform to a type. This premium on singularity leads to a logically kindred emphasis on the new, that which does not merely replicate available objects or qualities. The category

of the new is in a sense none other than the individual in temporal perspective. The difference of the individual at a given moment from other things in existence obtains also in the difference of the new from the old. Novelty moreover appears conceptually necessary for the continued possibility of the singular—since replication promises otherwise to suppress individuality. In Aesthetic discourse, burdened by the dual pressures of conformity and determinism, the individual betokens the singular and the new.

Again, the Aesthetic conception of beauty is instructively tied to a discourse of individuation. For Pater, "all works of art"—along with "the fairer forms of nature and human life"—are to be regarded "as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind" (*Renaissance* xxx). "A special, a unique, impression of pleasure," a "peculiar quality of pleasure . . . which we cannot get elsewhere": these are his terms for "this or that special manifestation" of beauty, to which it is the true business of the student of aesthetics to attend (xxix, 33). "Peculiar" appears in fact a favorite word of Pater's, recurring in his writing with comparable, and sometimes greater frequency than "beautiful."[14] No wonder that Denis Donoghue selects for the subtitle of his Pater biography the phrase "lover of strange souls" (from the essay on Leonardo; *Renaissance* 64), which might with more accuracy be generalized as an attachment to the peculiar—connoting the particular and the special as well as the odd and unusual.

Wilde's American lecture on "The English Renaissance of Art"— heavily Paterian, though Wilde does not cite his direct source—starts out in terms all but identical to *The Renaissance*: calling to "realise [beauty] always in its special manifestations," discarding any "universal formula," referring to the "particular picture or poem affect[ing] us with a unique and special joy" (*Intentions* 111).

[14] Searches of digitized texts out of curiosity turned up 30 instances of "peculiar" to 35 of "beautiful" in *The Renaissance*, 57 to 36 in *Marius*, 6 to 7 in *Imaginary Portraits*, 48 to 23 in *Appreciations*, 48 to 47 in *Plato*, 14 to 7 in *Gaston de Latour*, and roughly 27 to 26 in the cited selection of *Essays on Literature and Art*.

Much later Wilde would call the work of art "the unique result of a unique temperament," allying the individuality of the work to that of the artist-subject (*Soul* 41). This statement provides a gloss on others by Wilde identifying art with the "opportunity of expressing [man's] own individuality which, as it is the essence of all life, is the source of all art" (*Essays* 152). Although related in both cases to the individuality of the subject, the work of art produces a unique effect in its own right rather than transcripts of a (stable) personality. As Wilde writes elsewhere, "Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things" (*Intentions* 40).

Swinburne seems to express the highest valuation he can offer when he writes of Coleridge's "best verses . . . that the world has nothing like them, and can never have: that they are of the highest kind, and of their own" (*Essays* 259–60). Relatedly, Swinburne praises Dante Gabriel Rossetti for poems that "can be neither unwoven nor recast by any process of analysis," and "cannot be parcelled and portioned out for praise or comment" (*Essays* 64). This early statement of the "heresy of paraphrase" (codified in the mid-twentieth century by Cleanth Brooks, 176) frames the matter quite literally in terms of individuality: that which cannot be divided and separated out joins the unique and unrepeatable in Swinburne's estimation of poetic quality. If "style," for Wilde, pertains to the "unity . . . of the individual" (*Intentions* 123), Pater in his essay on style embraces the Flaubertian axiom of the *mot juste* in the following terms: "The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there!—the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation" (*Appreciations* 29).

The Aesthetic attachment to the category of the individual extends what Wilde calls the "romantic spirit," which concerns itself with "the exception" as opposed to "the type" (*Essays* 113). We have seen that Wilde radicalizes the romantic spirit, censuring nature along with society as sources of "monotony of

type." "The world," he suggests in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, "hates Individualism" because it disturbs conformity. Wilde therefore introduces art to his vision of a socialism-for-the-individual under the sign of individuality itself, doing so on dual grounds. On the one hand for Wilde, as for Pater's Marius, the experience of art gestures paradigmatically to that art of living in service of "our actual experience in the world"— "an art," moreover, "in some degree peculiar to each individual" (*Marius* 102).[15] On the other hand, the practice of art represents for Wilde the best existing model of a non-conformist individualism because of its affinity to the unique in the sphere of values: "Art is the most intense Individualism that the world has known," perhaps "the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known" (*Soul* 41).

Wilde's early lecture at the same time associates the "romantic" spirit with the spirit of "exception," "seeking for new subjects for poetry, new forms of art, new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments" (*Essays* 112–13). The "exception," relative in the synchronic sense to the rule that describes a type, is also relative in the diachronic sense to the rule that determines what will be from the condition of what is and has been, and the rule that prescribes what ought to be on the basis of an existing standard. The Aesthetic premium on individuation therefore requires the continued production of new goods and values that are not fully determined by, that break with or modify existing and accepted standards.

Aesthetic discourse on beauty again ties in closely with the idea of the new. "The imagination" for Wilde "is essentially creative, and always seeks for a new form" (*Intentions* 32). Swinburne accordingly celebrates not simply the

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[15] In this context Wilde prioritizes pleasure in the experience of labor as in that of art, adding that "by work I simply mean activity of any kind" (*Soul* 14). Freedom from compulsion in the sphere of labor allows the choice of those spheres of activity that provide pleasure to the individual, it being "mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure" (*Soul* 6, 36). Wilde's utopian sublation of labor in art recalls his early expression of affinity to William Morris' conception of the worker-artist (see *Essays* 152).

unique aesthetic object but the event of its occurrence: "a new thing of great price has been cast"; "one more beautiful thing is achieved, one more delight is born into the world" (*Essays* 121, 360–61). Arthur Symons would seem to echo these lines directly, writing of "that instant" when "a beauty which had never been in the world came into the world; a new thing was created, lived, died" (235).[16] Pater's Epicureanism of course calls for this quest after new impressions, so that Denis Donoghue rightly emphasizes the status of the work of art for Pater too as "an object added to the world" (310). The most categorical statement of the relation of artistic beauty to the new characteristically comes from Wilde: "the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been" (*Soul* 65).

Wilde attaches art to the new against the determinisms of nature and culture. Whereas art produces new effects, nature, "forgetting that imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it" (*Intentions* 40). In *The Soul of Man*, where Wilde's concern is with the social, he pits art against the grip of a problematic past and present to equate art with the individual as agent and beneficiary of a different future. "To measure [art] by the standard of the past," Wilde maintains, "is to measure it by a standard on the rejection of which its real perfection depends" (*Soul* 65). At the same time, "the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are" (*Soul* 77).

[16] Commenting on a performance of the Kreutzer Sonata, Symons goes on to accent the note of depersonalization present in Swinburne's exclamations: "That thing was neither Beethoven nor Ysaye, it was made of their meeting; it was music, not abstract, but embodied in sound; and just that miracle could never occur again, though others like it might be repeated for ever" (235). The passage, which recalls Pater's emphasis on the concrete and special manifestation, reads as a gloss also on a similar statement by Wilde: "When Rubinstein plays to us the *Sonata Appassionata* of Beethoven, he gives us not merely Beethoven, but also himself, and so gives us Beethoven absolutely—Beethoven re-interpreted through a rich artistic nature, and made vivid and wonderful to us by a new and intense personality" (*Intentions* 157). Wilde notably offers this observation as a token of art's relation to the new: performance ever renewing the materials or texts which it brings to life.

In this context, public opinion and authority represent for Wilde powerful arms that work to conform society to itself, and the future to the past and present, in aesthetic alike to other matters. Antagonism issues from these quarters before belonging to art itself: "it is the fact that Art is this intense form of Individualism that makes the public try to exercise over it an authority that is as immoral as it is ridiculous" (*Soul* 42). To that end, "the public make use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms" (*Soul* 48). The public and its appointed authorities vilify new forms of art as "grossly unintelligible" when "they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new" (*Soul* 49). This is the same "Public Opinion" which Wilde writes in scare quotes in "The Critic as Artist," declaring it an English-bred institution for elevating "the ignorance of the community" to the "dignity of a physical force" (*Intentions* 210). Public opinion thus names for Wilde the conformist tendencies of society rendered into a prescriptive force, on behalf of dominant codes, backed by public authority: "Whenever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates" (*Soul* 40–41).

When Swinburne decries an art that would be the "pioneer of morality," by "pioneer" he means what in current usage we would call "pawn": commanded foot soldier, or mere stooge exploited by others for their own purposes. Art as a "pioneer" in our current sense would have been more congenial to the Aesthete, even with respect to morality: a discoverer, or better, inventor, of new values or standards.[17] This would be of a piece with the conception of the work of art for Pater, as Donoghue puts it, as "the outward sign of a type of life that may be new,

[17] This forms a subtext of Wilde's turning of tables in his claim that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life" (*Intentions* 53)—without forgetting Wilde's proviso that "imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult."

an original self-creation" (310). One of Pater's central questions in encountering the aesthetic object is: "How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence" (*Renaissance* xxix). For Wilde, similarly, "the good we get from art is not what we learn from it; it is what we become through it" (*Essays* 150). These statements provide a gloss on Wilde's repeated claims attaching art to the intensification of personality and individuality (*Intentions* 130, 156; *Soul* 52, 69). The individual that constitutes the end and beneficiary of the aesthetic is not necessarily a static essence but a process in formation.

Finally form, that other Aesthetic idol—"Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the æsthetic instinct" (*Intentions* 202)—enters the picture also in relation to the new and the possibility of individuation. Far from a Platonic conception of essential forms, to the Aesthete form figures often as a principle allowing the formation of the new from the materials of the old. For Wilde creative activity simply "works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful" (*Intentions* 138–39). If the course of nature and social life tends towards "monotony of type," art provides an exception by "rearranging the facts of common life for us" (Wilde, *Essays* 150), "rearrang[ing] the details of modern life" (Pater, *Renaissance* 148), to "create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world" (*Intentions* 136). For Whistler nature becomes ever a resource for the artist instead of a constraint when it simply offers "hints for his own combinations" (*Ten O'Clock* 16). Such a principle of (re)combination provides the basis for an Aesthetic conception of the individual distinct from the Idealist assumption of an *a priori* and self-consistent subject.

"A tremulous wisp re-forming itself on the stream": the Aesthetic individual

Criticisms leveled at the time at an Aesthetic aloofness from the social world and from moral obligation could only be seen to confirm the Aesthete's antagonism

to prevalent and prescriptive standards. Yet Aestheticism would also be critiqued from quarters otherwise sympathetic to an oppositional positioning of art in principle against conformist tendencies, in defense of the particular and singular. The Aesthete, in such critiques, takes refuge in or attempts to construct a self-sufficient aesthetic realm in denial of the pressures of nature, society, and history, and shows an optimistic or naïve attachment to a sovereign and self-possessed individuality which becomes the subject and object of Aesthetic defense. Does the Aesthetic individual conform to this notion of the autonomous subject? And how does Aesthetic discourse position the individual with respect to the forces perceived to threaten the possibility of its existence?

Certainly, the writers of the Aesthetic Movement do offer claims that are indicative of a rarefied and timeless aesthetic realm as the province of art, and a heroic and self-possessed artist that can brave the determinisms of nature and culture to produce the unique, the new, and the beautiful. Swinburne writes that the aesthetic muse "is omnipresent . . . . the stuff she deals with is eternal, and eternally the same" (Swinburne, *Essays* 48–49). Wilde appropriates Swinburne's claim (without attribution): "to the poet all times and places are one; the stuff he deals with is eternal, and eternally the same" (*Essays* 130). For Whistler, the masterful artist puts nature "always at his service," and freely manipulates its materials and forms to "bring forth from chaos glorious harmony" (*Ten O'Clock* 14, 16). Yet Aesthetic discourse contains also a distinct streak that accounts for the individual by mobilizing rather than suppressing the contradictions weighing upon it, (re)conceiving the material forces that threaten the sovereign individual as conditions for the possibility of individuation.

Theodor Adorno's own aestheticist critical project provides instructive reference points because Adorno likewise commits the aesthetic to the defense of the individual and the particular—both the individual subject and the object in its particularity—while also blasting the conceptual grounds of an independent individual which he identifies with Enlightenment philosophy and bourgeois

ideology. Adorno's is a key articulation of a suspicion of modern individuality stamping much late-twentieth and twenty-first-century critical thought, targeting the Idealist basis of an *a priori* autonomous and self-consistent individual that stands problematically apart from nature and history. Pater and Wilde, however, in coming to grips with the individual's fraught relation to these forces, hint at a conception of individuation that chimes markedly with Adorno's concerns.

"In the age of the individual's liquidation," writes Adorno, "the question of individuality must be raised anew" (*Minima Moralia* 129). Like the Aesthetes, Adorno's thought is animated by conceptual and material threats to individuality. Like the Aesthetes too Adorno concerns himself not simply with the individual (human) subject but with the "subsumption of everything individual" within general categories that elide their differences—for him the quintessential logic of domination, in thought and cognition and analogously in the organization of social life (*Negative Dialectics* 310–11). "The matters of true philosophical interest at this point of history," therefore, "are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity" (*Negative Dialectics* 8). Adorno (with Max Horkheimer) diagnoses with familiar pessimism a "total society" in which individuals dwindle to "mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity" (Horkheimer and Adorno 29). Yet he would also claim that "some of the force of protest has reverted to the individual. . . . In the period of his decay, the individual's experience of himself and what he encounters contributes once more to knowledge": "if critical theory lingers there, it is not only with a bad conscience" (*Minima Moralia* 17–18).

This "bad conscience" has all to do with a fraught story of the individual which Adorno and Horkheimer recount in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Modern thought institutes the sovereign individual subject in a relation of mastery to the world outside it as humankind begins to gain ascendancy in the struggle with the hardships of the natural world and the elements. This premise, however, fatally

eclipses the parts of nature and history in the constitution of the human subject, while its hubris precipitates a doomed quest to subjugate the world of objects brought under the ambit of the subject as it conceives itself. The result is an individual that ignores the conditions of its own existence and a humankind that defeats individuality by extending the project of domination to all objects—including the objective existence of human subjects themselves.

Philip Weinstein traces this same story of the individual to the Cartesian conception of "the subject as one who comes to know" (26). Descartes, in effect, grounds this knowledge through an "*ontological* move" whereby "the individual occupies a prior space of inner being" from which it meets a world without (44). His method of "corrosive doubt" leaves standing a *"res cogitans*, the thinking thing" set apart from "the vast domain of extended material nature" (27). This constitutes effectively "a subject without history . . . but latent with a future," whose existence is logically prior to its encounter with the material world—including its own body—that it then comes to know (30). The Lockean blank slate presents a version of this individual similarly deprived of history. But the sovereign subject becomes enshrined when Kant solves the problems raised by empiricism by basing knowledge of the world in its conformity to the subject's pre-existing categories. Like Descartes, Kant relies on the premise that "we are conscious *a priori* of the thoroughgoing identity of ourselves," that "the *I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations" (qtd. in Weinstein 41). The principle of "inner coherence" that thus guarantees cognition, which Weinstein describes as a fiction—"'I' is an illusion of sustained identity" (Weinstein 46)—represents also for Adorno a costly reduction to an "ever-unchanging 'I think'" within "the identical, enduring self" (Horkheimer and Adorno 20, 42).

The problem is not only that this *a priori* and self-consistent self denies its own material and historical nature, but that its manner of knowing distorts the world by conforming it to itself, evading substantive encounter with objects in their particularity. Weinstein therefore terms this version of the individual an

"ego-logy that never leaves the precincts of self-sameness" (30). The sovereignty of the individual here is synonymous with the subject's capacity to "convert[]—by way of knowing—the otherness of everything it encounters into aspects of its own (reconfirmed) self-sameness" (Weinstein 46). For Adorno, this is part of the operation of "concepts," which subsume particulars in their generality. "The shortcomings of a cognition that can make sure of no particular without the concept," he writes, "redound . . . to the advantage of the mind that will rise above the particular and cleanse it of all that resists the concept" (*Negative Dialectics* 173–74). Yet it is clear, for Adorno, that this is not simply an operation that the mind effects on its own, but one that is mediated socially and enforced in collective life. "Identity," he writes (meaning this logic of self-sameness), is "the primal form of ideology" (*Negative Dialectics* 148). The "principle of identification" becomes also fundamental to the commodity logic that makes "nonidentical individuals" commensurable and interchangeable (146).

This sovereign subject then renders the world of objects and particulars alien only to reappropriate it by adequating these to itself. It establishes "in pure alienation," for Weinstein, the "object *as what is to be known*" while instituting the "instrumental" relation of "the object as means to the subject's ends" (28). Alienation and instrumentality thus constitute "not just liabilities of Cartesian knowing, they are its necessary conditions." Hence the trouble of instrumentality in this line of critique: insofar as ends are rooted in this sovereign, pre-established subject position, the relation of means and ends is submitted to the rule of the self-same. Again, this logic obtains not simply on the level of the isolated mind—"bewitched, on pain of losing [its] existence, not to perceive how mediated [its] isolation is"—but more generally: the "adequacy" of the object to the purposes of the subject "has always been subjection to dominant purposes," ideology working on a collective scale in "complicity with identifying thought" (*Negative Dialectics* 148, 312).

If Pater is led to root value in ends defined by and for the individual subject, does his Aesthetic outlook then undercut its ostensible emphasis on the singular and particular by trapping itself within the "precincts of self-sameness"? We have already seen that the same skeptical stance that commits Pater to the experiential standpoint of a perceiving subject, when pushed further, generates a conflict with the view of that subject as any kind of self-consistent source of valuations. Pater's adoption of an empiricist view of the self as "a bundle of sensations," as Jonathan Loesberg writes, is "deindividuating" in implication (21). Suffused, as Carolyn Williams, indicates by the empiricist epistemologies of Locke and Hume as well as by Berkeley and Kant's Idealist responses, the "Conclusion" aims to confront the problems raised by what Pater calls "modern thought" by acknowledging them and "regulating their effects" (12, 20). Pater does more than acknowledge the deindividuating implications of his skeptical standpoint: he embraces them. Rather than attempt to rescue a cohesive self from dispersal into "a combination of natural elements" or a "passage and dissolution of impressions," he allows doubt to corrode that self to redefine the individual as a "tremulous wisp re-forming itself on the stream" (*Renaissance* 150–152). Not "the identical, enduring self" interests Pater but what he refers to as an "elusive inscrutable mistakable self" ("History of Philosophy," qtd. in Hext 11).

Williams suggestively remarks that the note of Berkeleyan solipsism which Pater evokes—"each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" (*Renaissance* 151)—is countervailed by the vocabulary of mobility in his metaphors of the "race of the mid-stream," the impression in "perpetual flight," the "quickened, multiplied consciousness" passing "swiftly from point to point" (*Renaissance* 151–53). The implied picture of a "free, unrestrained, and mobile" mental life is the "very opposite of solipsistic, immobilized, and imprisoned" (Williams 24, 27–28). Pater's ideal of a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" thus diverges from the fixed and identical subject that bends the world to itself. As Pater suggests elsewhere in *The Renaissance*, Aesthetic

"natures rejoice to be away from and past their former selves" (*Renaissance* 147). "I have no end in writing but to discover myself," claims Gaston de Latour but continues: "who also shall peradventure be another thing to-morrow" (*Gaston* 106). This echoes in Pater's sense of the critic's "nature modified" by the presence of the object, as in Wilde's implication in *The Soul of Man* that individualism represents nearer an end than a starting point.

Revisionist readings of Pater's Aesthetic philosophy have paid increasing attention to his conceptual engagement with "forces of self-dissolution" (Hext 4). "Outside conditions," for Angela Leighton, so "permeate the self . . . that the difference between self and not self is lost" ("Aesthetic Conditions" 18). Kate Hext is right to point out, however, that such a "proto-postmodern" view of the Paterian subject can occlude the stakes of Pater's bid to reconceptualize the individual (61). Given the burden of protest that the Aesthetic individual comes to bear in relation to conformist and deterministic pressures—logics of "identity" in Adorno's sense—a too-exclusive emphasis on dissolution misses some of the import of the "identity-lessness" that Leighton infers (while eliding the persistent emphasis on individuality in Aesthetic discourse). Self-dissolution more fairly presents to Pater one moment in a dialectical movement which, running counter to the supposition of a fixed and identical self, lays a different conceptual ground for individuation. A positive and a negative dimension obtain in the "weaving and unweaving of ourselves" that interests Pater (*Renaissance* 152).

