CRITICS AND CONNOISSEURS:

POET-CRITICS AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF MODERNISM

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Abstract

Critics and Connoisseurs is a reconsideration of the seminal figure of the modernist poet-critic. In a series of case studies of the poet-critics T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Sterling A. Brown, and R.P. Blackmur, I examine the relation that pertains between critical and poetic writing with a particular emphasis on the process of self-explanation and justification. Modernist poet-critics, in my view, are distinct from the poet-critics of earlier literary eras to the degree that they align themselves with bureaucratic institutions, from the university and the little magazine to the philanthropic foundation and the state. This led to new and unprecedented interrelationships between literary and cultural criticism and bureaucratic administration and between the practice and explanation of literature. These are institutional inheritances that creative writers and humanist scholars still live with today.

In my introduction, I consider the importance of the poet-critic to modernism in the light of the figure’s long history, ultimately claiming that the originality of the modernist poet-critic is to be found in their relationship to administration and to bureaucratic institutions. My chapter on T.S. Eliot reconstructs the case made for the poet as critic in the late 1910s and early 1920s and points to its basis in an “artistic critique” of society that Eliot inherits from nineteenth-century Continental poet-critics like Baudelaire. The second chapter deals with Marianne Moore’s reluctance to participate in a culture of critical agonism and her recourse to a non-agonistic administrative role.
within the established modernist institution of the little magazine (specifically, as managing editor of *The Dial*). The third chapter, on Sterling A. Brown, brings both race and the state into the discussion by examining Brown’s work as “Editor of Negro Affairs” for the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s; this is followed by a discussion of an ambitious philanthropic project undertaken by the poet-critic R.P. Blackmur in the immediate postwar period to support little magazines. Finally, in an epilogue, I briefly consider the importance of the poet-critic to the evolution of the postwar university, with reference to the disciplines of creative writing and literary study.
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Acknowledgments

This dissertation project arose in part out of a sense of living — or wanting to live — a double life; a sense that, I have come to realize, is not at all uncommon for writers and literary intellectuals. When I first entered graduate school in 2005, I was not sure of what kind of writer or intellectual I wanted to be, and an intimidating series of oppositions posed themselves: was my work going to be primarily creative or critical? Political or aesthetic? Academic or journalistic? Over the course of my education, I have come to realize — or, it might be better to say in this context, to acknowledge — that literary culture (and culture in general) is not quite so schematically organized, and that this is, on the whole, a good thing. The either-or choices that exert so much cognitive power over our expectations rarely suffice to describe what actually happens to us, or what we are capable of. There are worse places to learn this than in graduate school.

I am enormously fortunate to have had a dissertation committee made up of three poet-critics (Susan Stewart, Meredith Martin, and James Longenbach) and two critic-scholars (Michael Wood and Jeremy Braddock), all of whom have provided, in addition to invaluable feedback and advice, models for the balance of scholarly rigor and intellectual creativity that I continue to strive for in my own work. I would also like to
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To my father, Jeffrey Kindley, I owe the origins of my interest in poetry and criticism; to my mother, Louise Kindley, the origins of my interest in institutions and social life. This dissertation in some ways reflects a blend of their sensibilities and priorities. It would have been impossible to complete without their support, and without the love, appreciation, and constructive criticism of my wife, Emily Ryan Lerner, who makes my double life worth living.
Village Explainers

At one time, it was a striking fact that many of the most prominent and respected modernist practitioners were also prolific literary and cultural critics. Today, if this same fact seems relatively mundane, we can fairly describe this perception one of modernism’s legacies. In the early twenty-first century we’ve grown accustomed to the idea of the poet as critic; indeed, it is one of the things we tend to expect any serious poet to be. Because of our habituation to the social fact of the poet-critic, a habituation which modernism has helped to bring into being, one of the most fundamental paradoxes of modernism — that it was at once a discourse of autonomous indifference to public norms and values and stringent intellectual self-justification — may fail to even arise for the contemporary reader.