The trouble with the sovereign and self-consistent individual has also to do with the problematic assumption of the subject's independence from nature, in denial of its material constitution. For Adorno, the "turn against nature" implicit in this Idealist separation enables the "subjective usurpation" whereby "nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank" (*Aesthetic Theory* 62). Pertinent to the opposition between the individual and nature is of course the Aesthetic turn against nature epitomized

by Wilde in "The Decay of Lying." Two distinct ideas of nature, however, come into play in Wilde's position which is opposed, as we have seen, to a Ruskinian conception of nature as the perennial source of truth, beauty, and moral order. Wilde and other Aesthetic writers do associate themselves, on the other hand, and despite apparent paradox, with alternative conceptions of nature—and of the material constitution of the individual—that emphasize mobility and variation. The Aesthetic treatment of nature further presents analogues to the Aesthetic individual's relation to history.

Before addressing "the inward world of thought and feeling" to describe the fragmentary qualities of mental experience, Pater opts to "begin with that which is without—our physical life" (*Renaissance* 150). The deindividuating impetus in this opening paragraph of the "Conclusion" derives from the recognition that the same "natural elements" and "elementary forces . . . of which we are composed" occur in the world outside us, "in places most remote." Conjuring a human body and a world alike abuzz with the play of elements and forces—including "the modification of the tissues of the brain by every ray of light and sound"—Pater concludes that "our physical life is a perpetual motion of them" (*Renaissance* 150). Pater does not retreat to the domain of mental experience in order to recant or contradict this picture of the material make-up of the self, but to retain the sense of mobility that the latter implies: again, what appears to preclude one conception of the independent self turns out to present a conceptual opportunity. The sovereign Enlightenment subject presumes to sever itself, in Weinstein's words, from a nature "sharing the fabric of his own being" (26). For Pater, nature and necessity are "not, as of old, a sort of mythological personage without us with whom we can do warfare"—a curious inversion in itself. "It is rather a magic web *woven through and through us*" (*Renaissance* 148, emphasis added).

Swinburne invokes the sovereignty of the subject to own "that we must live as the sons and not as the lords of nature," "ceasing to expect subservience

to our own ends from all forces and influences of existing things" (*Essays* 134). Citing Arnold—"To tunes we did not call our being must keep chime" (*Poetical Works* 449)—Swinburne also means to recast the recognition as a condition of possibility: "no reason to live basely instead of nobly," "ceasing to attempt and achieve the best we can." His language recalls Pater's, for whom the recognition of "all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing upon [man] . . . bids us . . . to make what we can of these" (Pater, *Essays* 2–3).

Part of the subtext for Swinburne, as for Pater who refers to the "remote laws of inheritance," is of course nature in Darwinian perspective. Although, as we have seen, the Aesthetes respond to the threat of determination by an obscure past cast in one sense by the shadow of evolutionary science, they seem to detect here too a conceptual opportunity. T. H. Huxley himself notes how "it is often strangely forgotten that the essential conditions of the modification, or evolution, of living things are *variation* and hereditary transmission" through selection—natural and artificial (*Evolution* 15, emphasis added). Nature itself in this view "is far from possessing the attribute of permanence. Rather its very essence is impermanence" (*Evolution* 4). Aesthetic writers show a willingness to adopt such a conception in contrast to the assumption of immutable nature. The Darwinian prospect that "the soul that dwells within us," as Wilde puts it, "is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual" is not in itself so unwelcome (*Intentions* 173). In fact, Wilde moves to compare "æsthetics" in the "sphere of conscious civilisation" to "sexual selection" in terms of the possibility to introduce "new forms . . . variety and change" (*Intentions* 215).

"Natural laws," writes Pater, "we shall never modify," but we may "watch their fatal combinations" (*Renaissance* 149). The Aesthetic affinity to such a potential even in the conception of nature aligns with the formalist vocabulary of "combination" that attracts the Aesthetic critic in correlation with the new. For Whistler, the artist can "pick, and choose, and group" for "his own combinations" the elements which nature presents like the notes of a keyboard

(*Ten O'Clock* 14, 16). The aesthetic process, for Wilde, "works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful" (*Intentions* 138–39). Pater locates the "basis of all artistic genius" in "a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits" (*Renaissance* 137). Michael North identifies "recurrence" and "recombination" as two models that account for virtually all major conceptualizations of novelty in European history. Remarkably, the "most influential modern model of creative change" presented by evolutionary theory is itself conceived as a "subtle combination" of the two models (*Novelty* 7–8). It is telling that in the same period the self-consciously modern—and self-consciously radical—Aesthetic project comparably links the aesthetic to the possibility of the new through a principle of recombination carried over into the sphere of culture.

Not only the consideration of physical life and psychology decenters the self for Pater. In "Coleridge" as in *The Renaissance*, the "relative spirit" observes the "character of the age," the "medium of language and ideas," the "influences of nature and society" that "sway [the individual] this way and that" (*Essays* 2). The early essays anticipate the taxonomy of factors which Pater associated with "a vesture of the past," including "the language which is more than one half of our thoughts," the "moral and mental habits, the customs, the literature, the very houses, which we did not make ourselves" (*Plato* 72–73). Here too what first appears as a fatal shroud presents in turn a condition of possibility.

Two divergent conceptions of the past, and attitudes towards cultural inheritance, obtain again in Aesthetic discourse. The first is what Wilde rejects as an "intolerable burden" and a fatal grip on the present and future (*Essays* 140; *Soul* 65, 77). This includes the prescriptive variant by which authority and public opinion wield the "classics" as "bludgeons" against novel aesthetic expressions (*Soul* 48). By contrast, the Aesthetic artist and critic alike are freely receptive to the cultural and aesthetic materials and forms bequeathed by the past, as so many resources for aesthetic creation. In "The Truth of Masks," Wilde approves an

archeology that recovers objects of the "antique world" not to be "left to moulder in a museum, for the contemplation of a callous curator," but to be "used as motives for the production of a new art, which was to be not beautiful merely, but also strange" (*Intentions* 235). This is often the purport of Aesthetic claims about the timelessness of art: "all ages in her sight are alike present" (Swinburne, *Essays* 46); "the poet is the spectator of all time and of all existence. For him no form is obsolete, no subject out of date" (Wilde, *Essays* 128–29). These claims at once respond to a late nineteenth-century English iteration of the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*: "there is no golden age of art" (Wilde, *Essays* 202); "a poet of the first order raises all subjects to the first rank, and puts the life-blood of an equal interest into Hebrew forms or Greek, mediæval or modern, yesterday or yesterage" (Swinburne, *Essays* 97); "to the poet all times and places are one . . . no theme is inept, no past or present preferable" (Wilde, *Essays* 130).

It is no accident therefore that Pater looked ever to the past—the questions of the old and the new pose themselves together—and launched his career with a history of the Renaissance that was criticized namely for not being a history at all, but a work of imagination.[18] In his expressly imaginative works too Pater's persistent modus operandi was to place individual characters within transitional historical junctures—with parallels to his own times—where currents of thought, traditional and modern, converge and clash: Marius at the crossroads of Greek, Roman, and emergent Christian cultures; Denys L'Auxerrois in a volatile mix of pagan and Christian traditions within a medieval community on the threshold of modern individualism; Gaston de Latour in the time of the French Wars of Religion; Sebastian von Storck in late seventeenth-century Holland coming to grips with empiricism, idealism, and solipsism; Carl of Rosenmold in the eighteenth century on the cusp of a German Enlightenment (*Marius*; *Imaginary Portraits*; *Gaston*).

[18] Pater changed in response the title of subsequent editions from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (see Donoghue 57; Williams 47).

For Jonathan Freedman, *The Renaissance* intones the "undersong" of "a world, indeed, in which devotees of the beautiful are mutilated or destroyed by the pressures of the respectable" (58). It may be said similarly that the undersong of Pater's *oeuvre* is the individual in the throes of historical change. But although mutilated the individual is not necessarily destroyed. Pater was effectively drawn to the eclectic syncretism of a Pico della Mirandola, to which he sought to supply the "rudiments of the historic sense" that he judged lacking (*Renaissance* 22).[19] The upshot of the "flame-like" individual of the "Conclusion," whose life "is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways," is to set in motion that eclectic spirit: "for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy" even "of our own" (*Renaissance* 150, 152).

Pater insists that "individual genius works ever under conditions of time and place: its products are coloured by the varying aspects of nature, and type of human form, and outward manners of life" (*Renaissance* 128). Yet critics have been led to characterize his aesthetics in contradictory terms, as confirming the separation of the aesthetic sphere from social and historical existence, or eliding the boundary between the two. That evidence of both may be found in Pater's writing points, for Andrew Eastham, to the elements of a "dialectical condition" (74). Indeed, aesthetic autonomy itself often needs to be understood as part of a dialectic with social embeddedness that pits literature and art against specific forms of constraint, and points back to the conditions that make autonomy desirable (Goldstone xi). Aesthetic discourse articulates such a dialectic nowhere more clearly than in its conception of the individual—subject and object alike—and the attempt to carve out conditions for individuation from within conceptual and material pressures of determinism and conformity.

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[19] "The figure of Pico is so attractive," Pater writes, because a "picturesque union of contrasts, belonging properly to the art of the close of the fifteenth century, pervades, in Pico della Mirandola, an actual person" (*Renaissance* 31).

Wilde's aesthetic, in Andrew Goldstone's reading, suggests "a *dialectical* conception of form as synthesized from the very elements of social life that exceed the purely formal" (28). Form in fact provides Pater and Wilde with an aesthetic principle of individuation that is versatile and mobile, and that confirms art's privileged relation to the singular and the new. Angela Leighton identifies as "a *locus classicus* for Victorian aesthetes" Friedrich Schiller's account of form and matter in art (*On Form* 6). According to Schiller,

> the content should effect nothing, the form everything. . . . Subject-matter . . . has a limiting effect upon the spirit, and it is only from form that true aesthetic freedom can be looked for. Herein, then, resides the real secret of the master in any art: that he can make his form consume his material. (Schiller, *Aesthetic Education* 155–57)

Wilde indeed echoes Schiller's language in his early "Lecture to Art Students," where he maintains that "imaginative art annihilates [its material]" (*Essays* 212). Schiller is echoed also in Pater's famed maxim that "*All art aspires towards the condition of music*. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it" (*Renaissance* 86).

Here Leighton simply follows Schiller's translators in noting that Wilde renders *vertilgen* ("consume") as "annihilate," and Pater as "obliterate" (Schiller, *Aesthetic Education* clxvi; Leighton, *On Form* 6). Yet it is worth noting that, for Pater, what is obliterated is the distinction between form and material, not the latter. Pater does not then confound Schiller to void art of its matter, as Schiller's translators suggest while insisting that *vertilgen* implies recycling rather than destruction (*Aesthetic Education* clxxvi–vii). Unity between form and content as Pater's ideal speaks rather to the formal aesthetic principle that allows the synthesis of a new object from available materials: so that a new and distinct

content might obtain in the combination that is not given in the component parts separately beforehand. In art, says Wilde, “the body is the soul” (*Intentions* 201).

Aesthetic discourse on the beautiful again serves to illustrate this point, since the Aesthetes insist that the beauty of the work is no direct function of the qualities of its subject or materials: “no object is so ugly,” for Wilde, “that, under certain conditions of light and shade, or proximity to other things, it will not look beautiful” (*Essays* 209); “there is no subject,” for Swinburne, “which may not be treated with success” (*Studies* 138).[20] The implication is present in Swinburne’s celebration of a beauty that “can be neither unwoven nor recast by any process of analysis” (*Essays* 64). It is form that can “rearrange the details of modern life” (Pater, *Renaissance* 148) or “the facts of common life” (Wilde, *Essays* 150), so as “not to copy beauty but to create it” (Wilde, *Essays* 209), through an aesthetic process that “works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful” (*Intentions* 138–39). That Wilde at the same time can affirm that “new subjects,” “a new medium or a fresh material” can be instrumental to artistic novelty only underlines that his aesthetics does not seek to annihilate the material but commits art to the production of new goods through all available means (*Essays* 112; *Intentions* 42–43). The formal principle nevertheless finds pithy expression in Wilde’s prose-poem parable of the artist who, in want of bronze, smelts “the image of *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever*” to fashion from it “an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*” (*Essays* 229–30).

The poignancy of Wilde’s parable finally colors Schiller’s opposition of material limitations to the freedom of form. The running theme of Aesthetic discourse addressed in this chapter has been an opposition between the limitation

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[20] By the time of this late essay on Whitman, Swinburne had quietly retreated from his earlier radicalism. While by now he disapproves of “the Zolas and the Whitmen” (137) for their mode of treatment of irreverent subjects, he nevertheless reasserts the principle on aesthetic grounds. Wilde interestingly criticizes Zola also—for an “unimaginative realism” as opposed to an “imaginative reality” *à la* Balzac—while expressing “no sympathy at all with the moral indignation of our time against M. Zola” (*Intentions* 11, 15).

of what is and the desire of its supersession. Yet Aesthetic thought aims not to dismiss the problem by separating a sphere of free-standing aesthetic forms from the world of matter, but to reconceive conditions of possibility on the ground of limitations. “For the artist can accept no sphere of life in exchange for life itself,” Wilde claims in his American lecture: “For him there is no escape from the bondage of the earth: there is not even the desire to escape” (*Essays* 117).[21] This much is implied where Pater readily dissolves the individual subject and the solidity of objects in order to stake his claim in a mobile individuation, and is summed up in Wilde’s claim that “limitation is for the artist perfect freedom” (*Essays* 143). The dialectic of limitation and possibility, then, central to the Aesthetic conception of the individual, pertains fundamentally to the criticality of the aesthetic *vis-à-vis* a problematic world.

Before concluding with this criticality as articulated by Wilde in “The Critic as Artist,” it is fitting to refer briefly to Adorno’s critique of Aestheticism. Singling out Wilde among British Aesthetes, Adorno summarily dismisses Aestheticism on the ground of its entrapment in the identifying commodity logic that it purports to resists. As a result, “the watchword *l’art pour l’art* was the mask of its opposite,” and Aesthetes rather “served as preludes to the culture industry” (*Aesthetic Theory* 239). The critique implies that Aestheticism promotes a false individualism whose attachments to singularity and novelty are fully integrable within the regime of the self-same.

Yet Wilde perhaps more than any other of the Aesthetes anticipates the problem. His spokesperson Vivian’s provocative claim in “Decay of Lying” that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life,” coupled with the caution that “imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult,” turns into a wry judgment on the appropriations of a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic in fashionable salons, or the

[21] Swinburne comparably quotes Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin: “Je trouve la terre aussi belle que le ciel, et je pense que la correction de la forme est la vertu” (in *Essays* 375).

passion for London fogs that informs the "mannerism of a clique" (*Intentions* 30, 39–40). Adorno cites only the "interiors of a chic aestheticism" in *Dorian Gray*, which "resemble smart antique shops and auction halls and thus the commercial world Wilde ostensibly disdained" (*Aesthetic Theory* 16). However, the "crude accumulation of all possible precious materials" and "heightening and expansion of the sphere of aesthetic stimuli" here is the Aesthetic diagnosis, in its Decadent phase, of the problem of the new. This is the recognition, on the one hand, that the "drive for novelty," as Michael North writes, does not so much express "the free and unconditioned status of modern beings as the opposite": "the force and prestige of novelty . . . is predicated on its absence from the contemporary scene" ("Afterlife" 95–96). On the other hand, Decadent Aestheticism turns a diagnostic eye on the deceptive guises of novelty that mask repetition, and on the repetitions that ever absorb and dull the truly new. Wilde's 1890s comedies of society can be seen to extend this critique in their playful variations on what may be termed a comedy of repetitions.[22]

Aestheticism does of course lack a full-fledged material account of the social conditions that weigh on the individual and on aesthetic production in its time, but Wilde if anything comes closest among his peers. Certainly, his writing records something of those conditions compellingly in its protest against cultural authority and a public opinion raised "to the dignity of physical force." Adorno, in suggesting that "some of the force of protest" lies in the individual, evokes a paradox of modernity whereby "the individual has gained as much in richness, differentiation and vigour as, on the other hand, the socialization of society has enfeebled and undermined him" (*Minima Moralia* 17). Wilde appears similarly alive to such a paradoxical condition. He observes in *The Soul of Man* the role of property in enabling individuality and art "under existing conditions," but

[22] "An event or series of events made ridiculous by the number of *repetitions* made throughout"—to adapt *Merriam-Webster*'s definition for a "comedy of errors." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comedy-of-errors. Accessed 6 Mar. 2022.

claims also that the onus of private property "crush[es] true Individualism, and set[s] up an Individualism that is false" (*Soul* 15, 17). Wilde registers, in other words, that modernity poses the question of the individual—including the singular and the new—under fraught pretenses. But he suggests that the problem is worth engaging in the attempt to actualize possibilities latent in its mixed bag.

This is not to suggest that the Aesthetic conceptualization of the problem, and any answers intimated, are fully satisfactory—any more than Adorno's are. But Aesthetic discourse articulates key problems that would accompany critical and aesthetic theory, and does so not naïvely as in Adorno's summary judgment. The "shrill tone that gives [aestheticism] the lie" of a "false social consciousness" might possibly describe an Aestheticism absorbed by market logic (*Aesthetic Theory* 249). But it could be countered, as Freedman does, that Adorno's critique cannot evade the problem of "its own potential commodification" (Freedman xxii).[23] Instead, Freedman argues that Wilde's Aestheticism is distinguished by "its own recognition of the inevitable commodification of cultural critique itself" (xxii). If such absorption of the new and singular by logics of the self-same is indeed inevitable, then this would only underline the Aesthete's commitment to constant renewal. At the least, Aestheticism anticipates the contradictions of a theoretical project that commits to a fraught autonomy against mounting social pressures. As this chapter will have shown, if only performatively, the Aesthetic project clearly does point, as per Goldstone's argument, to social and intellectual conditions that made desirable individuation in the sphere of values.

Artist as critic and critic as artist

"The artistic critic," for Wilde, is like the Aesthetic artist "an antinomian always" (*Intentions* 214). We have seen that Aesthetes place a premium on the production

[23] Wilde too, after all, tires of "individuals whose individuality is always too noisy" (Intentions 199), and Adorno passes the same judgment on him. It should be noted that Adorno glaringly omits to mention the terrible discipline meted out by bourgeois society on Wilde himself.

of new and unique—i.e., individuated—goods, against the backdrop of mounting conformist and deterministic tendencies and conceptions of the world. Both these moments—the critique of what is, and the fashioning of what is not—belong to what Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" terms "the critical spirit" (*Intentions* 129). As the title of his essay indicates, Wilde joins art and criticism not primarily by plying art to the critic's purposes, but by committing the Aesthetic critic to the criticality of art itself. Yet in the process, and in a curious reversal, the critic for Wilde can honor this commitment only by turning the work of art into material for producing something new—into means for another end. Instituting thus the criticality of art and criticism at once, Wilde's Aestheticism translates into a kind of radical *use-making*: with no qualms about treating art as a means, although regulated by, indeed producing, mobile and ever-renewed ends.

The critic and the artist are "antinomian" here because neither will adhere to a "vulgar standard of goodness" which requires simply "a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability" (*Intentions* 214). In terms quite reminiscent of Pater, Wilde champions a critical spirit that "will never suffer [itself] to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things" (191). But Wilde characteristically raises the stakes of the challenge. Since "custom" is a mainstay of "the security of society"—upheld by "Public Opinion"—"an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all" (181–82). It is therefore that "the public dislike novelty" just as "the world hates Individualism" (*Soul* 26, 46), and that "in its rejection of the current notions about morality, [Sin] is one with the higher ethics" (*Intentions* 130). Wilde's characteristic irreverence with regard to existing moral standards is also the defining note of his aesthetics, in which art presents the type of the good that ceases to be one whenever it binds itself to a type and reproduces an established standard. For this reason, however, Wilde surprisingly extends this irreverence to criticism's relation to art.

Ever the contrarian, Wilde proceeds in "The Critic as Artist" through his mouthpiece Gilbert by first cutting down the sanctity of artistic creation to the size of criticism. But he does so in order to underscore the necessary criticality of art. For without criticism art becomes "immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types" (*Intentions* 124). The "critical faculty" gives rise to new schools of art whereas "the mere creative instinct does not innovate, but reproduces": "the tendency of creation is to repeat itself" (124–25). The critical impulse therefore for Wilde works both to tear down and build anew, to criticize what is, and its trivial or problematic reproduction, and to assemble from its materials something new. On this basis, Wilde declares "the antithesis between [the creative and the critical faculty] entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name" (121).