But even the modernists themselves remarked upon this duality. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein describes Ezra Pound in terms that could apply to any of the writers considered in this dissertation, as “a village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not.” Stein’s quip is justly famous, and it zeroes in on exactly the questions that will concern me in the following pages: the relationship of creative writing to criticism, the proper social role of the artist, and the need for public explanation and justification of art and literature. In Stein’s time and in ours, these relationships are embodied in a figure that is not unique to the twentieth century, but that takes on an unprecedented amount of social power and importance in the last hundred years of literary history: the poet-critic.
It has long been a commonplace that the modernists were concerned above all with something called “aesthetic autonomy” — that is, with the protection of the intrinsic values of literature and art from all forms of exterior interference, whether economic, religious, or political. Stein’s remark is, among other things, an ingenious bit of modernist one-upmanship, of being more-autonomous-than-thou: Stein insinuates that Pound’s habit of “explaining” his work, and the work of his contemporaries, to the public makes him less of an artist than — for example — Stein herself. The implication of Stein’s joke is that artists themselves have little need of criticism, or of the productions of critics; these serve a primarily didactic function, helping to indoctrinate the philistine public into the mysteries of poetry, and to clarify the practice for “villagers” who might otherwise misunderstand or distrust it. (Let’s not forget that the word “bourgeois” derives

1 While the concept of the autonomy of the aesthetic has a long and complex history (nicely summarized by Charles Altieri in his entry on “poetic autonomy” in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, I use it mostly in the sense it is given in the sociological study of professions, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu, where it refers not to the subjective autonomy of aesthetic experience but the social autonomy of producers. In his forthcoming Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man, Andrew Goldstone provides a usefully flexible concept of aesthetic autonomy (a term which, he observes, has been much maligned in academic scholarship of the past few decades). Following the example set by Bourdieu’s The Rules of Art but adapting it to the field of Anglo-American modernism, Goldstone argues that “[m]odernist writers … sought to secure relative, worldly forms of independence for literature within society” and urges that “we must take the forms of relative autonomy seriously as a genuine and significant aspect of modernist literature’s engagement with its world. We must undertake the literary-historical study of autonomy itself” (1-2). Among the virtues of Goldstone’s theoretical perspective is his emphasis on the provisional and local aspect of claims for autonomy; as he puts it, “practices of autonomy themselves vary according to contexts — according, that is, to what modernist writers, in particular times and places, most urgently seek autonomy from … Indeed, autonomy has been a challenging subject in part because of its protean nature; autonomy arguments and practices change shape under varying pressures” (3). It is important to emphasize that this revaluation of autonomy is not a reversion to an ideology of the aesthetic which would deny the importance of history, social relations, or institutions to art. For Goldstone, as for Bourdieu, “the major late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century innovations [in the securing of autonomy] happen less at the level of ideas than at the level of the social”; what is most important to understand is how “the pursuit of autonomy leads modernist writers to take account of, and seek to transform, the social relations of their literary production” (11, 4).

For a less sociologically and more philosophically inflected perspective on autonomy and its relation to modernism, see Charles Altieri, “Why Modernist Claims to Autonomy Matter.”
from the French word for “village.”)

Stein, of course, did her fair share of self-explanation and popularization — *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is, itself, a work in this mold, although a cleverly ventriloquized one — but that is immaterial here; the posture she adopts *vis-à-vis* Pound’s habit of explanation is one we’ve come to associate with modernism and its kissing cousin the avant-garde: mandarin, aloof, and automatically dismissive of vulgar oversimplification and the heresy of paraphrase. Modernism, as it is often understood, offers a resistance to understanding and explanation; it prefers, to adapt the title of one of Stein’s essays, “composition as explanation” to explanation per se. “Never apologize, never explain,” Benjamin Jowett is supposed to have advised undergraduates at Oxford, and this aristocratic motto fits in nicely with modernist formulas like T.S. Eliot’s “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood” or Archibald MacLeish’s “a poem must not mean but be.” Autonomy means never having to say you’re sorry.

Yet there is a contradiction here, as the modernists — not only the helplessly didactic Pound, but Eliot and MacLeish and William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore and even Stein herself — were inveterate and passionate explainers, and it is largely thanks to historical developments of the modernist period that we now expect poets — and, increasingly, all other types of creative artists as well — to explain themselves and their art to us as well as produce it. To a certain extent, this activity of reflexive self-explanation can be seen as part of the “routine autopoiesis” that Mark McGurl sees as essential to modernism: “in the modernist tradition, the portrait of the artist is not only an important single book and an important genre, but also a name for one of the routine operations of literary modernism. For the modernist artist, that is, the
reflexive production of the ‘modernist artist’ — i.e., job description itself — is a large part of the job” (48). In much the same spirit, we might say that the reflexive production of explanations, analyses, and critiques of modernism form a large part of the modernist project.

That poet-critics have been important to the definition and promulgation of modernism should be uncontroversial. Pound and Eliot, after all, are exemplary figures in both traditions; the critical prose of Stevens, Williams, Moore, and others are frequently consulted by scholars of those poets’ work; academic poet-critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, and R.P. Blackmur have an established importance to the institutionalization of modernism in the academic curriculum; and longue durée histories of the poet-critic by René Wellek, Lawrence Lipking, and Adam Parkes all give pride of place to the figures associated with the modernist movement.² It is important to stress, however, that the poet-critic is not a modernist invention, and that there exists a long tradition of poets who have written critical prose (what John Milton memorably called “the work of the left hand”), a lineage that includes Sidney, Dryden, Behn, Milton, Johnson, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, Poe, Arnold, and Yeats, to name only the most obvious and prestigious examples.

Moreover, although there are certainly doctrinal similarities between the various

² Parkes, in his entry on poet-critics in the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory and Criticism*, notes that “[a]ccording to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term ‘poet-critic’ was not used in print until 1956.” The term certainly cropped up occasionally before this — the *OED* lists an example without the hyphen from 1814, and George Saintsbury’s chapter on Alexander Pope in his 1902 *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day* contains the sentence: “The poet-critic practically confesses the otiosity of the whole system by admitting that a lucky licence is a rule” (456) — but it does seem to have come into more general use only in the late 1950s.
poet-critics of the modernist period that distinguish them from their predecessors and successors, one should not insist too strongly on the specificity of the critical theories espoused by modernists. A case can be (and has been) made that all British and, to a lesser extent, American poet-critics are directly indebted to the practical and theoretical legacy of British Romanticism, for instance. The Coleridge of the *Biographia Literaria* certainly qualifies as a poet-critic in something very close to the modernist sense, as Eliot recognized when describing him, in his 1919 essay “The Perfect Critic,” as “the greatest of English critics, and in a sense the last” (1). Similarly, one can easily find points of connection between the critical theory and practice of modernists like Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens with that of postmodernist poet-critics like Olson, Ginsberg, Bishop, and Ashbery. Modernism’s anxious insistence on its own radical novelty has misled many scholars into overemphasizing the degree of its discontinuity from literary history in either direction, whether through its purported destruction of a “Romantic ideology” or the postmodern deconstruction of modernism’s own ideological assumptions.