The second step in Wilde's argument is then to commit criticism to the doubly critical and creative aesthetic principle. "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought" (*Intentions* 137–38). This relation is creative and productive, not imitative or simply explanatory. "Criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty . . . so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense"; in such light, "criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor" (137). Even where the critic "will indeed be an interpreter," it will not be "in the sense of one who simply repeats in another form a message that has been put into his lips to say" (155). Much as the actor interprets the dramatic text and becomes by this token "a critic of the drama," or as the singer and player interpret their musical score, the interpreting critic "shows the [artist's] work under new conditions" (156).

The commitment of the Aesthetic critic to aesthetic criticality contains two moments as a result. While apt to recognize the critical-creative impulse where it obtains, the critic is tasked—more importantly for Wilde—with producing it

in her own work. This becomes, for the Aesthetic critic, what Wilde earlier called "the honour and the homage which he gives to the materials he uses," it being "only through the mystery of creation that one can gain any knowledge of the quality of created things" (*Essays* 135–36). Whistler sounds a similar note in his comment on Swinburne's lines attached to his second *Symphony in White*: "the writing of them was a rare and graceful tribute from the poet to the painter—a noble recognition of work by the production of a nobler one" (qtd. in Prettejohn 89). Wilde praises Pater in this regard as an exemplary critic, "each of whose Imaginary Portraits . . . presents to us, under the fanciful guise of fiction, some fine and exquisite piece of criticism" (*Intentions* 187). For Lawrence Danson, Wilde himself epitomizes this sense of the artist-critic: "everywhere in his life and work . . . Wilde's new meanings pay tribute to the materials out of which they were created. It was a career of redefining and transvaluing, by allusion, quotation, or pastiche, or by the quick, hot energy of paradox" (Danson 2).

The recombining potential of form again presents for Wilde the aesthetic principle of the critical and the creative process alike: "it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the æsthetic instinct" (*Intentions* 202). "For it is the critical faculty," he maintains, "that invents fresh forms" (124). In order to recognize, conversely, criticism's kinship to artistic creation, Gilbert suggests it is enough to note that the critic "works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry?" (139). The critic, from this perspective, "exhibits to us a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself"—and "the employment of a new material is a critical as well as a creative element" (157).

Wilde's redefinition of criticism and art together—joined in a critical aesthetic and an aesthetic criticism—in terms of a relation to materials (as well as a formal relation *of* materials) leads him to stake his position in frankly instrumentalist terms. "Criticism of the highest kind," he suggests, "treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation (*Intentions* 143). In

progressively starker restatements, the work of art presents, as far as the critic at least is concerned, "simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises" (146). Wilde goes so far as to claim, finally, that the artist's work itself "may be merely of value in so far as it gives to the critic a suggestion for some new mood of thought and feeling which he can realise with equal, or perhaps greater, distinction of form" (183).

In this light, the critical-aesthetic principle may avail itself of virtually any object as material for its new ends. "Accusations of plagiarism," whether in art or criticism, thus smack of "inartistic temperaments" that limit the range of material available to criticism and art (*Intentions* 118–19). If a critic like Pater, moreover, might "put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Lionardo [sic] never dreamed of," that is only as it should be, and Gilbert describes the words of Pater's critical appreciation commingling in his own experience of the painting to produce further modified impressions (142–44). Wilde in effect restates his Aesthetic allegiance as to the critical-aesthetic principle, instead of reverence to a sanctified beauty of the work of literature or art. As beauty in art is no direct function of the qualities of the subject, so the critic "does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials. Anything will serve his purpose. . . . Like [the novelist or the painter], he can find his motives everywhere" (*Intentions* 138). These may be drawn, as for Swinburne, from "yesterday or yesterage" (Swinburne, *Essays* 97): "the one duty we owe to history is to re-write it. That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit" (*Intentions* 129). The critic in the process "sets [the work of art] in a new relation to the age" (144, 155), and in a new relation to oneself since "right interpretative criticism" stems from "the meeting of [art and personality]" (158).

Wilde does not then shy away from casting works of literature and art as means to further ends, "starting-points" rather than *culs de sac* of means-ends relations.

He does so in line with a principle of individuation that might allow, from the materials of what exists, the formation of novel and unique forms of value. The continued potential for such individuation appeared, to Wilde and to other Aesthetes, in particular need of affirmation in light of conceptual and material pressures toward determinism and conformity. Wilde, like Pater, sought in this context not to fall back to a defense of the sovereign individual subject—nor exactly, as we seen, a sovereign aesthetic realm—but to reinscribe the dissolution of self and object as the condition for a mobile principle of individuation.

Even where the Aesthetes ground value in the experience of the individual subject, this individual comes to constitute an unguaranteed and continual goal rather than an identical and enduring self that enlists objects to its ends in a regime of self-sameness. Wilde therefore advocates "insincerity"—neither truth to self nor truth to the object—as his "method by which we can multiply our personalities" and by extension intensify the individuality of objects also (*Intentions* 188). The aesthetic for Wilde and others appeared to promise a model of this individuating principle, if nothing else because the observation of novelty and singularity in literature and art, in work that transvalues the materials from which it is constructed, seemed to prove in its peculiar way this possibility of individuation.

Aesthetic discourse is rife with contradictions—and Wilde's perhaps most of all. No discourse entirely escapes them. Still, we have seen that Aesthetic discourse mobilizes some of its contradictions towards a dialectic of autonomy and embeddedness, to claim the force and prestige of novelty, as North puts it, at a time when the Aesthetes perceived its scarcity. In a meta-commentary which Wilde embeds in "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert justifies the dialogue form of the critical essay namely in terms of its dialogic embrace of contradiction, together with its ability to range through a ragbag of subjects and "side issues" that might suddenly intimate new relations (185). "There was never a time when criticism was more needed than it is now," Wilde provocatively suggests in conclusion,

since the scope of new "subject-matter at the disposal of creation is always diminishing, while the subject-matter of criticism increases" conversely (209).

That Aesthetic writing continues to present material for critical study would seem to confirm at least Wilde's latter claim, to the effect that criticism multiplies its subject matter. This chapter has sought to actuate some of the contradictions and side issues of Aesthetic discourse to present the Aesthete's rejection of the useful within a new set of relations. In the context of this thesis, the Aesthete's radical *use-making* appears to extend the Wordsworthian critique of a reductive utilitarianism. It recalls also that form of poetic thought which asks to be actualized by becoming the object of further thought: the motto of "*l'art pour l'art*" reading recursively, and not as a tautology. The Aesthetic premium on the exceptional and the new at the same time points ahead to the topic of the next chapter, where Virginia Woolf's writing will temper the force and prestige of novelty in a modernist poetics of ordinary life.

Chapter three

Writing the life ordinary: Virginia Woolf and the in/significant detail

> Daily the common range of visible things
> Grew dear to me.
>   . . . who hath among least things
> An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
> As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.
>   . . . they build up greatest things
> From least suggestions.
>
> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

"What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question" that besets Lily Briscoe in the final act of *To the Lighthouse*: "The old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularise itself at such moments as these . . . stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her" (133). This is one instance among many throughout Virginia Woolf's oeuvre where "life" seems to hover as a question over her characters or over Woolf's writing itself.

In her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf speaks of the novel as an "apparatus for catching life" (8), worrying if the apparatus is inadequate that "life should refuse to live there" (7). What is the meaning of such a program for the modernist novel as the effort to catch or express life? This chapter concerns the choice of "life," a term of unbounded generality, as the identifier for the subject of Woolf's fictional representation. Woolf's writing stands out because of the persistence and explicitness with which it addresses the term and, as we shall see, because of the contribution that Woolf offers to theorizing the stakes and the poetics of its representation. This chapter explores the implications of this poetics for a reconfiguration of value. Woolf's writing, as we shall see, at the same time commits to such a reconfiguration while also confronting limitations and problems to which it gives rise.

I begin, then, by redefining Lily Briscoe's question about the meaning of life. For Lily Briscoe "the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (133). The visionary, existential dimension of the question is not what concerns me here. Rather, I propose to examine Woolf's manner of illuminating "this thing called life" (*Mrs Dalloway* 103) in the act of representing it. Instead of asking "the old," "the vast, the general question" about the meaning of life, I wish first to pose the more modest one of what we might mean *by* "life": the meanings that the term comes to carry within a particular poetics. If the novel, for Woolf, attempts to portray life, then what does this life look like? How is it identified, what elements constitute it as an object, what qualities characterize it, and what textual materials go into its novelistic representation? What is, we might say, the *texture* of this "life"?

These questions we can begin to address by turning to Woolf's writing and trying to describe what we see. But such description, however successful, must leave us also with questions of a different order. Representations are necessarily selective, and so general an object as "life" poses the question starkly: why

should *this* be life? Why should the representation include this or that component? Under what conditions, moreover, does such an arrangement of materials plausibly suggest “life”? And what, if anything, is at stake in this identification? These are importantly *poetic* conditions. And the history of the novel, of fiction, of the poetics of representation, has involved changing and competing assumptions about the proper subject, objects, and means of fictional representation.[1]

Surely, though, the presentation of life as a literary program did not start with Virginia Woolf or modernist writers. Is such a project not more properly claimed on behalf of the sober realism of the Victorians and Edwardians, than of Woolf’s prose-poetic flights? From my perspective there is no great need to oppose Woolf to her predecessors, except insofar as she uses them as polemical reference points. Her fiction exhibits more continuities rather than it does ruptures with the history of the novel going back not only to the realists but to the early rise of the form in the eighteenth century. This is partly the history told by critics like Erich Auerbach, and more recently Jacques Rancière, of a serious attention to ordinary life that emerges in literary modernity (Auerbach; Rancière, *Aisthesis* x–xi). Yet Woolf’s fiction has its specificities too in its approach to the question of capturing life. Its recurrent and explicit references to “life” make of it something vaguer, less taken-for-granted than in the typical realist novel—assuming, for convenience, that there is such a type—which goes about its business of representation somewhat less apologetically. Woolf’s writing persistently makes of life and its literary representation a pointed question.

If we can make sense of what Woolf means by “life” by placing the matter in such a literary-historical context, the same goes for the way in which the life which she conjures is invested with sense. I mean by this that the question of the

[1] Sometimes, of course, the professed rejection of representation altogether, although this falls outside the purview of this chapter. The representational aspirations of Woolf’s poetics are the most relevant from the present perspective.

meaning of life can be recast on yet another level: by attending to the conditions under which this "life" means, or holds value, as opposed to trying to pin down *what* it means. Again, I am referring to poetic conditions, a poetics of representation that invests "little daily" things—objects, perceptions, events—with meaning and value. Woolf's writing is alert to the entanglement of aesthetic visibility with how we assign value to things and areas of experience. The poetic matrix, in other words, which allows Woolf's materials to suggest "life" also invests these with value and with meaning.

Across a range of intellectual and aesthetic currents of Woolf's time, we find a sustained interest in a critical concept of the ordinary or everyday which helps to make explicit the stakes involved in Woolf's representation of "life." The life which Woolf sets out to represent is in key respects this ordinary life, or what I will call life-as-ordinary: life seen under the aspect of ordinariness. The ordinary in fact emerges as a distinctive perspective on the real itself, rather than simply one domain of existence. And it constitutes moreover a *valued* description of this reality. On the one hand, to attend to the ordinary is to renegotiate a distribution of value through reclaiming the overlooked and devalued. At the same time, life-as-ordinary describes what has been termed its *astructural*, undifferentiated "messiness" (Gardiner 52), which implies a level field of value in which any and all areas of existence become possible *loci* for the realization of value.

The Aesthetes, as we saw in Chapter 2, allied art to the production of new objects and experiences of value, new ends-in-themselves, instead of reproducing the old or catering to established standards of what constitutes the good. Yet in so doing many also located the domain of those possible ends within material and experiential reality, and not—as they are sometimes criticized—in an ethereal aesthetic realm. This much and more is implied when Walter Pater writes that art promises "nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for *those moments'* sake" (*Renaissance* 153). It is implicit also

in Algernon Swinburne's, and later Arthur Symons', celebration of objects of beauty newly born *into the world* (Swinburne, *Essays* 360–61; Symons 235), as in the Aesthetes' desire to elide boundaries between art and life by striving to lead fully artistic lives. The modernist ordinary or everyday picks up in part this gesture. To value everyday life or life in its ordinariness is to treat actual material and experiential reality—all of material and experiential reality—as the domain of ends-in-themselves without subordinating it to ends that lie somewhere outside it. Henri Lefebvre, who also issues the call for a genuine "art of living," thus defines it as treating one's "own life . . . not as a means towards 'another' end, but as an end in itself" (*Critique* I: 199). The modernist ordinary, however, in contrast to the Aesthete's cult of "the new," demonstrates the value, the promise, and the exigency of the familiar, taken-for-granted, and neglected. In lieu of the obdurate dichotomies of repetition and rupture that we have come to associate with modernism, the ordinary intimates a subtle conceptualization of the layered reconfigurations of the visible and the significant.

Critical and literary histories are dialectically intertwined. Literary practices share histories with literary criticism and with the critical theories that we often bring to bear on literary and cultural phenomena.[2] Henri Lefebvre particularly credits modernist literature for its contribution to the visibility of everyday life as such (*Everyday Life* 2). Virginia Woolf in effect makes important contributions through the representational strategies of her fiction as well as through her programmatic criticism. But Woolf produces fiction that itself also theorizes its own poetics, committing to a poetics of ordinary life while reflecting on—and in the process mitigating—its limitations and risks. Such a

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[2] Jacques Rancière's work has recurrently emphasized these reciprocal relations: "The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices" (*Mute Speech* 31). See also *The Edges of Fiction* and *The Names Of History* for Rancière's arguments on the relations between literary and historiographic and social-scientific discourses.

dialectical movement, I will suggest, is of a piece with the operation of the ordinary itself as a critical concept.

In what follows, I begin with a partial survey of Woolf's novels to establish "life" as a problem term that recurs in her writing. Suggesting that the character of this life, as an object of representation, draws on the category of the ordinary, I move to early-twentieth-century critical theories and aesthetics of ordinary life in order to help make explicit the stakes involved in Woolf's poetics. I then turn again to Woolf to demonstrate the investment of her writing in the value-reconfiguring implications of an aesthetics of the ordinary. I devote the final part of the chapter to a reading of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The two main characters of the novel, I argue, double the author function and mediate its poetics specifically through their mode of attention to and valorization of the ordinary. Insofar as the two characters represent flipsides of the same poetics, the novel presents a compelling case for the desirability of such attention while also confronting its pitfalls.

What we talk about when we talk about life

Writing a life: Jacob's Room

Woolf's consistent engagement with biography and with history meant that her writing was particularly sensitive to the question of how to represent "a life" or "lives." In *Jacob's Room*, we find on the protagonist's desk a draft bearing the title: "Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?" The question directly invokes Thomas Carlyle's assertion that history consists of nothing else (Woolf, *Jacob's Room* 31, 163n21). *Jacob's Room* consistently challenges the "hero-worship" that Carlyle implies, as Sue Roe indicates in her annotation. Carlyle's claim epitomizes dominant Victorian models of life-writing and history-writing that Woolf's work challenged more generally. "[T]he question now inevitably asks itself," Woolf writes in her 1939 essay "The Art of

Biography," "whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography . . . ?" (121). In 1927, Woolf concluded a review titled "The New Biography" with the announcement that "the days of Victorian biography are over." "Consider," she writes

> one's own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that has been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers. (100)

These passages register Woolf's call for a double revaluation: first, of *whose* lives should be recorded; and second, as to *which elements* of their lives ought to receive attention, how best to capture what is "most real" in a life. She calls attention to overlooked ordinariness, asking to record "the life of anybody"—as the title page of her first draft of *The Waves* originally read (Woolf, *Waves* xxxvi)—and looking beyond the outward momentous actions and accomplishments of the supposedly "great."

Woolf's work across genres attests to this ambition. As Gillian Beer writes, Woolf "strained across genre, attempted to break through—or disturb—the limits of the essay, the novel, the biography, to touch realities denied by accepted forms" (77). In "The New Biography," Woolf suggests that "many of the devices of fiction" can be used "in dealing with real life"; that "a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality effectively"; finally and provocatively that "the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life" (99–100). Woolf wrote two satiric books subtitled "A Biography," where she uses fiction to subvert the genre. These are *Orlando*, the chronicle of a fantastic life that spans centuries of English history; and *Flush*, an imaginative biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. But here I wish to focus on *Jacob's Room*,

Woolf's first radically experimental novel, which essentially constitutes an experiment in how to represent "a life"—realistically, but in a manner that stands in direct contrast to the values and methods Woolf associated with Victorian biography and, we should add, with the Edwardian and Victorian realist novelists that she criticized.

Jacob's Room appears generically as a *Bildungsroman*. It follows the life of its protagonist Jacob Flanders from his early childhood to his untimely death as a young man on the French battlefield in the Great War. But Woolf's is an eccentric specimen of the genre. Jacob's brusque (but heavily foreshadowed) end prevents any sense of a destination reached, maturity attained or promises fulfilled that we would expect as the outcome of *Bildung*. Similarly, everywhere the narrative cuts away and denies the connective threads that would grant the story continuity and wholeness. Nor does Woolf allow the story to cohere through Jacob's subjectivity, to which the novel's narrative perspectives systematically deny us access. Woolf's life of Jacob is instead a series of loose, disjointed vignettes. Temporal ellipses are not bridged or summed up, and the vignettes are minimally contextualized. Thus, as Judy Little writes, "Woolf drags in all the *Bildungsroman* scenery; then she lets Jacob walk aimlessly about, as though the stage were bare" (109). The protagonist remains as an empty hole, an absence at the center of the novel which does not allow the peripheral impressions we gather around him to cohere—neither in a plot of development nor in the character portrait of a congruous personality.[3]

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[3] James Joyce wrote his modernist *Bildungsroman* in five detached episodes covering a similar span to Jacob's journey from childhood to early adulthood. Where Joyce's free indirect method grants the perspectives of his protagonist—albeit with a shadow of irony that always potentially puts them at arm's length—Woolf's practically denies them altogether. The more pointillistic vignettes of Jacob's Room also represent a more radical compromising of narrative continuity, and ultimately of meaning-making. Finally, while Joyce ironizes the *Künstlerroman* by leaving his protagonist with a "false" or incomplete aesthetic maturity, belied by Joyce's own aesthetic in the novel (see Kevin J. Dettmar's comments in Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man;* and *Dubliners* xxvii), Woolf undercuts altogether the idea of development: the sense of promise—real or illusory—cultivated around Jacob over the course of his brief story never reaches a semblance of fulfilment.

Undermining the *Bildung* plot, Woolf thus eschews conventional devices that would give coherence and meaning to "a life." We are left with no clear and commanding organizing principle to shore the ruined fragments of Jacob's life, the scattered episodes that (dis)compose the novel. Thus for Avrom Fleishman *Jacob's Room* turns the *Bildungsroman* into a "fitful sequence of unachieved experiences rather than a coherent process" (46). The inscrutable life of Jacob, however, can become "emblematic of all lives" precisely in its obstinate resistance to "expected patterns," to "conventionalised fictional 'summing up'" (Little 109). Woolf sticks out her tongue equally at the young man's courtship plot, dangling in front of the reader an upwardly mobile, safely middle-class match with Clara Durrant that Jacob simply sidesteps without much ado. Similarly, any possible plot of adventure attendant upon Jacob's travels is darkly overcast by the ever-present specter of Empire that will lead to his unsung demise on the French battlefield. As Judy Little aptly puts it, Woolf's parody of representative conventions directs in its sweep a "subtly feminist" laughter at the "male hero" of the "young Englishman's storybook socialisation" (109, 122).[4]

If the life to be represented does not fit conventional plot forms, then what is it? Where does this leave the disparate elements that Woolf has marshalled to make up "a life"? The question will lead us from the countable—"a life," "lives"—to an uncountable "life." For what kind of life is it that lives in the loosely connected phenomena—incidents, scenes, descriptions, conversations, thoughts, objects—that populate *Jacob's Room*, or indeed Woolf's novels in general? It is just that: scattered, amorphous, elusive. For Rachel Bowlby, Woolf's novels break down the "coherence of plots and characters . . . into the disconnections of heterogenous pieces of dailiness" (117). It is in terms of this dailiness—of the ordinary or everyday—that I will examine the implications of

[4] See also Rachel Bowlby's *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*, on Woolf's linking of conventional, linear, and masterly narrative forms to masculinist thinking. Like Little, Bowlby reads the life of Jacob as a rebuke to conventional biography and narrative's implication in the ideological "development of masculinity" (155).

the distinctive texture produced in Woolf's writing of life. I turn first, however, to some of her other novels to survey their persistent interrogations of the term life in its uncountable, general form.

From lives to life

The impressions of "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" ("Modern Fiction" 9), with objects, snippets of conversation, interior monologue or reminiscences, chance encounters, the serving of dinner, the labor of maintaining a summer house, reading and writing: all of these things and more belong to the texture of that reached-after thing Woolf calls "life." While everywhere in her writing "life" eludes anything that would stamp it with definite form, her narrators and characters evoke it repeatedly and explicitly. Often sheer deictics such as "it" or "this" will stand in for "life," emphasizing its evasiveness or indeterminacy. We can start by cataloguing some of these references to demonstrate their ubiquity, and to identify some of the terms of Woolf's interrogation of "life."

Already *The Voyage Out* establishes "life" as a problem term, as well as announcing a number of key subordinate concerns that would recur in Woolf's later novels. A thought about "life which had been unnamed before" (52) strikes Rachel Vinrace at the end of a conversation. Thereafter it reappears in the guise of explicit questioning, the narrator ventriloquizing Rachel's thoughts: "And life, what was that?" (114); and then directed at her by another character: "What do you call life?" (119). Later on it is "the mystery of life" that overcomes Terence Hewet at the close of the fourteenth chapter (178). Questioning about the "meaning of life," in the conventional sense, also appears explicitly elsewhere: "what was it all about?" (28); "What was the meaning of it all?" (346). It will appear in *Jacob's Room*: "Everything seems to mean so much" (124), or in the form of loose "questions – what? and why?" (117), "What for? What for?" (141). As it will in *Mrs Dalloway*: "He [Septimus Warren Smith] knew the meaning of

the world, he said" (57), then "It might be possible, Septimus thought . . . that the world itself is without meaning" (75), and "what did it mean to her [Clarissa Dalloway], this thing called life?" (103); in *To the Lighthouse*: "What was the value, the meaning of things?" (99); "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?" (121); and in *The Waves*: "Who is to say what meaning there is in anything?" (96), and "Now, to explain to you the meaning of my life" (199).

Similarly, quizzings about the beauty or ugliness, the pleasure or hardship of life alternate in *The Voyage Out*: "'How good life is!' . . . infinitely wonderful" (52), "the excitement, the romance and the richness of life" (172); and "What's hard? . . . Life" (209), "the struggle of life; the hardness of life" (325). This duality would appear also—with pronounced class-inflections—in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* especially. Clarissa Dalloway, while not insensible to life's precarity—having "the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (7)—is associated more frequently with a love of life: "what she loved; life" (7); "what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her . . . all this . . . her life, her self" (8); "And of course she enjoyed life immensely. . . . She enjoyed practically everything" (66); "Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it . . . was enough" (67); "how she had loved it all" (104). Septimus Warren Smith, on the other hand, while sensible to "beauty, more beauty!" (19), is on the whole more prone to succumb to the terrors of sheer existence: "this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him" (13). In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is "in love with this all" (19), "in love with this world" (22), whereas for Mrs McNab "it was one long sorrow and trouble . . . It was not easy or snug this world" (107). Mrs Ramsay one moment finds "this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance" (50-1), only to feel later as had Clarissa Dalloway: "It is enough! It is enough!" (55). In *The Waves*, Neville is "in love with life!" (66), and "it is the panorama of life . . . that delights"

Bernard (202), but the latter also speaks of “the blow; the mixed sensations; the complex and disturbing and utterly unprepared for impacts of life all over” (212).

The “mystery of life” also importantly articulates itself as an epistemological problem: the knowability of lives or life, and the question of their communicability. The problem often appears as that of the privacy, the self-enclosedness of individual consciousness, but it is also generalized into metacommentary on the writer’s (author, narrator or character) task of grasping and conveying in language a life, or “life” itself. In *The Voyage Out*, Richard Dalloway intones to Rachel Vinrace: “How little, after all, one can tell anybody about one’s life! Here I sit, there you sit . . . chock-full of the most interesting experiences, ideas, emotions; yet how communicate?” (59). In *Mrs Dalloway* for Clarissa the “supreme mystery” is the “privacy of the soul,” or “simply this: here was one room; there another” (107–08). “How then,” Lily Briscoe muses in *To the Lighthouse*, “did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?” (44), and Mrs Ramsay thinks of “being oneself” as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others” (52). In *The Waves*: “‘I am merely ‘Neville’ to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line it cannot pass. But to myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the world” (178). *Jacob’s Room* revolves around the absent center of Jacob’s consciousness: “yet all the while having for centre, for magnet, a young man alone in his room” (82, note the lonely room image which turns up again in *Mrs Dalloway*). But *Jacob’s Room* also contains some of Woolf’s most pointed metacommentary generalizing the problematic: “the strange thing about life is that though the nature of it must have been apparent to every one for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it” (82). “It is thus we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it” (137). How then does one go about the desired “account”? “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not

exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (24; and repeated verbatim on p. 135).

This problem of communication combines with that of sense-making in an important recurring idea: the tension between the disorderly, sprawling, mercurial substance of life and the attempt to capture it in some stable, coherent arrangement, as in the work of fiction or art. *Night and Day* reports on Katharine Hilbery "tracing out the lines of some symmetrical pattern, some arrangement of life" to "invest" the whole with meaning (266). But elsewhere she will see "life pouring ceaselessly," in "complete indifference to . . . individuals, whom it swallowed up and rolled onwards" (374). Woolfian characters that act as partial surrogates of an author figure illustrate this ordering impulse. Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay, which Suzette Henke has called "social artist[s] of human relations," are "good liver[s]" who strive to bring "people together in new, imaginative configurations" (Henke 128, 139) in order to create out of "the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral" some stable arrangements, something that "would remain" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 85). Lily Briscoe the artist labors to capture and replicate this feat in art, in her portrait of Mrs Ramsay. These characters channel an impulse to crystallize the fleeting substance of life in something tangible, coherent, meaningful.

The wished-for crystallization is strikingly evoked in Woolf's image of the "globe," a solid, compact object liable to direct touch and examination from all sides. In *The Voyage Out*, Clarissa Dalloway strikes Rachel Vinrace as someone who could grasp "the enormous solid globe" of the world to "sp[i]n round this way and that beneath her fingers" (38). *Night and Day* refers to a fragile "globe . . . round, whole, and entire," glimpsed for a moment and dispersed (428–29). In *Jacob's Room* letters "lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe" (79). Lily Briscoe imagines persons "whose gift" would be "to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people

(all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers" (157). In *The Waves* Bernard asks to "pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers" (210).

But Woolf's writing is just as invested in the failure or impossibility of full crystallization. It foregrounds the amorphous qualities of so-called "life" to the extent that any full and stable realization is refused. Mrs Ramsay's "triumph," as also Clarissa Dalloway's, are flawed. Lily Briscoe's final success is unclear: if, after the final stroke of her brush, she claims to "have had [her] vision" (170), as the closing line of *To the Lighthouse* reads, the present perfect tense suggests it is fleeting at best. For the narrator of "Time Passes," "it seems impossible . . . that we should ever compose from [the] fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth" (105). Going back to *Jacob's Room*, the letters supposed to "lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe" strike a different note when we remember the frills and fragments that compose the novel, and that the globe they make up revolves around the vacant center of an absent Jacob.

The "perfect globe," then, "round, whole and entire," turns out to be at best an ephemerally realizable ideal. For Ralph Denham in *Night and Day* "so many of the objects of life" are ever "inexplicably" surrounded by "smudges," "softening their sharp outline" (420). Bernard in *The Waves* would like, "[i]f it were possible," to "hand [his life] to [us] entire," to "break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes" and "say, 'Take it. This is my life'" (199). "But unfortunately," he continues, "what I see (this globe, full of figures) you do not see." "The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it," he says later, "far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst" (214). One factor then is the permeability of boundaries and the impossibility of neat divisions. "[W]hat you call life" is for Rhoda a "whole and indivisible mass" (107), and, for Neville, "all things—hands, curtains, knives and forks, other

people dining—run into each other" (111). In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe was aware of "the fluidity of life" (131) and felt "it was all one stream" (92).

Second, the thing called life is too multifarious for apprehension and for language. "One could say nothing to nobody," Lily Briscoe broods in *To the Lighthouse* (133). Bernard continues in the "globe of life" passage: "Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle . . . and slip through my fingers" (*Waves* 214). "How impossible," he continues, "to order" the elements "rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole." He will conclude that "Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it" (223). Earlier, however, he had suggested a possible strategy which can be seen to describe Woolf's novel itself: "But in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story—and there are so many, and so many" (199). In *Jacob's Room*, the narrator reflects on how the "observer" is ever "choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification." Although she notes that "There is no need to distinguish details," nevertheless "the difficulty remains – one has to choose" (57).

The life that Woolf's writing attempts to capture, or at least connect with, is then paradoxically characterized by this ungraspable proliferation. In images that express both fluidity and profusion, "life pour[s] ceaselessly" (*Night* 374), is a "fountain and spray" (*To the Lighthouse* 33). In *Jacob's Room* "life" is "an indescribable agitation" (143). In *Mrs Dalloway* "life" is of "infinite richness" (139). In *The Waves* it is "a many-sided substance . . . a many-faceted flower" (191), and finally "life" is a "populous undifferentiated chaos" (208). In a diary entry from 1920, Woolf announces her idea for a new form of novel that would "enclose everything, everything" (*Writer's Diary* 23). The result was to be the radical experiment of *Jacob's Room*, but this ambition can be seen to

characterize her subsequent novels as well. Already in *The Voyage Out*, the "one enormous question" on Rachel Vinrace's mind articulates into: "Please tell me – everything" (48). For Sandra Williams in *Jacob's Room* "Everything seems to mean so much" (124), and she reflects cryptically: "For I am sensitive to every side of it" (134). The enjoyer of life Clarissa Dalloway "enjoyed practically everything" (66). Lily Briscoe wants "to say not one thing, but everything" (146). Bernard's "mind hums hither and thither with its veil of words for everything" (*Waves* 96). "Immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained—so [Bernard's] being seems" (242)—although by now we have reason to qualify this clarity and containment.

The impulse to capture, touch on or express a vague "everything," and the limits to that impulse, recurrently articulate themselves as failures of articulation. We have already come across explicit commentary on communicative difficulties and breakdowns. Woolf's prose also hovers at those limits through unanswered questions, ellipses and trailings off, and indeterminate deictic expressions, often revolving around the term "life." "[W]hat was it all about?" Rachel wonders (*Voyage* 28). *Night and Day*'s Mrs Hilbery: "'Life . . . consists in missing trains and in finding—' But she pulled herself up and remarked that the kettle must have boiled completely over everything" (422). Lily Briscoe: "Only she thought life . . . Life: she thought but did not finish her thought" (*To the Lighthouse* 50). Though she has "a clear sense of it there, something real" before her, this is only specified with the word "life" and the deictic "it there." "This is life," thrice repeats Fanny in *Jacob's Room*, while looking through a shop window. The pronoun "it" appears six times in an early passage of *Mrs Dalloway* bereft of a referent: "why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh"; only for "it" to turn out to be "life" (4). "That is all," Clarissa declares "looking at the fishmonger's," and again outside a glove shop (9), and the phrase occurs twice again some pages later (34). Lily Briscoe is "in love with this all" (19), and Mrs

Ramsay feels: “It is enough! It is enough!” (55). “And this, and this, and this,” she notes while walking past ordinary household objects intertwined with the lives of the people there on that day (92). The indeterminate references to “things,” “somethings,” “all,” “its” and “thises” and “thats” abound and cannot be summed up.

These deictic expressions often follow lists describing ordinary scenes. They intimate that the details picked out are so many elements, impressionistic tokens of a larger, vaguer mass—but one made up of concrete particulars. Sometimes the scenes are of natural landscapes. Often they are urban scenes. Other times the setting is domestic. The accent will often fall on people and human relations—“the way people look and laugh, and run up the steps of omnibuses” (*JR* 69)—but also sheer objects. In *The Voyage Out* Rachel believes “In everything! . . . I believe in the bed, in the photographs, in the pot, in the balcony, in the sun, in Mrs. Flushing” (236). For Clarissa Dalloway “life” was “[i]n people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging . . .” (4). Bernard envisions a book “upon the true nature of human life,” “embracing every known variety of man and woman”; and he “fill[s] [his] mind with whatever happens to be the contents of a room or a railway carriage as one fills a fountain-pen in an inkpot” (53). “This is life then to which I am committed,” he declares (50). Lily Briscoe ponders simply “the deposit of each day’s living” (45).

What, then, can we say about the substance of “life” in Woolf’s writing? I suggest that the “life” Woolf is after relates to an idea of *the ordinary*. Her writing indeed declares its investment in ordinariness. In *The Voyage Out* “the ordinary was . . . preferable to the ecstatic and mysterious, for it was refreshingly solid” (274). *Night and Day* highlights “all the trivialities of a Sunday afternoon” and those considered “only small people” (9). In *Mrs Dalloway* Septimus values “all of this . . . made out of ordinary things as it was” (59). Lily Briscoe wants

"to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy" (164). Louis in *The Waves* conjures "the protective waves of the ordinary" (76) while Neville looks to "the quiet of ordinary things. A table, a chair, a book" (119).

The ordinary is notoriously difficult to define. But it is precisely the intransigence of the ordinary and its mercurial substance that inform, as I see it, Woolf's writing of life. The ordinary can be anything at all. This undifferentiated quality at the heart of the idea of the ordinary, I will contend, has important consequences for the value-leveling implications of Woolf's poetics of representation.

Life-as-ordinary: a critical poetics

What are the stakes involved in a literary project that professes to express "life"? Answering the question requires paying attention to the designation of such an object for representation, as well as to what representation solicits in the object. This concerns the choice of subject—what the artist chooses to represent—and of content—"what the artist discovers or emphasizes in his subject-matter" (Berger 209). The two selective operations are bound together, since the features attributed to the object inform its identity, how it is understood, and so the import and meaning of its election as subject matter. What, then, can we make of "life" as the declared subject matter for a novelistic program? In its generality and boundlessness, "life" would seem to name the subject of any variety of literary or artistic realism. Indeed, as will be apparent, I treat Woolf's literary project, in its attempt to "capture life," as in a basic sense a realist one. As per John Berger's definition of realism, however, artists "are Realists in so far as they bring into art aspects of nature and life previously ignored or forbidden by the rule-makers" (208). Realist writing or art, then, involves negotiations of the real, rethinking that in which it consists, its attributes and qualities. In Woolf's words when she

contrasts modes of representation, “the accent falls a little differently” (“Modern Fiction” 11).

Woolf was alert also to representation’s entanglement in systems of value. Her criticism and her fiction take up the question of what in life is worth representing, on the premise that fictional visibility (and its obverse) translates assumptions about the place of things in established orders of value. “Since a novel has this correspondence to real life,” she writes in *A Room of One’s Own*, “its values are to some extent those of real life” (67). Woolf’s writings on biography for instance—the writing of lives—urge the recording of ordinary lives against the privileging of supposedly great personalities as the essential actors of history.[5] Even when it came to portraying ordinary subjects, Woolf faulted a conventionalized realism for what it demoted or ignored in the ostensibly exhaustive pictures it painted of its chosen subjects. Woolf’s writing, moreover, recurrently takes aim at the hegemony of abstract values that posit themselves as true values over and above, and at the expense of actual life, and which Woolf associates with the patriarchal order and strategies of domination and control.

In what follows, I wish to establish “ordinary life” as a byword for a range of critical ideas about the real, its constitution and character, its mode of visibility and the entanglement of its (re)presentations with conceptions of value, that are at play in Woolf’s poetic and literary outlook. Woolf advances ordinary life as the life that fiction ought to convey but has often obscured, and at stake in that visibility are contrasting value systems. Her work proffers the ordinary as a

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[5] Melba Cuddy-Keane documents Woolf’s historiographic interest in the recording of ordinary life and the “Lives of the Obscure” (see Woolf’s eponymous essay), situating it within nascent currents that point forward to later twentieth-century practices of “microhistory” and the “history of the everyday.” This emerging line contrasts with the “dominant historical paradigm in Woolf’s time” which was “totalizing, linear, political, and monumental” (“Virginia Woolf” 65). “Monumental” history fixates on “certain privileged moments—if biographical history, in the great lives of great men; if political and constitutional history, in the public arena of laws, wars, and treaties” (“Virginia Woolf” 60).

corrective to skewed value assignations, as a way to render visibility to the overlooked and to assert the value of actual life against that of pernicious and distorting abstractions. Ordinary life, however, is not simply a subdomain of experience, an object or field of interest alongside others, that needs to be brought (back) into view. As we shall see, the ordinary rather names a way of attending to a totality and carries a description of the real itself. For this reason, it will be appropriate to speak of a poetics of *life-as-ordinary*.

The poetics of life-as-ordinary, in short, not only pays attention to "what is commonly thought small" ("Modern Fiction" 9) but in effect renders visible the ordinary character of life itself. Its motto may be borrowed from Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*: "all of this . . . made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now" (59). The implications of this treatment of life as ordinary for the question of value may be conceived in two ways. First, the description of the real implied in such a poetics is value-laden in that it carries a set of critical attitudes. The ordinary is anti-hierarchical. It deflates the transcendental and the abstract in order to locate value squarely in the concrete and this-worldly. Life-as-ordinary, as we shall see, also stresses an *astructural* quality of the real which makes it recalcitrant to containment, a quality that Woolf and others recurrently pit against ideological and institutional domination. Second, these features together entail a radically reconfigured value-scape. In gesturing towards an astructural totality of life all "made out of ordinary things," the anti-hierarchical impetus of the poetics of life-as-ordinary extends to a radical leveling of the field of value, putting all aspects of existence on an equal footing as ends-in-themselves.

I will first consider a range of literary, artistic and intellectual projects roughly contemporary with Virginia Woolf's that have also concerned themselves with the ordinary as a critical concept. Reference to Jacques Rancière's historico-theoretical account of modern poetics will also help frame the rise of the ordinary in the scene of literature and the value implications of

aesthetic visibility. These will help establish the stakes attached to a modernist poetics of the ordinary before turning to Woolf and showing how her critical and poetic outlook shares these concerns. These currents are generally referred to as critical theories of the everyday, and less often as of the ordinary. I will be using the terms rather interchangeably, although my approach slightly favors the latter. This is because the connotations of repetition and routinization, and of temporal division associated with the term everyday are less crucial from my perspective—although these are necessarily encompassed in ordinary life as well. The ordinary, on the other hand, also highlights the anti-hierarchical impetus of the concept. And I seek to register its all-embracing character by speaking of a poetics of "life-as-ordinary."[6]

The critique of ordinary life: visibility and (re)valuation

Representation entails value-laden ways of conceiving and seeing objects. Selective operations accentuate or disclose features and qualities, and a set of underlying principles or assumptions allow such elements to stand for—to be read as—representations of objects. This is the matter of the poetics of representation. Jacques Rancière's sweeping historical account of modern literature turns on a far-reaching transformation in the dominant "modes of visibility" at work in aesthetics. Aesthetics refers for Rancière to modes of perception—following the root of *aesthesis*, from the Greek *aisthesthai*, "to perceive." His use of the term *visibility* therefore is not meant to privilege the visual but encompasses ways of sensing, identifying, ordering and being affected by objects (*Aisthesis* ix–x). The forms under which a world is presented or presents itself to us—its host of components more or less visible or left out, and the shapes that order the visible—necessarily reflect what I will refer to as a

[6] Woolf, as Lorraine Sim points out, employs "ordinary" with much greater frequency than "everyday" (2).

value-scape: a distribution of values to match what Rancière calls distributions of the visible or sensible.