Nevertheless, I will claim that modernist poet-critics play a distinctive role in literary history, and this is a function not only of their numerosness — no other period, with the possible exception of our own, can compete with the twentieth century for sheer density of poet-critics — but also of their affiliation with institutions. The importance of the modernist era is not that it produced a new kind of literary figure, but that it found a

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4 Marjorie Perloff, in particular, has excelled at demonstrating links between the modernist and postmodernist poetic traditions, particularly via Pound. See especially *Poetic License: Studies in the Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* and *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*.
new kind of work for that figure to do. There is something of a historical irony in this, in that the main current of modernist criticism can perhaps best be described as emerging out of what are largely anti-institutional, individualist tendencies of Romanticism and Symbolism. On the whole, this kind of self-reflexive critical writing is perhaps closer to what we would now call “poetics” — i.e. creative criticism that blurs the boundaries between artistic production and critical reflection — than it is to the journalistic tradition associated with Dryden and Johnson. As Lawrence Lipking recognizes in his account of the phenomenon of the poet-critic in the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, this is a kind of critical practice that arises out of, and in turn promotes, a new kind of difficulty and opacity in works of art. Lipking dates its emergence to the period many art historians consider the beginning of the modernist era proper, the long *fin-de-siècle* that begins with the French Second Republic. “The early modern period [i.e. the mid-nineteenth century] is an age of poet-critics,” Lipking writes:

At the turn of the twentieth century, as new schools and movements of poetry sprang up throughout Europe, the poets who created them also spread the word of a critical revolution … A flood of essays and lectures and position papers and manifestos accompanied each innovation in style … This interpenetration of criticism and poetry, their mutual influence and vitality, helps to define the early modern period. The leading figures tend not to be poets only, but genuine poet-critics. (439)

Lipking’s ecumenical history of the poet-critic has the virtue of encompassing not
only the usual Anglo-American suspects but also important European figures like
Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, F.T. Marinetti, André Breton, and Mikhail Kuzmin who
are usually associated not with poet-critics but with the avant-garde tradition of the
manifesto.\(^5\) For Lipking, the true modernist poet-critic emerges with the advent of
Symbolism and Aestheticism, literary tendencies so recondite and inaccessible that they
require a new class of village explainers to step in: “New rhythms and new languages of
poetry, new forms, new understandings of how and what a poem ought to mean, aroused
a fervor of experimentation. Hence poets were forced to be critics, whether to conceive
the terms on which poetry could be written or to explain them to the public. New codes
require decoders” (440).\(^6\) With such a feedback loop in place, it’s not surprising that
many poets would go into the explanation business themselves. While on first blush it
may seem paradoxical that a movement as intransigent and oppositional as the avant-
garde would willingly generate so much helpful expository writing, Lipking shrewdly
points out that the avant-garde’s aspiration toward irrational “purity” actually entailed a
concession — even a commitment — to communicative rationality: “The advocate of

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\(^5\) Lawrence Rainey provides an excellent analysis of the interpenetration of the Continental avant-
garde tradition and Anglo-American modernism through his work on the influence of Marinetti
and Futurism on Pound and Wyndham Lewis; see *Institutions of Modernism*, 10-41, and the more
recent *Futurism: An Anthology*. The last decade has seen a great deal of excellent scholarly work
on avant-garde and modernist manifestos, including Mary Ann Caws’ anthology *MANIFESTO: A
Century of Isms*; Luca Somigli’s *Legitimizing the Artist. Manifesto Writing and European
Modernism, 1885-1915*; Janet Lyon’s *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*; and Martin
Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution*. While these scholars tend to insist, to one degree or another,
on a radical distinction between the (Continental, politically engaged) “avant-garde” and (Anglo-
American, quietist or reactionary) “modernism” which would exclude most if not all of the
figures I address in this dissertation, I would maintain that the culture of manifesto-writing and
that of poet-critics has important and underappreciated similarities.

\(^6\) James Joyce, though not a poet per se, is the paradigmatic case here; see especially his infamous
(and possibly apocryphal) remark to his French translator Jacques Benoist-Méchin: “I’ve put
in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over
what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality” (quoted in Richard Ellmann,
*James Joyce*, 521).
pure poetry resorts to prose in order to explain whatever the verse has left out … There is nothing illegitimate about this division of responsibilities; to defend purity, one need not be pure” (442).