The entanglement of aesthetic visibility with the distribution of values in a world-picture is immediately apparent in Rancière's account of modern poetics, which contextualizes the rise of the ordinary in literature. The transformation that, for Rancière, founded modern poetics at the turn of the nineteenth century involves the dismantling of a hierarchy of subjects that defined a previously dominant representative regime. The latter's intricate system of genres reflected a hierarchic conception that assigned each type of subject its place in an ideal order of things, along a differential scale of value. "Serious" literary treatment was reserved for the ideal types highest in the hierarchy: heroes, princes, generals. Across diverse literary currents and moments Rancière now identifies the premise that potentially *anything* gains an equal claim to representation. This is the implication Rancière draws, for instance, from Flaubert's assertion that "from the standpoint of pure Art . . . there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things" (Flaubert 154; Rancière, *Mute Speech* 51, 115–16). All subjects, all things, warrant an equal mode of aesthetic attention. Woolf, in fact, would make the same claim in her seminal essay "Modern Fiction": "'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction" (12).

Viewing the rise of the ordinary in literature from this standpoint brings into focus some of the key impulses of ordinary life poetics. First, we understand it differentially, in opposition to a hierarchical order privileging certain subjects for representation. The poetics of the ordinary therefore tends ever to seek new subjects, habitually overlooked and devalued. We need only glance at nineteenth-century realism's serious literary treatment of increasingly wider strata of social life, in the rising, versatile and shifting form of the novel—which Rancière calls the "non-generic genre" (*Mute Speech* 51) and Woolf "that cannibal" ("Poetry, Fiction and the Future" 80). Yet the ordinary does not, in the

process, claim for itself a newly privileged or even separate field. Rather it differentiates itself from forms of differentiation. It constitutes an all-embracing mode of attention opposed to the idea of inherent distinctions of subject matter in a hierarchical order. The radical implication of the ordinary, as per Flaubert and Woolf, is that its purview extends equally to potentially *anything and everything*. It is a way of seeing, a perspective on the whole: life-as-ordinary. In fact, as we shall see, Woolf would fault her near-contemporaries precisely for having so conventionalized realism as to restrict its purview to a limited field of subjects and attributes, while presenting that limited field—in a deficiency of vision or imagination—as exhaustive of the real.[7]

Rancière furthermore identifies parallel transformations in the poetics of knowledge beyond literary fiction, calling attention to the political valences of a large poetic shift within and outside of literature as such. History writing, for instance—which so intrigued Woolf—also starts, in the nineteenth century, to take interest increasingly in ordinary lives and the lives of peoples, as opposed to the chronicles of what Woolf calls “Great Men” (Rancière, *Names Of History* 2). This tendency would be formalized in the twentieth century by the French Annales school historiographers and in Britain through the practice of “history from below” (Moran 51–52). Rancière’s political theory gives a central place to aesthesis, referring to generalized modes of visibility operating in the social sphere at large. The political concerns the ordering the social world, the manner in which subjects and objects are admitted—or not—within that order. It is a matter of how the social world presents itself, and the terrains on which modes of its visibility are possibly contested or negotiated. Since literary representation participates in these forms of visibility, it constitutes one such terrain—among many others. Therefore the historical shift in literary poetics, and the value transformations attendant upon it, gain in political resonance. These, as we shall

[7] Such a consolidation of convention amounts in effect to a *regenrification* of fiction, “realist” subjects now ossifying into ideal, conventionalized types.

see, interested Woolf and other of her contemporaries who took up the question of ordinary or everyday life, in aesthetics as well as in critical social theories.

Concern with the ordinary or everyday registers across literary, artistic, and intellectual projects contemporary with Woolf's. These share critical tendencies that will bring into emphasis the import of Woolf's attention to ordinary life in her literary practice. I will approach this field by focusing on two key aspects that elucidate the value implications of the visibility of life-as-ordinary. First, across these currents reverberates a repudiation of abstraction, seen as a key operator in the ideological devaluation of the ordinary. From this point of view, the ordinary is the real, the concrete and this-worldly, as opposed to illusory transcendentals and abstractions. These perform an ideological trick: not only do they pass themselves off as real entities, but in the process, they separate themselves from ordinariness and relegate it to a realm of inconsequence, to be scorned in the name of higher pursuits. Thinkers of the ordinary commit by contrast to the thorough-going ordinariness of the real, making the ordinary the only possible domain of values and ends-in-themselves. Second, the theories and aesthetics in question stress an *astructural* character—what has been called the "messiness"—of ordinary life, which makes it recalcitrant to subsumption within overarching concepts or containment within rigid forms. The latter are associated with discourses and institutions of control, making the ordinary both the life that is threatened and in need of liberation, and the terrain containing the resources for intervention. Ordinary life becomes the domain of both ends and means. All of the thinkers under consideration saw political dimensions to their work, in which attention to life-as-ordinary, and the reconfiguration of values that it entails, form a necessary condition.

We may start nearer to Woolf with the work of James Joyce, whose modernist writing of ordinary life makes explicit an anti-idealist thrust. Joyce claimed to write in a "style of scrupulous meanness" (*Selected Letters* 83): highly

attentive to the ostensibly "mean" or petty, and suffused with a critical attitude. In *Dubliners*, he sets out to puncture various spiritualisms and romanticisms that divert his array of characters from the real conditions under which they lead their daily lives. As Liesl Olson puts it, Joyce pursues a realism with "political aims" centering on a "desire to strip life of symbolic and romantic visions" (34). The characters of *Dubliners* are driven to the detriment of their actual lives by abstract ideals and romantic ideas about self and world—which Joyce proceeds to bring down to their prosaic substrates.[8] Leopold Bloom, nevertheless, the unassuming hero of Joyce's modernist *epos* of the ordinary, would prove that Joyce's method simultaneously raises up the prose of life as a valued good-in-itself. For Henri Lefebvre *Ulysses* rescues "each facet of the quotidian from anonymity" (*Everyday Life* 2). Joyce's valuation of the ordinary remains part and parcel of his distrust of abstract values: as Stephen Dedalus warns in *Ulysses*, speaking of heroic ideals of (English) virtue and justice: "I fear those big words . . . which make us so unhappy" (*Ulysses* 31; See Olson 31–32).

The continental Surrealist and Dada movements represented, in a different register, influential critical aesthetics of the ordinary (Henri Lefebvre, in many ways a founder of discursivity for the so-called critique of everyday life, was associated early in his career with the Surrealists). Surrealism sought to disclose the marvelous within the everyday, recalling attention to its overlooked richness. Although Lefebvre would later criticize the idea of the marvelous as conducive to a "transcendental contempt for the real" (*Critique* I: 29), the Surrealists themselves insisted that the marvelous does not constitute a transcendental reality but "an immanent one, located firmly in the here and now" (Gardiner 34). This perspective would find an echo in Walter Benjamin's notion of "profane

[8] We may also think of Joyce's naïve young hero Stephen Dedalus in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as he enacts his cherished sentimental narrative gleaned from *Monte Cristo*, in Dublin's red-light district (See Joyce xxix).

illumination," which made the "mundane world" the "privileged site of revelation, mystery and the poetic" (Gardiner 35).

These bids to reenchant the ordinary here-and-now echo Joyce's suspicion of the abstract and other-worldly. Surrealism together with Dada, moreover, trained explicit revolutionary aspirations on the actual transformation of everyday life, as the sole possible terrain for liberatory politics. They championed the everyday in the face of the "rarefied abstractions" of "bourgeois morality," values like "honour, discipline, family, country and capital" (Benjamin, "Surrealism" 179; Gardiner 24). These are *reified* abstractions: they masquerade as real things while lacking content in terms of actual qualities of life, forming in the words of Dada founder Tristan Tzara a hollow "skeleton of conventions" (qtd in Lewis 3). Through such illusory values, Surrealists and Dadaists argued, the bourgeois order degrades actual life, demanding its "sacrifice" in their pursuit (Gardiner 24). Their politics insisted by contrast that the concrete elements of everyday life constitute the ultimate domain of ends-in-themselves and the only reality available for human realization, including those heightened or revelatory experiences associated with the marvelous.

Henri Lefebvre's theorization of the everyday similarly stresses the role of ideologies in "the devaluation of everyday life" (*Critique* I: 87). Lefebvre faults philosophy too for an idealism that regarded the everyday as trivial and inconsequential, the philosopher "enthroned . . . above the moments lost in triviality" (*Critique* I: 5). This idealism valorizes the "supposedly 'higher' functions of human reason as displayed in such specialized activities as art, philosophy and science," as opposed to the "petty concerns" and "messy vagaries of daily existence" (Gardiner 75). Thus everyday reality is spurned or relegated to a subordinate position: only meaningful insofar as it bears on or leads to those higher values. But "the 'meaning' of a life," Lefebvre insists, "is not to be found in anything other than that life itself. It is within it, and there is nothing beyond that" (*Critique* I: 144–45). "Superior, differentiated and highly specialized"

fields, he argues, "have never been separate from everyday practice, they have only appeared to be so," concealing as part of an ideological operation their own connection to the everyday "as they raised themselves above it" (86).

The first task of critical theory, then, is an effort to salvage or restore the denigrated value of the ordinary and everyday.[9] The critique of everyday life clearly commits to the "social and political resonances" of making "the invisible visible" (Highmore, *Everyday Life Reader* 2). Lefebvre in fact gives credit to modernist writing—citing the work of Joyce, Woolf and Marcel Proust, with precedents in nineteenth-century realist writing—for a "momentous eruption of everyday life into literature" (*Everyday Life* 2).[10] As well as rendering visibility to the ordinary as such, a self-conscious modernist writing of the ordinary reconnects the "supposedly 'higher' function" of art firmly to the everyday.

Critiquing the separation of higher activities and values from the realm of the ordinary, then, a constellation of writers, artists and theorists deployed the ordinary or everyday to name the ultimate domain of ends-in-themselves, the all-embracing reality where human realization had to take place. According to Stewart Home, Dada, Surrealism, and other currents of the moment carried a utopian impulse aimed "not just at the integration of *art* and *life*, but of all human activities" (qtd in Gardiner 25). Lefebvre too called for the critique of everyday life to "organize a 'whole', to bring to the fore the idea of the *total man*" (qtd Gardiner 79)—using the term "totality" as one of his names for the everyday (Highmore, *Everyday Life Reader* 14). As a Marxist, he sees the aims of "cultural revolution" in the "transfiguration of everyday life": "The revolution will transform existence" itself, "not merely the state and the distribution of property, *for we do not take means for ends*" (*Everyday Life* 204, emphasis added).

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[9] See Lefebvre, *Critique* I: 184: "And so our entire life is caught up in alienation, and will only be restored to itself slowly, through an immense effort of thought (consciousness) and action (creation)."

[10] Ben Highmore also points to Joyce and Woolf as theoretical precursors to the study of everyday life (*Everyday Life Reader* 30).

Everyday life then is the only existence where ends are realized. "Is it not," Lefebvre asks, "in everyday life that man should fulfil his life as a man? . . . Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all" (*Critique* I: 127).

The ordinary or everyday, then, is meant to name human existence in its totality, not just a specific domain of it. Gertrude Stein put it thus: "the daily life is a daily life if at any moment of the daily life that daily life is all there is of life" (10). The critique of everyday life seeks to render back to their real, ordinary substrate those domains and abstract entities that separate themselves from it. "We refuse," Lefebvre writes, "to see them as the substance and hidden being of human reality, we devalue them and we revalue the mere residuum upon which they are built – everyday life" (*Everyday Life* 16). In effect, then, the ordinary as a critical concept entails a description of human reality: life-as-ordinary. The description is a critical one, expurgating reified abstractions that falsely purport to describe real things, or that impose themselves on the real with distorting effects. The thrust of this critique of abstractions, moreover, is a reorientation of value, to those aspects subject to ideological denigration under the sign of ordinariness. Accordingly, critical takes on ordinary life—whether theoretical or aesthetic—polemically tend to call attention to subjects, activities, and experiences habitually overlooked and devalued. This does not, however, make the latter more ordinary than anything else—though they might connote the ordinary more readily by habitual (and often pejorative) association. Ultimately, as Bryony Randall writes, "there can be no hierarchy of dailiness, nothing and no-one is intrinsically more everyday than another" (188).

The all-embracing purview of the ordinary or everyday may seem to pose a conceptual problem, the term becoming so general as to lose all meaning. Franco Moretti writes about the everyday that "if we must define a sphere of life, and declare it limitless, then we have not come very far" (*Way* 33). Moretti is right that the concept may be of little use if it lacked specific content. While its *referents* may abound, however, the concept does contain specific descriptions

of and a set of attitudes towards that referent. As we have seen, it redefines the purview of the real to which it refers, even as it still allows it to include an unlimited number of objects and phenomena. We will also shortly consider the implications of the astructural character described in life-as-ordinary. As a critical concept the ordinary also has practical discursive functions: it conveys attitudes divergent from other conceptual systems, and it issues a call to attend to reality differently. Theorists of the everyday therefore stress that it calls forth a form of *attention*. Even for Moretti, "what characterizes everyday life . . . is not the nature or the number of its pursuits but their 'treatment.'" Ben Highmore suggests that "the everyday is the name that cultural theory might give to a form of attention that attempts to animate the heterogeneity of social life" (*Everyday Life* 175). Bryony Randall also sees the everyday "as a particular perspective on, a particular kind of attention paid to, the various practices which make up life as a whole" (11). For Michael Sheringham, since the everyday is "where we already are," the aim is "somehow to bring about a transformation that will make it visible or palpable" (188).

As Bryony Randall writes, this "question of attention is inevitably connected to that of value, since we supposedly value that to which we attend, and attend differently to things we believe to be of different value" (12). For Randall, modernist writing of the ordinary intervenes "in the matrix which conventionally relegates the everyday to the realm of the trivial, unremarkable, repetitive and impotent," and countervails "the value-judgments implicit in those associations" (11). I have focused thus far on the critique of reified abstractions from the standpoint of the ordinary because it demonstrates the ordinary's connected claims about the real and about its valuation. It aims to recenter value within a concrete yet inclusive ordinariness while pushing against a hierarchization of value that demotes the ordinary as trivial in the name of something other. The theorists of the ordinary see *life*, in all its aspects, as the ultimate domain of ends: Lefebvre calls for an "art of living" that would treat the

human being's "own life – the development and intensification of his life – not as a means towards 'another' end, but as an end in itself" (*Critique* I: 199). For Liesl Olson, modernist fiction contributes to such a project where it does not transform the ordinary "into something else, into something beyond our everyday world" but allows it to "endure in and of itself, as a 'final good'" (4). Similarly, for Randall, modernist texts set themselves against the tendency to supersede the everyday in favor of ulterior ends imposed *a priori*, so that it is "significant only in terms of its relation to those ends": they suggest instead "the constant production of ends, uses, values, in the ongoing experience of everyday life" (191).

Across critical and aesthetic approaches to the ordinary recurs an emphasis on another quality of the real viewed under the sign of ordinariness: what has been called its "messiness," or its "astructural" character. From this point of view, the richness and fluidity of ordinary life overflow neat forms or conceptual categories that tend to impoverish their object. Many of the thinkers in question, furthermore, see in the representative and conceptual reduction of ordinary life attempts to master its complexity and unpredictability that form a discursive analogue—and an ideological instrument—for the reduction and domination of life in praxis. This gives political valences to modes of representation of life-as-ordinary—aesthetic or conceptual—which rather than reduce and falsify its character succeed in conveying its elusive profusion. The astructural character of the ordinary as a description of the real also has consequences for the reconfiguration of value implied in the poetics of life-as-ordinary. This is because conceptual reduction privileges certain features of objects at the expense of others. By contrast, the idea of the astructurality of the ordinary invites attention to its rich complexity without subsuming or subordinating it, and thus informs the value-leveling implications of the ordinary.

Emphasis on the messy character of the ordinary may be understood as an extension of the critique of reified abstractions. Theories of the ordinary question totalizing concepts that purport to account for the real while reducing its messy complexity. The Surrealist André Breton insisted that "the world and human existence could never be fully explained or encapsulated within an overarching conceptual system," because that would necessarily overlook "the richness of the concrete and the particular" (Gardiner 38). Generalized abstractions occlude and demote concrete particularity by subsuming it within an idea that comes to take precedence over it. Mikhail Bakhtin faults Western philosophy for a "desire to supersede everyday life with theoretical abstractions," and calls for a turn away from "abstruse theoretical constructions" and back to "bodily, lived experience" (Gardiner 47–48). His idea of a "prosaic imagination" sought to "grasp the contingency, complexity and 'messiness' of everyday life," recognizing its "multiformity and diversity" and refusing to "impoverish . . . the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome" (qtd in Gardiner 52–53).

Henri Lefebvre similarly stresses what he calls the "astructural" quality of the everyday, its connection "to the idea of the amorphous and unformed" (*Critique* II: 163). The everyday, he writes, "evades the grip of forms" and "eludes all attempts at institutionalization" (*Everyday Life* 182). Lefebvre thus makes explicit the parallel between the discursive impoverishment of the everyday through reductive concepts—philosophical and ideological—and its practical and institutional counterpart in the organization to which modern life is subjected: "Everyday life – organized, neatly subdivided and programmed to fit a controlled, exact time-table" (59). We hear in Lefebvre echoes of Michel Foucault's influential account of the "disciplining of the lifeworld through the various technologies of social control" and "the dominant discourses and practices of power" (Gardiner 64). Rendering visibility and value back to the everyday, in its recalcitrance to formal and conceptual control, is seen as a necessary condition for its liberation in practice. According to Michael Gardiner,

it is "the very 'messiness' of daily life, its unsystematized and unpredictable quality, that helps it escape the reifying grip of nomothetic social science and technocratic planning" (16). Tristan Tzara, for his part, had tied Dada's aesthetic promise of freedom to embracing the messiness and contradictions of life: "a roaring tense of colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE" (20).

We may stop here at some paradoxical implications of the ordinary. The desire to grasp (at) life as a totality through the category of the ordinary—"to enclose everything, everything," as per Woolf's programmatic statement—may sit uneasily with the suspicion of totalizing ideas. Yet the ordinary purports to be precisely the kind of concept that gestures towards a totality without containing or systematizing it—entailing rather a sense of that totality as uncontainable.[11] Similarly, while itself an abstract concept, it is pitted against the reification of abstractions and stresses that it only holds meaning insofar as it points to concrete particulars—impossible to list or exhaust—of lived experience. The unformed and astructural, importantly, are aspects of the *concept* as well as the thing-itself—the real on which it forms a perspective. The concept thereby remains labile, porous, receptive to new objects, while describing realities that are themselves protean. Crucially, too, formlessness needs to be understood as a *latent* aspect of ordinariness as a description of reality. It precludes neither concept nor thing-itself gaining form, definition, even containment, but denotes rather an ever-present potential to evade, in Lefebvre's phrase, the *grip* of forms.

Third, as we have noted, "the ordinary" means differentially. Life-as-ordinary is conceived in opposition to ways of seeing that reduce, contain, and hierarchize the world and its experience, privileging certain aspects above others, or setting up misleading, reified abstractions as holding more essential truth or weight. Yet, although it means differentially, the ordinary by the same token

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[11] "Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 53).

points to something *undifferentiated*: reality recalcitrant to supposedly impoverishing and hierarchizing forms of differentiation. As Rita Felski aptly puts the paradox, "the distinctiveness of the everyday lies in its lack of distinction and differentiation" ("Invention" 80).

The undifferentiated character of the ordinary informs its value-leveling implications. Implicit, of course, in the common meaning of the ordinary (indeed also the everyday) is something regarded as unexceptional, unexalted, trifling. In its all-inclusive sense, however, the ordinary leverages these associations to reclaim the trivialized while denying its discontinuity with the supposedly nontrivial. The ordinary's shapeshifting character is de-hierarchizing in implication since hierarchies are themselves "forms" that organize the world into "asymmetrical, discriminatory" configurations, distributing "bodies, things, and ideas according to levels of power or importance" (Levine 82). By eliding demarcations between significant and insignificant, and loosening the grip of hierarchical distinctions, the inclusive sweep of ordinariness levels the plane such that any and each part of life is similarly subject to value consideration, and a locus where value may be actualized—or missed.[12]

Jacques Rancière, who may be regarded as a contemporary historian and theorist of the "eruption of the everyday into literature" as Lefebvre calls it, associates an egalitarian promise with a modern aesthetic regime's inclusiveness and "indifference," its sensibility (always only potential) to "anything and everything" (*Aesthetics* 40; *Politics* 53–54). This points in effect to the de-hierarchizing implications of the ordinary as such. Thus, in Ben Highmore's accurate gloss, the modern poetic regime's "indifference to a hierarchy of significance" promises reconfigurations of the visible, "inaugurates (continuously) the possibility of everything and anything being significant"

[12] No necessary implication follows that all actual objects, all contents of experience become equal or indifferent—although Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* intimates the extremes of paranoia and nihilism to which such a possibility might give rise.

(*Ordinary Lives* 46, 48). I would stress, because the nuance is often missed, that a redistributive potential is not afforded only by the admittance of ever new objects breaking through the bounds of the visible, but since the indifference of "anything and everything" affords labile topographies also of the already-visible: the ordinary touches both the unnoticed and the all-too-familiar.

When literature or art claim to represent life, they translate value-laden ways of attending to their object. Representation can thus serve a valorizing function as it negotiates, from its position, what constitutes the real and what is worth attending to within it. The radical development that Jacques Rancière emphasizes in the nascent modern poetics, and which is encapsulated in Flaubert's and Woolf's declarations on the subjectlessness of art and literature, starts to appear as a contribution to the visibility of the ordinary *as such*. The increased self-consciousness with which this poetics defines its purview as "anything and everything," in direct opposition to inherited classes of subjects and proprieties for their treatment, is commensurate with both the all-inclusiveness and the undifferentiated amorphousness of life-as-ordinary. The equalizing implications of this aesthetic attention are of a piece with the value critiques advanced by the theorists of ordinary life. I turn again now to Virginia Woolf to discuss her critical views on modern fiction and demonstrate the investment of her literary project in the representation of life-as-ordinary, along with the value reconfigurations entailed by that form of aesthetic attention.

Woolf and the realism of ordinary life

Some of Virginia Woolf's seminal pronouncements on the poetics of fiction appeared within polemical texts aimed at the realist writing of some of her contemporaries and immediate predecessors, whom she collectively referred to as Edwardians. In criticizing this group of writers, however, Woolf points in the direction of a realist representational practice of her own. Criticism has by now

established that modernist writers including Woolf do not necessarily relinquish realist representational aims but seek an updated realism faithful also to interior, subjective experience (See Auerbach; P. Lewis 213–14). But Woolf's accent falls as much on the ordinariness of life, an aspect of her writing which only recently has begun to garner sustained critical attention. Even Woolf's occasional jabs at the Edwardians' fixation on petty externalities ought to be read as critiques of a realism that had so conventionalized its representations as to reduce and falsify the character of reality. Such remarks should no more detract from Woolf's critique of distinctions between trivial and nontrivial, than from her own meticulous writing of the material world.

The paradoxes of the ordinary make it into an unstable category, and gives rise to difficulties for its representation as such. According to Liesl Oslon, "modernist writers acknowledge and respond to the difficulty of representing the everyday, as it is both everywhere and nowhere, overlooked and yet a subject that deserves attention" (12–13). Woolf's fiction may be characterized as a realist project invested in the presentation of life-as-ordinary, alive both to the reconfigurations of value that it implies and, as we shall see, to the paradoxes to which it gives rise. As a species of realism, her writing rethinks the make-up and qualities of lived reality and the appropriate strategies for their representation. In so doing it renders visibility to overlooked and undervalued aspects of experience, while implying a level value-scape in the inclusiveness of life-as-ordinary. Woolf registers the astructural, amorphous quality of an all-embracing ordinariness and puts into play critiques of totalizing, reductive, and distorting abstractions. We will see later on, however, that her writing conversely grants the necessity and practical value of localized crystallizations or even reductions, while also allowing these to fold back into the flow of ordinary life, maintaining a porosity of boundaries.

We have noted how Woolf in her views on biography disputes both the choice of subjects whose lives are worth recording—“Is not anyone who has lived a life . . . worthy of biography?” (“Art of Biography” 121)—and the question of “what is most real” and worthy of record in a life (“New Biography” 100). In “Modern Fiction” she puts the central question for fiction-writing thus: “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (9). Her criticisms of early-twentieth-century realism thus do not belie her critical commitment to life-like representation. According to Liesl Olson, Woolf “transforms, but does not reject, the literary realism of the past” (66). Woolf calls these writers “materialists” (“Modern Fiction” 8) and blames them for fixating on “facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines” while failing to look squarely “at Mrs. Brown in her corner,” as she writes in “Character in Fiction” (47). Yet her own novelistic practice is far from anti-materialist, challenging instead the way that “materiality is conventionally depicted in fiction”—and this, as Bryony Randall puts it, through attention to “the substance of everyday life” (168). Woolf faults the Edwardian realists, in effect, for a worn conventionality that falsifies the reality it seeks to describe.

The “stuff of fiction,” Woolf proposes, “is a little other than custom would have us believe it” (“Modern Fiction” 9). She takes realist convention to task for the elements it emphasizes in representing its subjects. The realists of her day had come to fixate on a restricted set of signs as their strategy for “proving the solidity, the likeness to life of the story” (8)—her criticism chiming partially with Roland Barthes’ later views on realism (“The Reality Effect”). This writing, Woolf quips, is content to dress its characters “down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour,” as though that were sufficient to establish life-likeness (“Modern Fiction” 8). She calls such representations—still in a sartorial metaphor—“ill-fitting vestments.” Similarly, she writes of Arnold Bennett that he tries “to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house,” described it “accurately and minutely,” “there must be a person living there” (“Character in Fiction” 47). But this “form of fiction most in vogue,” Woolf

maintains, "more often misses than secures the thing we seek" ("Modern Fiction" 8). The "enormous labour" employed is "misplaced" so that in the end result "life escapes."

The problem, then, is with a realism that obscures its object, overlooking aspects of the real that warrant attention. More strongly put, it is with a realism that treats a restricted set of features as though they were exhaustive of the real, thus reducing it and distorting its character. Woolf praises, by contrast, modernist writers like James Joyce for reaching "closer to life," in disregard of entrenched novelistic conventions ("Modern Fiction" 9). Urging modern fiction to place "the emphasis . . . upon something hitherto ignored," she joins Joyce in praise to older authors like Sterne and Thackeray because their works "suggest how much of life is excluded or ignored," and show "that there are not only other aspects of life, but more important ones into the bargain" ("Modern Fiction" 11). We begin to see that Woolf ties representational visibility to value. "Let us not take it for granted," she presses, "that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (9). Ostensibly realistic fiction, she is suggesting, implies an idea of the *substance* of reality—that in which it consists *and* what is important in it. Edwardian novelists pictured life as coterminous with conventionalized markers of "solidity," occluding from view and thereby devaluing other elements. A primary function of the best fiction, Woolf counters, is that it renders visible and recognizes the value of aspects hitherto ignored or demoted—much as Lefebvre would later argue and credit modernist fiction with doing for the everyday.

Woolf's critical and poetical efforts to redress skewed assignations of value, "what is commonly thought big" or "small," have clear feminist implications. Writing in *A Room of One's Own* that the novel's "values are to some extent those of real life," Woolf points out that "it is the masculine values that prevail," constructing and separating "important" and "trivial" subjects along gendered demarcations (67). In "Women and Fiction" she speaks of the

writer's perpetual need to "alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man" (136). It is clear, however, that the "feminist critique of literary value" which Woolf initiates (Cuddy-Keane, *Public Sphere* 167–68) is a far-reaching critique of value *tout court*—it reflects, moreover, that any thorough-going critique of value must be feminist.[13]

For fiction better to approach adequate representations, then, Woolf requires it to be radically inclusive, admitting into its sphere an ever-widening scope of objects, extending serious attention to matters neglected or deemed unimportant, or that lack a place or determined significance within existing, conventional economies of representation. "The proper stuff of fiction," Woolf concludes, "does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction" ("Modern Fiction" 12). This outlook informs the "constant experimentation" seen across her work: her invention of new forms in each successive novel translates an "incessant desire to include a little more than has been netted" (Cuddy-Keane, *Public Sphere* 56).

In a diary entry from 1924 Woolf provides a designation for the life that escapes: "Indeed most of life escapes, now I come to think of it: the texture of the ordinary day" (*Diary* 2: 298). In "Modern Fiction" too Woolf appeals directly to the ordinary when discussing what the conventional realist novel overlooks. In a much-quoted passage, she invites us to

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the

[13] The everyday itself, critics and theorists have noted, has had a historical, ideological association with women, the everyday and the feminine both constructed as spheres separate from a realm of action and event that then raises itself above them. On the ideological association of everyday life with women, see Rita Felski, "Invention" 80.

> life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there. (9)

Woolf's appeal to mental impressions is in line with her and other modernists' attempts at an updated realism that takes account of reality as experienced by realistic subjects. And Woolf does indeed offer up "the dark places of psychology" as a likely avenue for exploring hitherto ignored subject matter ("Modern Fiction" 11). But her emphasis falls in equal measure on the abundance and the unordered quality of ordinary experience: "a myriad impressions," "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms." "Life," she continues, "is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display?" (9). Woolf, then, urges fiction to come to terms with the astructural character of the real that she herself also associates with ordinariness.

How should we square Woolf's desire to convey this unordered life with the impulse, expressed elsewhere, to hit upon crystallizing, coherent arrangements? Bryony Randall notes a characteristic "'oscillation', between chaos and order, the random and the structured, movement and stasis, the transitory and the enduring," between "the desire to find shape, structure and patterns, and to preserve the fluidity and randomness of everyday life" (156, 189). Woolf at times suggests a quest for a "pattern" behind the "cotton wool of daily life" (*Moments* 72–73), for "the true and the enduring" as opposed to "the trivial and the transitory" ("Modern Fiction" 8), for "the moment . . . stabilized" ("Street Haunting" 177). Elsewhere in her writing, and in her novelistic practice, however, there is a sense that "fluidity and randomness" necessarily persist. I agree with Olson that "Woolf's essays overemphasize dichotomies (poetry and prose, inner and outer, exceptional and ordinary)"—we may add the "enduring"

and the “transitory,” the “true” and the “trivial”—“that her novels do not play out” (58). As with her targeting of Edwardian realism, Woolf’s critical statements ought to be understood in their specific, often polemical contexts.

“What is meant by ‘reality’?” Woolf asks in *A Room of One’s Own*, in a passage worth quoting at length:

> It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech – and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. (*Room* 67)

We would be hard-pressed, reading this passage, to understand the “fixed” and “permanent” as referring to any essential reality sought beneath or beyond the “trivial and the transitory.” The passage sooner implies a world of unfixity and impermanence, captured as in a snapshot in order to be stamped with the appearance of solidity, to be made “real.” The paradox of representation, in this view, would consist in the need to produce such apparently fixed images—or arrangements of words—that nonetheless do not falsify the mobile, fleeting qualities.

As Olson writes, Woolf’s professed interest in structuring patterns is “always counter-balanced by a valued interest in the diffuse and messy particularities of . . . life” (5). We have seen how the ideal figure of the “crystal, the globe of life” turns out to have “walls of thinnest air” (*Waves* 214). Writing about Woolf’s “atomized universe,” Ann Banfield suggests “a *momentary* order is imposed on the unordered units” (109–10, emphasis added). Instances of

apparent crystallization turn out to be fleeting, Bernard in *The Waves* going so far as to call them illusory: “the illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed” (*Waves* 199). For Olson, although Woolf’s fiction sets up loaded “moments” where things crystallize into an apparently harmonious whole or converge to a heightened point, “these moments ‘drop’ back into the flow of ordinary life” (70). Woolf, she continues, “represent[s] these interruptions, these deflations, the way that the everyday is a mixture and ongoing flow of events,” how the “natural ‘ebb and flow’ [of the ordinary] denies a stable moment of recognition.” Olson is describing the leveling effect of the ordinary: heightened, apparently privileged moments or experiences are acknowledged, included and folded back into the unhierarchized mixture of events. At the same time, she is describing how Woolf’s writing conveys the astructural quality of the everyday, eluding capture into stable, cohesive arrangements—“evad[ing] the grip of forms” in Lefebvre’s words—although such moments of apparent cohesion do themselves form part of the everyday and fold into it.

The Ramsays’ dinner in *To the Lighthouse* is a classic example of such Woolfian moments. Mrs Ramsay, whom Suzette Henke calls one of Woolf’s “social artist[s] of human relations” bringing “people together in new, imaginative configurations” (128, 139), presides over this scene and registers its quality: “It partook, she felt . . . of eternity. . . . there is a coherence in things, a stability; . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral . . . Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain” (*To the Lighthouse* 85). Lily Briscoe would spend the remainder of the novel trying to replicate in a portrait this perceived power of Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay herself, however, in the same breath second-guesses the impression: “Just now (but this cannot last, she thought. . .).” Mrs Ramsay’s power, celebrated in this instance, is also ironized in others, as with her fixation on bringing together Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley in the hardly imaginative

configuration of a marriage which does not turn out a success. The novel concludes at the moment Lily Briscoe completes her painting. If Briscoe's objective had been to replicate in an arrangement of lines and colors the crystallizing power associated with Mrs Ramsay, the phrasing and verb tense at the end suggest its impermanence: "Yes, she thought, . . . I have had my vision" (170). Replicating Mrs Ramsay's second-guessing, Lily imagines: "It would be hung in attics . . . it would be destroyed. But what did it matter?" The simultaneous completion of painting and novel casts the one as an image of the other, Lily Briscoe the painter as a proxy for the writer. It would seem then that painting and novel register heightened moments of crystallization, that appear to emerge out of the everyday, while folding them back dialectically into its flow. Woolf's writing "suggests the impossibility of arranging life into distinct events, with certain moments (however un-lofty) marked as the most important" (Olson 63).

Recall again how Woolf in "Modern Fiction" characterizes the "myriad impressions" received by the mind, "trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (9). All of these, she suggests, are as worthy of record. Woolf's declaration on the all-inclusive purview of the "stuff of fiction" then carries the same leveling implications—even more programmatically, perhaps—that Jacques Rancière locates in Flaubert's similar assertion.

The vested interest, which Woolf assigns to fiction, in the astructural qualities of the real carries critical implications comparable to other theories of the ordinary. Woolf in fact persistently associates rigidly imposed structures with systems of domination, with war, and with patriarchal thinking. In *Mrs Dalloway* the Great War that looms large over the events of the novel is evoked in a scene that emphasizes the rigidity of military discipline: "Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue

praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (43). Already the description compacts a number of key critical associations: "stiff" order dangerously connects with a sort of tunnel vision ("eyes ahead") and with deference to abstract values, patriarchal and chauvinistic—like those the Surrealists suspected.[14] *Jacob's Room* provides another striking example that links imperialist war to a masculinist ideology aiming to impose its rigid, determinate forms on world history. As the world hurtles towards the outbreak of the war, we are presented with a caricature of a group of "sixteen gentlemen" who "decreed that the course of history *should shape itself this way or that way*, being *manfully determined*, . . . to *impose some coherency* upon Rajahs and Kaisers and the muttering in bazaars . . . *to control the course of events*" (151, emphases added).

In another noteworthy paragraph of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf ponders the destructive effects of order-imposing ideology not only on the world-historical stage but at the level of everyday life. Here she figures Enlightenment rationalism as a "Sunlight," a "bright, inquisitive, armoured, resplendent, summer's day, which has long since vanquished chaos; which has dried the melancholy mediaeval mists; drained the swamp and stood glass and stone upon it" (143). Woolf casts Enlightenment ideology as an armored vanquisher of chaos dispelling pessimism and illusion, imposing (literal) rigid structures on the boggy disorders of nature and culture. This armored figure, the narrator continues, has "equipped our brains and bodies with such an armoury of weapons that merely to see the flash and thrust of limbs engaged in the conduct of daily life is better than the old pageant of armies drawn out in battle array upon the plain." The image dimly recalls the conclusion of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," where the poet compares the modern public world to "a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash

[14] Cf. Walter Benjamin's "taste of the drill," which also figures oppressive and false "order" while evoking militaristic regimentation and discipline (*Illuminations* 176).

by night" (Arnold, *Poetical Works* 227). But where Arnold expressed a wish to turn to private life as a qualified refuge from the alarms of the public world, Woolf suggests that the public and private "conduct of daily life" has been so colonized and weaponized as to one-up the traditional forms of battle conjured by Arnold. In her image of Enlightened rationalism, Woolf here figures the imposition of rigid structures materially ("our bodies") and ideologically ("our brains") as leading to a sort of generalized warfare in everyday life.

Woolf registers in other wise her skepticism of neatly ordered categories of thought. *To the Lighthouse* caricatures the epistemologist Mr Ramsay for his linear conception of logical thinking. Mr Ramsay conceives of thought "like the alphabet," "ranged in twenty-six letters all in order," "his splendid mind . . . running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately" (30–31). Except that Mr Ramsay only reaches the letter Q and wretchedly exerts himself to push ahead to R. "Z," Mr Ramsay believes, "is only reached once by one man in a generation." Mr Ramsay is the figure of the patriarch par excellence in the novel and an apparent subscriber to the "Great Man" theory of history, haunted by the idea of making his own name, and compared to Carlyle himself by one of the characters (40). He conceives of his intellectual quest as a heroic, "desolate expedition," akin to a colonial-scientific venture "across the icy solitudes of the Polar region." In a similar image in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's surrogate speaker on her own expedition into the male-guarded territory of the university, seems to prefer, to "the reader next door who was making the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C," her "own notebook riot[ing] with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings" (27).[15]

[15] The alphabetical metaphor recurs in Woolf's commentary on the reductive systematization of literary history in the nascent English curricula of her day, lamenting that "thus we get English literature into ABC; one, two, three; and lose all sense of what its [sic] about" (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf: 1932-1935* 450). On this topic see Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* 59–116.

The single, straight line, writes Rachel Bowlby, connotes for Woolf a form of "mastery," a desire for order—and by extension power—"implicated with masculinity institutionalised and imposing" (67, 77). Bowlby's essays in *Feminist Destinations* together explore Woolf's feminist critique of reductively linear and teleological forms of thought and narrative. Lorraine Sim also writes that Woolf associated "linear thought patterns," "systematic, regimental and encyclopaedic approaches to knowledge" with patriarchal culture, inflexible and dogmatic (40–41). Instead of an "alphabetical order [that] obscures the 'contradictory' matter" at hand, Woolf seeks not a "Z at the end of the alphabet, but rather the discovery of a different kind of line" (Bowlby 32, 88). This is why Woolf celebrates digression, "doodling in the margins, against the main line of thought," favoring the "wandering" over the "trained" mind running smoothly along "preconceived lines" (Bowlby 33–35). Woolf's 1906 sketch "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn," for instance, provides an early apology for digressive writing. Its protagonist's approach to historiography refuses to stick to what convention admits as the main facts (Woolf, "Journal"; DeSalvo 65).[16] The historian Rosamond Merridew here rescues from oblivion the diary of a young medieval woman, recognizing the historical value of its experiential record of daily life, as opposed to facts about "genealogy, property and ownership" (Cuddy-Keane, *Public Sphere* 150). The gesture looks forward to Woolf's jibes at the Edwardian realists' "facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines."

In Woolf's early short story "Solid Objects" the ordinary countervails linear teleologies, this time pointing forward to Woolf's undermining of plot in her later narrative experiments. The protagonist John, increasingly distracted from a promising political career, pursues discarded objects that lure him with

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[16] *Night and Day*, too, evinces sympathy for Mrs Hilbery's erratic and digressive efforts at writing the biography of an ancestor, despite her daughter's "schoolmaster[ly]" advice: "but you see, mother, we ought to go from point to point" (93).

an uncanny aesthetic appeal. His solid objects are particular, concrete, random, and lead him to neglect his supposed civic duties—an abstract value the actual content of which turns out to be full of banality. Living up to a "brilliant career" in politics presents itself as a life-plot—traced, formulaic, abstract—tantamount in practice to a regimented life rhythm: a "number of papers to keep in order" (*Selected* 64). Likened to a Benjaminian "ragpicker" (Sim 53), John is also like a modern novelist after Woolf's fashion. His pursuit of ordinary objects leads him astray from a destined, conventional life plot. In "Modern Fiction" Woolf would explicitly extend her attacks on convention to make a target of narrative plot, decrying that "unscrupulous tyrant who has [the writer] in thrall" to provide one (8). The conventional imperative of plot occludes the astructural character of ordinary life by figuring it as "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" and tending towards some definite consummation. In response, Woolf calls for a liberated novel with "no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style" (9).