The ultimate terminus for this dialectic between modernist obscurity and critical explanation, as many have noted, is the literature department of the modern research university, and there is no question that poet-critics have played a decisive role in its evolution. In his groundbreaking 1993 monograph *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism*, Langdon Hammer insists on the mutual benefit to both poetry and criticism that academic specialization offered:

> [P]oetry was criticism’s way into the university, a form of knowledge through which New Critics like Tate established their authority without advanced degrees, against the resistance of historical scholars … This is true, but it could also be turned around, since criticism was *poetry’s* way into the university too. The hyphenated form poet-critic expressed an addition, a further development: it indicated a poet with the capacity not only to write poems but to reflect on them, to write about them, and to teach them. (27-28).

Furthermore, while modernist poet-critics like Eliot and Tate was often perceived, especially after 1960, as politically “reactionary” rather than progressive or avant-garde (and indeed sometimes perceived themselves this way, as the title of Tate’s 1936 volume *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* evidences), Hammer nicely demonstrates the
paradoxical degree to which such poet-critics, whatever their political or cultural commitments, were in fact, in a sociological sense, vanguard figures. In Hammer’s estimation, “[m]odernist exponents of tradition such as Eliot and Tate took part in [a] transfer of social power, as the New Criticism’s success in the university after 1940 attests. In so doing, they forged an aesthetic ideology for the coming organization of intellectual life and not (as they are frequently felt to have done) a defense of that which was passing away.” (7)

In the chapters that follow, I build on the foundational work undertaken by scholars like Lipking, Hammer, Stephen Schryer, Gerald Graff, and others who have — understandably — focused on the role of poet-critics in shaping university curricula, and, in particular, their influence on the pedagogical and research programs of professors of literature. While I would hardly argue that the university is not, by a wide margin, the dominant institution in Anglo-American postwar literary life, I would like to take a somewhat more expansive view here, examining the institutional affiliations of poet-critics beyond the academy. (This is necessary, it seems to me, in order to avoid a certain comfortable dualism that academic commentators on the “institutionalization of modernism” have consistently maintained between academia and non-academia, or “the ivory tower” and “the real world”: then as now, an artificial dichotomy that utterly fails to account for the complexity of poet-critics’ various institutional affiliations.) Leaving to one side, for the moment, all of the poet-critics who have held full-or part-time positions as professors — a job that necessarily requires an enormous amount of administrative work, regardless of whether one is particularly ambitious in that arena outside teaching and writing — we are still left with a plethora of examples of poet-critics who have
undertaken administrative work. These would include T.S. Eliot’s editorship at the Criterion and at the publisher Faber & Gwyer (later Faber & Faber), and his regular meetings throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s with the Christian social policy discussion group the Moot; Marianne Moore’s editorship of The Dial; W.H. Auden’s work with the British government’s General Post Office Film Unit in 1935 and, later, with the Morale Division of the U.S. Army’s Strategic Bombing Survey in 1945; Sterling Brown’s labors as “Negro Editor” for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and consultant on Gunnar Myrdal’s research project on American racism, funded by the Carnegie Corporation; William Empson’s service (along with George Orwell) as a “Talks Assistant” for the BBC’s wartime propaganda division; John Crowe Ransom as the recipient of Foundation monies from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations for the Kenyon Review, and as director of the Rockefeller-financed Kenyon School of English; Stephen Spender as co-editor of the CIA-funded Encounter; Archibald MacLeish as Librarian of Congress (1939-1944); and Blackmur in his longstanding association as an advisor to the Rockefeller Foundation. None of these commitments were merely “second jobs,” in the sense that the sociologist Bernard Lahire uses to refer to work undertaken merely to finance less profitable artistic activities: they were all positions that drew on the symbolic capital these poet-critics had acquired in the literary sphere, and that allowed them to advance ambitious administrative aims consistent with their practical interests as writers.