Franco Moretti has claimed that the nineteenth-century novel's "only narrative invention" was "filler," descriptive realist passages that fill the increasingly large spaces between "turning points" in a story ("Serious Century" 366–68). Roland Barthes sees it as an agent of the "reality effect" achieving the realist illusion. For him and Moretti, it marks colonization by bourgeois interests, "the almost religious attention with which the bourgeois century looked at its daily existence" (379). Jacques Rancière, however, sees in filler and its expansion a manifestation of the leveling impulse that leads the novel astray from the hierarchical reign of plot. Supposed distractions gain a life of their own, break loose of their subordinate position to plot's significant teleologies (*Lost Thread* 7). Modernism, Olson argues, "makes the filler autonomous" and in the process "deflates the importance of event and outcome" (18). Whereas the intervals between turning points in a plot can seem as "time in which no central experience

can necessarily mark what the novel is 'about,'" the novel of autonomous filler, subtracting centers, puts all elements equally in focus, radicalizing the leveling impulse described by Rancière. As Erich Auerbach writes, "to put the emphasis on the random occurrence" is to resist exploiting it "in the service of a planned continuity of action," letting it rather stand "in itself" (552).

The form of *Jacob's Room* represents a radical example of this leveling effect through the undermining of narrative turning points and of plot. Woolf described her "new form for a new novel" as one employing "no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen" (*Diary* 2: 13). As discussed earlier, the novel plays against and undercuts conventional *Bildung* plots. No sense of maturity attained or promise fulfilled punctuates the story of the rather unexceptional Jacob. Even his much-foreshadowed death is undramatically set off-stage (looking forward to Mrs Ramsay's parenthesized death in *To the Lighthouse*); so that his already shadow-like existence seems merely to peter out. No coherent character portrait even emerges to subordinate the parts that make up the novel to a governing idea. Jacob remains a mystery until he fades away.

The vignette-like structure of the novel, made up as it is of a large number of radically disconnected short episodes, cutting the narrative thread into merely one thing happening after another, undermines any sense of teleology or privileged narrative moments. As Rachel Bowlby writes, *Jacob's Room*'s "breaking up of narrative" avoids "giving prominence to chief turning points" (88). Writing about Joyce's method in *Ulysses*, Liesl Olson remarks on the *list* as a key device that defies the possibility of narrative events, "leveling out experience, parsing it into many items with no connecting narrative to signal which items are more significant than others" (35, 41). The insight applies to *Jacob's Room* as a whole, the novel employing in its overall structure a form of parataxis. If paratactical style, as Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes describe it, counters the hierarchical nature of "the sentence" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 49–50; Olson 53), the paratactical structure of *Jacob's Room* as a novel undermines the

hierarchical effect of plot. The novel places all its narrative and representational elements on something close to an even plain, equal in importance and significant in themselves rather than relative to superordinate destinations to which they lead.

In a review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, C.G. Jung seemed precisely to register and react to a flattened landscape of value and meaning. Jung appears troubled and disoriented by the equal claim to attention of any and all elements in a populous undifferentiated chaos—as Woolf would put it (*Waves* 208)—making it impossible to fixate on anything in particular. In a telling topographical metaphor, Jung complains that there is "not a single hallowed island where the long-suffering reader may come to rest" (Deming 584–85). To Jung the book that "touches upon life's ten thousand surfaces and their hundred thousand color gradations" consisted merely in the "single and senseless every day of Everyman." While evidently fascinated, he deems the work in the last instance "infernally nugatory," consisting ultimately "of nothing but nothingness." Jung's response brings together questions of attention, value, sense-making, undifferentiation (coming for him near indifference) and literary form, with the astructural and all-inclusive character of the ordinary. For critics like Rachel Bowlby, Woolf's evasion of any "stable order of meaning," through allowing "world and objects [to] hang loose," is productive (103). We shall see, however, in the next section, that Woolf's writing was also alive to the dangers of such destabilization: the potential for the undifferentiated ordinary to tip into complete loss of meaning, or alternately to be recaptured by problematic master narratives.

In pursuing a realism "closer to life," Woolf faulted the Edwardian realists for ossified conventions that miss or falsify the latter on two main counts. First, they do not have a sufficiently inclusive conception of their object. They overlook and devalue important elements of life because they have reduced it to a circumscribed set of conventional signs, which they take as all there is to report.

Second, they distort the astructural, messy character of ordinary life, stamping it with a false coherency by imposing the abstract, conventional forms of traditional plots. The rule of plot implies definite teleologies as well as a differential value scheme that privileges certain moments and objects at the expense of others.

Woolf's critique and her own novelistic practice are in direct opposition to these tendencies. She rejects conventional plot in favor of malleable, fluid forms that convey the character of life-as-ordinary: abundant, amorphous, unhierarchized. Her fiction represents its elements as though on a level field, with equal weight given to each in-and-for-itself. It strives to include both the "trivial" and the "fantastic," the "evanescent" and the "engraved." It acknowledges and portrays heightened moments where things appear to come to a point, to crystallize momentarily, while folding these moments back into the flow of ordinary life.

For Woolf the question of realistic representation has far-reaching implications. As in the theories of the ordinary or everyday surveyed above, Woolf ties representational visibility to the premises of a value system. That which is presented as coterminous with the real, she suggests, has routinely excluded, made invisible and devalued aspects of life that deserve attention. She is keenly aware of the gender inflections of this visibility within a patriarchal value system. She also suggests in general that the "texture of the ordinary day" routinely escapes representation. Her wish to "include everything, everything" emerges, in the first instance, as a bid to redress fiction's skewed value system, to reclaim visibility and value to denigrated things. This entails, however, a more radical reconfiguration of the mode of visibility under which reality is presented, in her wish to convey the astructural quality of ordinary life, its way of eluding imposed structures. Here, again, for Woolf, these imposed structures not only falsify the character of the real but do so in ways that reinforce hierarchies and the hegemony of abstract values—often patriarchal and imperialist—that play

into strategies of containment and control. Her poetics of life-as-ordinary runs counter to these tendencies. The question becomes not only about representing an overlooked subdomain of experience but presenting life itself in its ordinary character. This includes a radically value-leveling tendency whereby all aspects of life are seen equally as ends-in-themselves and loci for the actualization of value.

How is it possible, though, to "include everything, everything"? Woolf herself suggests it is not: "the difficulty remains—one has to choose" (*Jacob's Room* 57). "Every moment," she writes elsewhere, "is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it" ("Poetry, Fiction and the Future" 84). Woolf crafts poetic strategies that reflect something of this abundance without claiming to exhaust it, to convey the "texture of the ordinary day." If "life" inevitably "escapes," what Liesl Olson writes of Joyce applies equally to Woolf: her writing "necessarily gestures toward what cannot be included in a literary text" and "creates the texture and believability of everyday life by pinning it down while simultaneously letting it go" (34). On the other hand, the impossibility of the task carries risks. I will argue in the next section that *Mrs Dalloway* deals with two main kinds: falling back into forms of containment, and the overload liable to ensue from attention to "everything, everything." Woolf achieves a writing of ordinary life that carries through a poetics of life-as-ordinary while reflecting on, making visible its own limitations, the problems entailed by what Liesl Olson calls the "valued interest in the diffuse and messy particularities of that life" (5).

Protected and relinquished: the ordinary in *Mrs Dalloway*

Woolf, in her preface to a 1928 edition of *Mrs Dalloway*, described Septimus Warren Smith as Clarissa Dalloway's double (*Essays* IV: 549). Both characters,

indeed, are under the heavy press of expectations within a patriarchal and paternalistic social system. The shell-shocked Septimus' physicians tell him to shake off his distress, or seek to confine him to a resting cure, so that he may conform to—or, failing that, to prevent him from offending—social propriety and the "normal" functioning of the active British citizen. Clarissa is under the allied pressures of gender expectations and (upper) middle-class decorum: as a housewife, mother, wife of a politician, and society hostess. Clarissa has her own history of illness, being a likely survivor of the Spanish flu and treated as of fragile health. She is prescribed her own (less strict) resting cure. If Clarissa seems ambivalently attached to the conventions of her class, sometimes seeming to embrace them, while at others afflicted by their weight, Septimus too had at one point taken to heart the jingoism of Nation and Empire that crunched him and his comrades in the trenches. The two characters never meet, but Clarissa is moved by the news of Septimus' suicide when she hears of it. She is instinctively repulsed by Bradshaw, Septimus' imperious physician, upon hearing him speak at her party.

But the two figures are bound together also via the poetics of ordinary life. They both embody—and comment on—versions of just such a poetics, and its mode of value and meaning assignation. Clarissa and Septimus are both highly attentive observers of the ordinary. Their attentions function as key vehicles for the text's own. From this perspective, the two characters also double an implied author—the poetic activity that characterizes the text. If the text on the whole grants visibility to an amorphous life-as-ordinary, this is effected largely through their eyes, to which the ordinary is intensely visible. And it is in this hyper-visible ordinary that Clarissa and Septimus look for value and meaning. Clarissa finds pleasure in the fleeting qualities, perceptions, and incidents of the everyday. To Septimus the ordinary world discloses itself in a visionary register. Both characters intimate that for them the scattered elements, experiences and objects that make up the ordinary are "all."

Clarissa's joyful embrace of the everyday, however, can seem rooted in the qualified safety afforded by her class position (qualified by the pressures of patriarchal structures that restrict her sphere of activity and experience, and the shadow of illness hanging about her that metonymizes her precarious position within a social order in crisis). While in kinship to Septimus' precarity, however, she is able to find beauty in his succumbing under the weight of the world, appearing to see vicariously in his demise a gesture of defiance perhaps unavailable to her. Septimus' visionary disposition, on the other hand, exemplifies a flipside to hyper-attentivity to the everyday: a new version of the literary trope of the mad reader. For Septimus the ordinary world proves overwhelming, and his visionary valuation and interpretation of the ordinary threatens to oscillate between a sort of nihilism and the attempt to force a singular order of meaning upon the world.

Woolf's characteristic mixture of sympathetic and ironic treatment allows her text to comment through its two main figures on its own poetic procedures. Clarissa's embrace of the ordinary allows her to reclaim value in her life, even as *her* ordinary world does not fully live up to the inclusive idea that it announces. The novel, meanwhile, through multiplying perspectives and counter-perspectives maintains a fluidity and a porosity that do not allow boundaries fully to congeal. This allows Woolf to uphold Clarissa's affirmation of her ordinary world as a meaningful intervention in a skewed value system, while also registering the radically inclusive promise of the ordinary which eludes Clarissa's ultimately limited class perspective. The novel's poetics of ordinary life reflects in this way the dialectical operation of the ordinary: it affords localized and bounded interventions in value systems, calling attention to devalued phenomena or spheres of existence and reinfusing them with value, while also registering the necessity of further transformations beyond those bounds.

In what follows, the first task is to establish in what sense Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith surrogate for an author function. The second is to examine how these characters comment on or problematize the author function's poetic activity. And third, to explore the possibility of a synthesis emerging from the meta-reflexive operation of the text.

The poetics of representation involves the sum of devices and strategies for registering, selecting, arranging and presenting elements, in this case to produce a world inhabited by characters and objects. Fictional representation carries an idea of what a world looks like. It entails modes of visibility that are invariably value-laden. This is so in a double sense: values inform the strategies of a fictional representation, and the fictional representation valorizes features by attending to the world in specific ways. Here we are concerned with the implications of a poetics that attends to ordinary life, or what I have called life-as-ordinary. *Mrs Dalloway* not only registers the ordinary world and experiences of its characters but features main characters who are themselves peculiarly attentive to the ordinary. We get a sense of Clarissa and Septimus through their ways of seeing, registering, contemplating, and being affected by their world. Their activity is thus predominantly *aesthetic*, in the Rancièrian sense. In reflecting on their world, they reflect it to us and the text effects its poetic operations primarily through attending to their attentions.

One way of talking about poetics is with reference to an implied author, or author function.[17] The text projects (or we construct) an author function—irrespective of flesh-and-blood author—to which we ascribe the text's poetic activity. Because of their proximity to the aesthetic operations of the

[17] See Rimmon-Kenan 89–92: "According to this view [Wayne C. Booth's and others], the implied author is the governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work" (89); "the notion of the implied author must be de-personified, and is best considered as a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice (i.e. a subject)" (92).

representation, the doubles Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith also double the projected author function. They surrogate for the text's poetic function, enacting and elaborating it. The text, however, simultaneously ironizes and puts them at a distance. At least, given that their outlooks are not identical, neither can exactly coincide with that of an author function. Rather they represent two different iterations that while effecting a poetics of the ordinary also problematize it. Septimus' mad reading of the world as signs, alternately overloaded with and bereft of meaning, appears as a literary flipside to Clarissa's affirmation of life. I read the two characters as sympathetic yet critical embodiments that mobilize a poetics of the ordinary while showing its possible pitfalls and limitations. While performatively endorsing the leveling, inclusive, concretizing, and anti-totalizing impulses of such a poetics, the novel attempts to preempt risks of its lapse into opposite tendencies.

Clarissa Dalloway is highly sensible to the everyday world and attaches value to its manifold aspects. Much of the text is devoted to the impressions she registers, and the reflections they spur, from the world around her as it goes about its daily business, in the public city streets or the privacy of her household—her party finally bringing together the two spheres. Her outward activity is largely a matter of short interactions with acquaintances and members of her household, and tasks like sewing, reading, and planning a party. She is however a highly active observer of her world. As a character she constitutes a primary vehicle for channeling the mode of attention and visibility that typifies the novel itself.

Clarissa, moreover, is attentive to the ordinary world *as ordinary*. Her mode of attention in itself implies valuation, but she also explicitly sees in the ordinary as such an ultimate locus of value. "All the same," she reflects, "that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; *it was enough*" (104,

emphasis added). "That is all," she mutters, while she observes the day-to-day movements of the city streets, the comings and goings, the shop windows, the "absurd little dramas" that she witnesses (9, 67).

Clarissa's old friend Peter Walsh reflects that "she enjoyed life immensely. It was her nature to enjoy. . . . She enjoyed practically everything" (66). The "life" that she is said to value is a nebulous category that encompasses "practically everything." Passages that would seem to concretize this indeterminate mass only do so impressionistically—whether it includes "a bed of tulips" or a bunch of roses, a child in a perambulator, the morning sky or a walk in the park, a chance encounter or a social call, sandwich men or the fishmonger's window, motor cars or faces on omnibuses. The syntax of the open list that characterizes such passages, stringing together random acts, objects and incidents, is suggestive of a host of other elements of the same order, of the undifferentiated quality of the ordinary. Clarissa is attuned not only to what we may casually call the ordinary world, but specifically to the ordinariness of the ordinary. It is there that she wishes to anchor her apprehension of value—"it was enough," "That is all."

Clarissa's attention and attachment to ordinary things align her in the novel against ideological forces that prove exclusionary, controlling, invasive or tyrannical. Clarissa herself is excluded from Lady Bruton's lunch invitation addressed to her husband, on the grounds that the lunch concerns a matter of High Politics. This turns out to be a letter to the *Times* advocating an emigration scheme to Canada: a seemingly Malthusian, social-eugenicist scheme of demographic engineering, that would advantageously relocate some of "the superfluous youth of our ever-increasing population," at least those "born of respectable parents" (93). A more openly tyrannical exponent of population control is Septimus' physician William Bradshaw—the one unequivocal antagonist in the novel. In addition to his imperious, bullish approach to mental health, we read of Bradshaw as a worshipper of "Proportion" and "Conversion,"

grand ideological abstractions personified by the narrator as tyrannical sister Goddesses. In the name of abstract values, and having "to support him police and the good of society," Bradshaw "made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (84–86). These forces pose as benevolent values: "under some plausible disguise; some venerable name; love, duty, self sacrifice"; "offer[ing] help, but desir[ing] power," "stamp[ing]" their "own features . . . on the face of the populace."

Bradshaw, who would "toil to raise funds, propagate reforms, initiate institutions," compares to such well-meaning men as Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread, suggesting that their same impulses satisfy a "craving . . . for dominion, for power." "Administrators," as Alex Zwerdling writes, "they (Dalloway, Bruton, Bradshaw) compartmentalize in order to control" (74). They are representative of what Peter Walsh in the novel calls "the public-spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform, governing-class spirit" (*Mrs Dalloway* 65) that defines Clarissa's social milieu, target of the novel's satire despite the sympathy extended to Clarissa and others (Zwerdling 70). Clarissa's embrace of the ordinary pits her against such useful men as Richard or Bradshaw. Hers is an alternative conception of value, anchored in the concretion, particularity, and immediacy of the ordinary, every moment of it, as opposed to the sweeping, indifferent tyranny of abstractions with their destructive effects on actual lives.

Peter Walsh attributes to Clarissa an enjoyment and pleasure in "life." When he in the following paragraph would wish, having "acquired the power, . . . to extract" from "Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it," "every ounce of pleasure" (67), it appears that is a power he associates with Clarissa herself. Walsh's observation does chime overall with Clarissa's outlook: "how she had loved it all; how every instant . . ." (104). We are also alerted, however, to the partiality of Walsh's view of her, as he himself admits: "though goodness only knows, she had her reserves; it was a mere sketch, he often felt, that even

he, after all these years, could make of Clarissa" (66). The text elsewhere mitigates and critiques Clarissa's purported enjoyment of "practically everything," on the one hand in the way she herself is characterized, and on the other through the perspectives of other characters. Her affirmation of life is not unalloyed, and her "practically everything" is shown in practice to be a circumscribed sphere. The novel, however, exhibits on the whole a wider purview of "life" than Clarissa's.

Early on in the novel, Clarissa intimates an attunement to precarity, thinking "it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (7). The Shakespearean refrain that she—and at one point Septimus—repeats: "Fear no more the heat o' then sun, / Nor the furious winter's rages" betrays an underlying unease. In what critics have referred to as an apotropaic gesture (see Hoff, "Midday Topos"), a warding-off of evil, the refrain suggests a world under threat. Considering her of fragile health, Clarissa's husband Richard "insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed" (27), in a version of the resting cure to be forced upon Septimus. She retreats in the afternoon "Like a nun withdrawing" to a "room [that] was an attic; the bed narrow." Here, in contrast to life's abundance to which elsewhere Clarissa attests, there is "an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room." Clarissa reflects on the limiting effects of middle-class domesticity, "being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore" but "Mrs Richard Dalloway" (9). We may thus detect a pathos in her declaration that "it was enough," following a list of casual experiences such as Clarissa was likely to have on a given day: "that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses" (104). Her delight in the everyday can start to seem like so many consolations sought within a circumscribed sphere of experience.

Other characters throw into relief Clarissa's limitation of scope. Her daughter Elizabeth's omnibus venture into the Strand has often been read as a sign, however tame, of new possibilities unavailable to their mothers opening for

the next generation of middle-class women. Elizabeth takes to heart her tutor Doris Kilman's assertion that "every profession is open to the women of your generation" (*Mrs Dalloway* 115–16). Other characters cast a different shadow on Clarissa's affirmative valuation of her ordinary life. Septimus' experience of the world is the main foil to Clarissa's, but the character of Doris Kilman also represents a distinct challenge to Clarissa's worldview. An antithesis to Clarissa's love of life, she carries a "hatred of Mrs Dalloway" herself, and a "grudge against the world" (105). An educated working woman, victimized and ostracized as a German in London during and after the War, she detests the hypocritical middle-class civility that Clarissa for her embodies. Clarissa, for Kilman, "came from the most worthless of classes—the rich, with a smattering of culture" (104). As though commenting on Clarissa's apparent relish in life, Kilman judges Clarissa's life "a tissue of vanity and deceit" (109): "she know the meaning of life!" Kilman scoffs (106). Kilman causes Clarissa to doubt her own disposition: "all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend . . . *as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love*" (11, emphasis added).

Kilman, from her more precarious social position, experiences the world as a hostile, antagonistic place, raising the suspicion that Clarissa's relatively assured outlook is in part an affordance of the safety of wealth and status. The same kind of class contrast appears in *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, where Mrs McNab's feeling that "it was not easy or snug this world which she had known for close on seventy years" (107) sounds a stark rejoinder to Lily Briscoe's sense of being "in love with this world" (22). There is little question that Clarissa, although she chafes against the limitations of her position as a middle-class woman, and though her safety is qualified and under threat, also embraces much of the value system of her class. The circumscribed boundaries of Clarissa's world cut both ways: as Zwerdling notes, "No Septimus, no Rezia, no Doris

Kilman could conceivably set foot" in Clarissa's "class-demarcated" party (74). The boundaries limiting her horizons may equally serve the exclusion of others.