7 This reckoning of poet-critics with bureaucratic ties also leaves out writers who have received fellowships from philanthropic organizations such as the Lannan, Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and MacArthur Foundations, and from governmental organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Imagining a history of postwar poetry without the intervention of these organizations is incredibly difficult; it would look very different.
As the above briefly noted examples, some of which will be further elaborated in what follows, should already make clear, I am less interested in the poet-critic as teacher or researcher — positions which, while supported by bureaucracy, are not intrinsic to its functioning — than I am in the poet-critic as administrator: as the deviser and facilitator of systems for organizing productive activity on a very large scale. What is more, I am interested in the connection between the administrative activities of these poet-critics and the larger project of the justification of literary autonomy in the public sphere. In Europe, this autonomy is typically supported by the state and by state universities; in the United States, it is far more likely to be underwritten by private universities or philanthropic foundations. In either case, however, we are dealing with what the economist Kenneth Boulding called a “grants economy.” Boulding defined the grants economy as “that segment of the total economy which deals with one-way transfers of exchangeables” rather than reciprocal exchange, upon which most economic theory is based, and he believed the rapid growth of the grants economy after World War II to be “a major structural change, comparable in size to the decline of agriculture or the rise of the war-industry” (477). Whereas the virtue (or vice, depending on your perspective) of a traditional exchange economy is that participants in it are spared the labor of arguing over what is and is not important or valuable — this is precisely what the price mechanism renders unnecessary, so that, as we say, “the market decides” — Boulding’s grants economy is founded on a logic not of profit maximization but of a promotion of the common good, an abstract notion that must always be made concrete. Thus, it must also involve the establishment of what the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot call “economies of worth,” in which beings of very different types — human actors, but
also inanimate objects (in this case, primarily, texts) — are brought into relation with one another and compared. Social actors, in Boltanski and Thévenot’s theory, strive to define their collective situation with reference to normative principles, undertaking a work of continual justification.

In a highly subjective and quantification-resistant field such as modernist poetry, justification requires the active participation of agents embedded in the particular situation defined as existing for the common good. Poet-critics, I submit, have served this justificatory purpose perfectly. The maintenance of the extraordinarily delicate economy of twentieth (and now twenty-first) century poetry in fact depends on the participation of these double agents: deeply invested participants who also have the ability to issue rewards and support the day-to-day continued functioning of the system, in the absence of powerful market mechanisms, and who regard themselves, their work, and their way of life as perennially subject to justification and defense.

In *Critics and Connoisseurs*, I argue that the proliferation of poet-critics in the twentieth century, and their tendency to attach themselves to institutions, are both linked to the peculiar form of cultural value that poetry has assumed in modern Anglo-American society, one that — unlike most other values in Anglo-American life — is assumed to be, by its very nature, irreducible to economic value. The work of poet-critics has been to somehow *account* for this value, thus creating a kind of equitable, justifiable system for writers, readers, and works of art that market capitalism claims to establish for consumers, producers, and commodities.

This anxiety about incompatibility of poetry and the market precedes modernism, of course. At the turn of the twentieth century, as John Tinderman Newcomb shows in
Would Poetry Disappear?, an anxious Social-Darwinist discourse about this very topic, positing the inevitable extinction of poetry, began to appear in the pages of magazines like *Forum*, *Lippincott’s*, and *The Dial* (49-58). While Newcomb is committed to a somewhat improbable narrative of reconciliation, in which modernist poets found a way to re-connect with their audience through the medium of the little magazine, other scholars, like Lawrence Rainey in his *Institutions of Modernism*, have tended to emphasize modernism’s flight from the open market. In positing a shift from an interwar phase in which modernist works circulate primarily as luxury commodities within networks of wealthy patrons, to a postwar phase when explanations and justifications of modernist practice circulate within bureaucratic institutions like universities and philanthropic foundations, I am elaborating the narrative put forth by Rainey about the alliance between high modernism (he focuses, in particular, on the work of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and H.D.) and the prestige/collector market. “Modernism,” Rainey writes, quoting Terry Eagleton’s “Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism,” “is commonly considered ‘a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth’ against the loss of aesthetic autonomy. But it may be,” he goes on, in good dialectical fashion, “that just the opposite would be a more accurate account”:

that modernism, among other things, is a strategy whereby the work of art invites and solicits its own commodification, but does so in such a way that it becomes a commodity of a special sort, one that is temporarily exempted from the exigencies of immediate consumption prevalent within the larger cultural economy, and instead is integrated into a different economic circuit of patronage, collecting,
speculation, and investment … Modernism marks neither a straightforward resistance nor an outright capitulation to commodification but a momentary equivocation that incorporates elements of both in a brief, necessarily unstable synthesis. (3)

In a series of remarkable close readings not of texts but of significant contexts — such as the salons and gallery spaces where the early works of Pound (including his critical lectures later collected in The Spirit of Romance) were first presented, or the successful marketing of seminal modernist works like Ulysses and The Waste Land to select “smart” demographics — Rainey makes a persuasive case that modernism, particularly in the key decade between 1912 and 1922, invited commodification “of a special sort” in order to ensure its continued survival in an inhospitable market economy. “That equivocation, in turn, demands new strategies of authorial self-construction that can accommodate a rapidly changing configuration of cultural institutions,” he writes. “Strategies of authorial construction changed as authors sought to address different publics, ranging from patron-saloniers to mass audiences, or from patron-investors, dealers, and speculators to a broader (if numerically restricted) corpus of critics and educated readers” (4). Following the general model proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in The Field of Cultural Production, Rainey emphasizes speculative investment and the

8 Rather than Bourdieu, Rainey himself cites Jürgen Habermas, whose The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere “stands in the background of this study.”

Public culture is used here as a colloquial counterpart to Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, that social and discursive space in which … norms of rational argument began to take precedence over status, tradition, or the identity of participants in civic discussion. … The transformation of that sphere, its gradual distortion and partial
[I]f one could neither go back to reconstructing the aristocracy of the salon nor go forward to embrace the egalitarianism of the commodity, what solution was there? The answer, paradoxically, was to do a little of both at once: to reconstruct an aristocracy, but to do it within the world of the commodity — to accept, in other words, the status of art as a commodity but simultaneously to transform it into a special kind of commodity, a rarity capable of sustaining investment value. Or, to reformulate this, the answer to the leveling effect precipitated by a consumer economy was to defer consumption into the future, to transform it into investment; which is to say, to encourage or even solicit the ephemeral seduction of the consumer economy, acknowledging the status of art as commodity, but to postpone and sublimate consumption by turning it into an object of investment whose value will be realized only in the future. (39)

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disintegration, occurred under the impress of its continual expansion to include more and more participants and the development of large-scale social organizations that mediated individual participation: channels of communication became more regulated, and the public sphere, now “dominated by the mass media,” was transformed into an “arena infiltrated by power,” one in which the ideal of rational discourse and its critical function have been eviscerated … Modernism, poised at the cusp of that transformation of the public sphere, responded with a tactical retreat into a divided world of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment, a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counterspace securing a momentary respite from a public realm increasingly degraded, even as it entailed a fatal compromise with precisely that degradation. (5)

Habermas argues that the civic republican public sphere, developed in the eighteenth century, is invaded in the nineteenth by the market and publicity. The avant-garde, in order to survive in this environment, fashions strategies of cynical distinction, playing the "long game" of speculative investment as opposed to transforming itself to suit the market.
Like Rainey, I am interested in “authorial construction” and career building, and I’d like to reiterate that I find his account of the heyday of high modernism highly convincing. But I take him at his word when he suggests that modernism’s speculative turn was, in broader historical terms, a “momentary equivocation,” one that rapidly gave way to different (and more durable) arrangements with a variety of large bureaucratic institutions. Though he does note in passing that “[t]he Great Depression effectively eliminated the structures of private patronage that had sustained modernism’s growth” (105), Rainey’s emphasis on speculative investment and the production of prestigious luxury commodities within a limited sphere of circulation fails to account for modernism’s response to the worldwide crisis of capitalism precipitated by the stock market crash of 1929. This was a crisis for poetry and its patrons, but also — as any moment of crisis tends to be — a major opportunity for critique. The fact that so many poets, in the wake of Pound and Eliot, had styled themselves as poet-critics meant that it became an opportunity for modernist autonomy as well.