Ann Banfield in *The Phantom Table* documents Woolf's sustained engagement with the problem of solipsism from a philosophical, epistemological standpoint. We saw in the first section of this chapter that questions of the knowability and communicability of the lives of others often accompany interrogations of the term "life" in Woolf's novels. In *Mrs Dalloway*, this appears through the leitmotif of the "privacy of the soul": "here was one room; there another" (107–08). As Ann Banfield argues, however, the problem is one that Woolf's fiction both acknowledges and attempts to overcome—not allowing the enclosure of the individual to congeal, any more than those forms of containment and consolidation discussed in the previous section. For Banfield, Woolf presents "a privacy multiplied and extended," so as "no private world in Woolf is so sealed as to be untouched at its outer limits" (129).[18]

Clarissa Dalloway, then, enacts a version of the novel's poetics through her attention to and valuation of ordinary life. Yet her outlook is modified, nuanced and extended through other perspectives. The dual movement does not invalidate the text's mobilization of a poetics of life-as-ordinary and the negotiation of values that it entails, but rather reflects the dialectical movement of the ordinary. *Mrs Dalloway* upholds Clarissa's affirmation of her ordinary world as a meaningful, localized, context-specific intervention in a skewed value system. Clarissa rejects Bradshavian "Proportion," which subjugates forms of life and measures their worth according to reified, abstract values. She affirms the qualities of the ordinary—concrete yet eluding a sizing up—as what is "most real" in life and the ultimate locus of value. Upholding Clarissa's localized affirmative gesture, the novel still registers, by acknowledging and extending

[18] Banfield's description of Woolf's "method of multiple perspectives" (312) parallels and extends, with reference to philosophical debates of Woolf's time, Erich Auerbach's early reading of Woolf's realism as "a close approach to objective reality by means of" a "multipersonal representation of consciousness" (536, 541).

past her limitations, the necessity of further transformations beyond those bounds. What Melba Cuddy-Keane writes of Woolf's reading of Defoe applies perfectly to Clarissa:

> Thus, on the one hand, Woolf allows full ironic expression of her own distaste for national and class complacency: "There is no greater good fortune we are assured than to be born of the British middle-class"; on the other hand, her willingness to see through Defoe's eyes leads her to see and to appreciate the way he illuminates the value of everyday life. (Cuddy-Keane, "Virginia Woolf" 69)[19]

As with Woolf's successive efforts to "include a little more than has been netted," the inclusive promise of the ordinary is a continual dialectic of localized interventions that hold the door open for further revaluations. This movement is aptly summarized in Banfield's formulation of Woolf's approach: "Privacy must be alternately relinquished and protected, the thinker passing via expansion and contraction in and out of frames" (Banfield 179).

Clarissa's primary counterpart in the novel is Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus provides another reflexive embodiment of attention to the ordinary. He is, like Clarissa, intensely observant. The text accompanies his impressions too, and the reflections that they spur. Other characters also see him looking, "looking at the sky, looking at this, that and the other" (71). For both characters, any heightened moments of experience fixate on, and take their starting point in, the ordinary objects of the world. In Septimus' case, he sees the signs of nature and the city-scape "signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking

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[19] Woolf also noted her own ambivalence towards Clarissa as a character along with Lytton Strachey's complaint that "she is disagreeable and limited, but that I alternately laugh at her and cover her, very remarkably, with myself" (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 78–79; See Zwerdling 79).

merely, with beauty, more beauty!" (19). His experience of the ordinary marks a difference from Clarissa's. It is characterized, on an affective level, by persistent terror, and only rarely approaches Clarissa's joyful outlook. On the other hand, his mode of attending to the ordinary involves attaching specific meanings to the signs of the world, in a visionary register.

In a rare moment of serenity, taking in again his morning spent at Regent's Park with his wife Rezia, Septimus reflects that "all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now" (59). Here and in the later hat-making scene which Septimus enjoys with Rezia at home, Septimus is closest to Clarissa's general outlook. The two characters balance each other: whereas rare moments of calm punctuate for Septimus an otherwise terror-stricken experience, for Clarissa it is the sense of precarity that intrudes in moments—"the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day"—upon an otherwise collected and cheerful apprehension of the world.

Both characters spend the first part of the novel out in the streets of London. The city-scape seen through Septimus' eyes represents a direct and nightmarish flipside to Clarissa's relish in the bustle of motorcars and shop windows: "In the street, vans roared past him" and "brutality blared out on placards" (76). The world for Septimus is much more imminently on the edge of falling apart: "The world" before him "wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (13). In his sense of the world as a hostile and threatening environment, Septimus' experience resonates more with Doris Kilman than with Clarissa's love of life. On the other hand, notwithstanding Clarissa's antipathy towards the imperious Bradshaw, he—Septimus' arch-oppressor—would seem to echo in distasteful light Clarissa's outlook when he maintains to his struggling patients that "life was good" (86). Bradshaw's self-appointed guardianship of "Proportion" can even appear like an amplified image of Clarissa's attachment to middle-class codes of civility and decorum.

Septimus relates to the ordinary world characteristically looking for *meaning*, attending intently to objects and perceptions as signs to be deciphered. His first visionary experience in the novel immediately follows that famous early scene often read as a parable of interpretation: the narrative voice shuffling between observers in the street variously interpreting the letters of an aeroplane's skywriting. "So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me" (18). Hearing the sounding of the letters "'Kay Arr'" he makes the "marvellous discovery" that "the human voice . . . can quicken trees into life." "Transfixed" by the sight and sound of "elm trees rising and falling," he sees them "beckon" to him that "trees were alive" (19). Soon after, in a sparrow's warble he hears "Greek words" announcing that "there is no crime," "there is no death" (21).

Septimus deciphers "supreme secret[s]" that "must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love." His "profound truths," require an "immense effort" to draw out, "so deep were they, so difficult" (57), but turn out to be almost comically banal. The note of irony is clear. Yet it remains that text and narrator are sympathetic to Septimus not only on account of his disturbed mental state but in that his attentiveness is shared with Clarissa and with the text's own strategies of representation. Septimus, however, experiences an overload whereby excessive assignation of meaning toggles into senselessness. Alternately, he exhibits a problematic tendency—not discernible in Clarissa —to assign singular meanings to the profusion of signs that he registers.

The passage where we read of the limitless promises afforded to Septimus "for looking merely" ends with Rezia bidding him to "'Look,'" only for the act to be markedly deflated: "But what was there to look at? A few sheep. That was all" (22). Septimus "knew the meaning of the world," he says at one point (57), and pages later he thinks "it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning" (75). Similarly in his mass of scribbled notes that Rezia gathers up, "Some things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense" (119). Excess of

meaning, the investment of practically anything with heightened significance, tips into non-meaning. Septimus as a result experiences himself as "the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable" (71). He complains "he could not feel" (74), but at other moments he appears to feel all too intensely. For Peter Walsh "Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it . . . was enough. Too much, indeed," a lifetime being "too short . . . to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning" (67). For Septimus the same abundance often seems to be "too much, indeed": not a wealth of experience waiting to be plucked, but a terror of too much to be borne.

Although Septimus seems sensible and responsive to virtually any stimulus, any appearance of the ordinary world—elm leaves, birdsong, street bustle, a plate of bananas, the play of light on the surfaces of a room—the meanings that he seems to attach to things are single-minded, formulaic, repeated over again: "Love, trees, there is no crime" (21, 57, 125). This single-mindedness has its counterpart in the singularity of his delusion of grandeur: the world speaks its singular message to himself "alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men" (57). Despite his sensibility to the ordinary world in its multifarious aspects, Septimus' "madness" articulates itself as a reduction of this multitude to the singularity of a message, with a determinate and singular addressee. This has led critics such as Suzette Henke to favorably contrast Clarissa's "existential philosophy" to Septimus' "mystical madness": "Whereas Septimus is convinced that everything has a transcendent meaning that eludes mankind, Clarissa believes that we must constantly create meaning in the face of absurdity" (134).

Woolf commented while composing the novel that it would be "a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side—something like that" (*Writer's Diary* 52). The novel's presentation of Septimus' madness is firmly anchored in the historical context of the "shell shock" epidemic of the First World War, as well as the disciplinary medical discourse and institutions employed in its diagnosis and "treatment." It has been profitable

to study the novel, from the perspective of these contexts, as a critique of such discourses of control and containment and their destructive effects on individuals. As we have seen, the poetics of the ordinary that has concerned us here can itself be seen as part of this critique, insofar as it represents a counter-discourse to the containment effected by totalizing concepts. Here I wish to examine Septimus' "madness" as metacommentary on the poetics itself. Representations of madness in the Western literary-aesthetic tradition have often played such a function, in addition—often even at the expense of—the representation of actual mental illness. Irrespective of the actual realism of the portrait, the text selects and accents certain traits that are noteworthy from this perspective. Why these symptoms rather than others? Why a particular backstory for the character? I suggest that Septimus' "madness" peculiarly manifests itself, in part but notably, as a disturbance of reading.

In a consultation Septimus is said to be "attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A serious symptom to be noted on the card" (81). The observation is cited sardonically. As a diagnosis, it pathologizes an ordinary function of language. Woolf ironizes in this sense scientistic literality and the vain disciplinary control that the clinician would seek to impose on language itself. But the remark is doubly ironic, turning back on the uses of language that define the text itself, its writing and reading. At least, it alerts us to Septimus as a reader, when considered alongside his peculiar tendency to read and interpret the world as signs.

Septimus is reminiscent on a number of counts of that originary figure of literary madness in the modern Western tradition, Don Quixote. As for Quixote, the ordinary sensory world takes on for Septimus meanings that appear to exceed their proportions, seen through the prism of a grand personal calling. And like Quixote's, Septimus' delusions of grandeur cast him as the bearer of a cultural tradition. In the case of Quixote, it is the way of life of the literate knight errant, versed in a literary culture and, standing alone, waging battle in the name of its

chivalric values. Septimus appears to see himself as the heir and culmination to (Western) civilization: "he, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth . . . which now at last, after all the toils of civilization—Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare, Darwin, and now himself—was to be given whole" (57). Septimus, we are told, "was one of the first to volunteer" for the War, going "to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole" (73).

Septimus Warren Smith's backstory as a literate soldier connects him to Quixote by way of the "*armas y letras*" convention (See Hoff, *Virginia Woolf's* Mrs. Dalloway 134). If his idolized English teacher is something like Quixote's imagined Dulcinea—later displaced by visions of his trench comrade Evans—then Shakespeare stands for him for cultural tradition as did for Quixote *Amadís of Gaul*. Septimus had embraced a national-cultural ideology that equated Nation and Empire with a tradition of letters and a chivalric code, and gone to fight on their behalf. Quixote became mad by buying into world-distorting narratives of chivalric romance (the downfall of Emma Bovary—a later influential embodiment of the disturbance of reading—was initiated by narratives of sentimental romance). Septimus Warren Smith went to war having bought not into Shakespeare per se, but a romance of Nation and Culture that cast Shakespeare as its representative. This part of Septimus' story functions as a critique of the indoctrinating effects of induction into a distorted—and patriarchal—view of history and culture. As Zwerdling writes, Septimus "begins, indeed, like the classic ambitious working-class boy entering the Establishment" (76). With some provisos, we may even think of Septimus as a version of Jacob Flanders—inculcated into a male, English cultural tradition—had he survived the war.

Septimus after the War no longer acts out a chivalric fantasy—nor does he really read books. Yet his "madness" still manifests as a disturbance of reading. He still sees himself, as we have seen, as the bearer of a tradition of

letters. More importantly, he sees himself as a master reader of signs and interpreter of hidden messages. He assigns hidden meanings to the observed signs of nature and the cityscape, and deciphers "the message hidden in the beauty of words" (75) alternating between "beauty, more beauty" (19), "loathing, hatred, despair" (75), and intimations of complete loss of meaning—all of which, whenever they occur, seem to eclipse all other aspects. Like Clarissa, Septimus is highly sensible to the multifarious objects and experiences of the ordinary world. But he seems to persist—the exception being the one happy hat-making scene with his wife, in which he is much more like Clarissa—in attempting to attribute singular meanings—sometimes transcendent: "There is a God" (21); always abstract ("universal love")—to its multiform variety.

Peter Allan Dale describes two dominant strains of nineteenth-century history, both based on linear, teleological assumptions: a theistic strain, in which history reveals providential designs, and a positivist strain in which history follows laws of social development (Cuddy-Keane, "Virginia Woolf" 60). Virginia Woolf, as we have seen, wrote against just such views, advancing instead nonlinear and nonessentialist premises. From this perspective, Septimus appears to have lapsed into a teleological, even a heroic view of the world and his place in it. Despite attending to the ordinary in its multiplicity and proliferation, he still attempts to coerce it into a flawed, singular framework. As Cuddy-Keane writes elsewhere, Septimus' early, naïve enthusiasm for the war effort stems from inculcation into a view of English literature and culture "permeated with the ideal of recovering a lost organic society," and where "the ideal of manliness became invested with the ethic of sacrifice in defense of that society" (*Public Sphere* 84–85). Remnants of this outlook are obvious in Septimus' post-war experience, despite Septimus' now more explicit victimization by that culture.

Septimus' "mad" reading suggests two possibilities that comment on the poetics of the ordinary for which he acts as one prism in the novel. The first is

that the hypervisibility that assigns value to "practically everything," if not circumscribed in some way, can be overwhelming, such that the overload of meaning and value tips into meaninglessness and nihilism. The second is that hyper-attention to the ordinary, because of this overload, can still lend itself to a totalizing-abstracting impulse that departs from the concretion and particularity of things-for-themselves towards singular, abstract meanings.

The ordinary world is hyper-visible to Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. It is for them the locus of values and meanings. Their perspectives and attentiveness function as vehicles for the novel's own, its rendering visibility to and attendant valuation of the ordinary. Yet the text simultaneously ironizes and shows limitations to their perspectives. Clarissa's pleasure in the ordinary is qualified by counter-perspectives such as Doris Kilman's, and by the precarity of Septimus' own experience of the same world. It is shaded over by the suspicion that it might simply be an affordance of the safety of status and wealth. Septimus' madness is a function of his hyper-sensibility to the ordinary, which alternates between an overwhelming, unbearable impulse to see great meaning in the trivial—in practically anything—and an utter loss of meaning. In both cases the ordinary world becomes "too much indeed."

The poetics of the ordinary is double-edged. It is compelling but risk-laden. As the theoretical critiques of everyday life surveyed indicate, the ordinary is not so much one, partial, domain of reality as a mode of attending to reality itself. The ordinary thus encompasses "anything and everything." At the same time, life-as-ordinary implies resisting certain (possibly overlapping) kinds of abstraction: totalizing ideas that impose a reductive and self-reifying order on reality, thereby wrongly writing off aspects of it; and those that posit themselves as realities in their own right taking precedence over actual life.

Woolf's poetics—in *Mrs Dalloway* and elsewhere—bears out this outlook, and it does so critically. The case of Clarissa suggests that her

"practically everything" is a partial purview conditioned by interests and social situation. The desire to embrace "everything" runs into the difficulty that remains: "one has to choose," and risks collapsing into unacknowledged partiality. The case of Septimus suggests on the other hand that "practically everything" can signify an unbearable overload which can lapse into erasures of meaning. But it also implies that the manifold and undifferentiated ordinary can still revert to singularity of meaning. In both cases, therefore, the visibility of the ordinary, if not critical, can succumb to reduction and the reification of parts as totalities. And yet the novel cannot by this token be said to censure a poetics of the ordinary. Instead, it carries out the poetic project while incorporating a self-critique of its limitations or pitfalls. The balancing act, acknowledging its partialness without reifying it, paradoxically succeeds in gesturing towards a totality of life-as-ordinary.

"For there she was," reads the novel's final sentence (165). "She" is Clarissa Dalloway, but it is also *Mrs Dalloway* the novel, which presents through its eponymous heroine a glimpse of life-as-ordinary. I have argued that the novel does so in both a representative and a theoretical sense. It represents characters and a world by giving heightened visibility to its ordinariness. In its critical staging of a poetics of the ordinary, the novel both employs and offers up to view "ordinary life" also as a critical concept invested in the renegotiation of value. *Mrs Dalloway* gestures towards an inclusive, virtually limitless, leveling promise of the ordinary while giving view to the dual risks of recapture by forms of containment and loss of meaning. But the novel nevertheless validates the ordinary as a necessarily localized, context-specific intervention in a value system, which yet holds the door open to further transformations. *Mrs Dalloway*, in other words, performs the poetics of ordinary life as a dialectical reconfiguration of value.

Postscript

Speculative genealogizing

To the contemporaries of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde in the historical century, inheritance already began to appear as a potentially fatal shroud and a prophecy of doom. In response to the twin pressures of historical determination and social conformity, Pater and Wilde themselves looked to the contradictory cultural conditions of the past and present, as to the "rough material" of nature and the "facts of common life," as just that: conditions and materials, which must enable thought and creation if these are to be possible at all. This thesis was motivated by the premise that historicizing affords not only historical explanation but an expanded sense of possibility. It does so not only to the extent that it shows our received ideas to be contingent and changeable, but also through attending to the multiple potentials present and contending within any given discourse and at any given juncture. If literary history, as I suggested in my introduction, has ceded a complicated legacy to the critical discourses that we bring to bear on its works, then what might such historicizing or genealogizing afford criticism today? If it sheds some new light on questions still in contention two centuries into our literary modernity, could it also turn up usable materials, forgotten resources, or underrealized potentials?

Wordsworth's anti-utilitarian poetic thought, far from banishing the useful or putting it in its proper place outside the literary domain, implicated poetry in articulating an expansive conception of the useful and of the paths that lead from means to ends. It intimated precisely that there is no "proper place" of the useful that can be pinned down in a specialized knowledge; that the ground of utility cannot be ceded to such specialism precisely because the question of the useful has such a pervasive claim on human practices. Wordsworth's poetic critique of utilitarian political economy in the process presented a positive converse to its own critical negativity, but we also saw it run into difficulties when the sense of possibility thrown up by negation came then to be positively affirmed. The result, in other words, was a typical critical impasse (one that is, to be sure, sometimes bandied in bad faith): the challenge to reductive discourses by its own negative logic failing to offer alternatives. Yet Wordsworth's poems also hinted at a way out of this impasse: although poetic thought turns inwards to embody its negative logic of unmasterable means-ends relations at the risk of cutting itself off from the world, at the same time poetic thought thus embodied offers itself again as an object in the world, available to—indeed requiring—the work of others to verify and activate its potentials in thought and practice.

A generation after Wordsworth, the Aesthetic quarrel with utility picks up a similar theme, opposing to the constraint of established standards the potential for the continual pursuit of new and unforeseen ends. Although the Aesthetes have been read also as avatars of an inward, sometimes an otherworldly, aesthetic realm, they nevertheless clung to the possibility of bringing something new *into* the world, assembled from the materials that nature, history, and society supply. Part of the legacy of Aestheticism has been to enshrine what can be called a veritable cult of the new, which reverberates in the tendency of latter-day critical thought ever to censure the replication of a fallen world and to place a premium on attempts to break with it. But the Aesthetes call attention conversely to the creative impetus of the "critical temperament," as Wilde calls it. Wilde insisted

on the criticality of the aesthetic *vis-à-vis* the conditions of actual existence, but also on the aesthetic principle of criticism that can locate in a given state of things the conditions of possibility for something different. The critic by this token, like the artist, not only grasps her object but puts it to use—in fact cannot be said to grasp the object without putting it to use—to produce new ends out of the often-problematic materials of the old.

Modernism often receives the double and dubious credit of consummating the aesthetic break from the world and of worshiping at the shrine of the new. Virginia Woolf's ordinary life poetics, however, not only commits the aesthetic fully to the world but further suggests that the familiar and the unexceptional can also stand in need of reclamation. The productive negotiation of the topographies of value promised by aesthetic representation ought therefore to be subtler than what binaries of repetition and rupture imply. In this vein, Woolf's modernist attention to the ordinary bears on the question of "paranoid" critiques that labor to invest the seemingly insignificant detail with heightened and often monstrous significance. Prefiguring such significance-investing attention, Woolf's writing of ordinariness compellingly makes the case for attending to and (re)valuing the insignificant detail while also anticipating important risks that attend upon such attentions. In theorizing the ordinary, Woolf's writing in effect offers a versatile and dialectical logic for the critical valorization of the overlooked or too-familiar detail, committing to necessarily bounded revaluations that nevertheless promise further revaluing attentions.

This thesis also set out to tread familiar ground so that new or overlooked ideas might come to light, or better, become productive of further attentions. The foregoing speculations, like the chapters above, propose themselves frankly as a *prelude* to such further labors.

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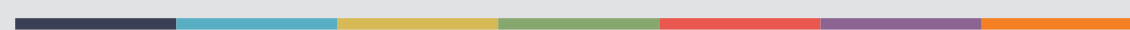

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