This should be remembered by contemporary scholars who might otherwise see the institutional affiliations of modernist poet-critics like Moore, Brown, Ransom, and Blackmur as somehow compromising the critical spirit of modernism. As I will attempt to show, although the discourse of poet-critics is often linked to an apolitical formalism, each of these figures can be read as a kind of social critic as well. In taking on managerial or administrative duties, modernist poet-critics didn’t cease to be critical. There has been a great deal of recent interest, on the part of scholars like Martin Puchner, Janet Lyon, and Jonathan Eburne on in the expository writing of the modernists, especially that taking
the form of avant-garde manifestoes and programmatic statements of poetics. These scholars have quite rightly emphasized the oppositional, agonistic character of the critical writing of modernists like Pound, Williams, and the early Eliot and Moore, in order to oppose the caricature of modernism as a monolithic conservative or apolitical force. While I owe much to this work and its productive reconsideration of modernist criticism in an expanded historical and political context, I will be less interested in the avant-garde and its tradition of limited-circulation manifestoes and oppositional agonism — what one might call the “charismatic tradition” of modernism — than I am in the “bureaucratic tradition”: i.e., in those modernists who attempted to work within an existing literary and cultural institutions — magazines, universities, foundations, and even government — rather than oppose, reject, or criticize them from the outside. Thus, I will not argue (as some, most notably Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, have) that the avant-garde suffers a co-optation, decline, or “fall into institutionality” (in McGurl’s marvelous phrase). Indeed, it is my sense that the spirit of the avant-garde, in all its charismatic, agonistic glory, is today alive and well. But I do want to call attention to an alternative strategy, adopted by English and American modernists, to justify the ways of poetry to bureaucracy, and vice versa.

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In the chapters that follow, I proceed through a series of case histories of individual

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9 I am thinking in particular of Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution*, Lyon’s *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, and Eburne’s *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, all of which are concerned to read the programmatic and critical writing of the modernists as closely as their more strictly “creative” work.
poet-critics in the “bureaucratic tradition” in order to get a sense of what kind of work
was held to be consistent with, or necessary for, a life in poetry in the first half of the
twentieth century. In Chapter 1, “Imperfect Poet-Critics,” I consider the archetypal
modernist poet-critic, T.S. Eliot, at a formative stage in his development, looking closely
at a few of the essays concerning the practice of criticism in The Sacred Wood. Through
an analysis of Eliot’s reckoning with forebears like Matthew Arnold, Algernon
Swinburne, and Arthur Symons, and more broadly with the legacy of British
Romanticism, I try to reconstruct some of Eliot’s basic assumptions about the proper
division of labor between poets and critics and the psychological and sociological
concepts that underlie them.

In my second chapter, “Picking and Choosing,” I examine the idiosyncratic
reaction of a very different kind of poet-critic, Marianne Moore, to the agonistic postures
adopted by many modernist poet-critics in the Poundian mold. To be a poet-critic in the
early twentieth century, in practice, meant being highly “critical,” in the colloquial sense
of “querulous”: it meant formulating universal precepts and principles, having public
arguments, taking oppositional stances, and engaging in constructive (or destructive)
critique of other writers’ work. Poet-critics emerge out of this avant-garde culture of
agonism, but the managerial role they would take up by midcentury is made possible by a
sublimation of this competitive impulse, and a tendency toward pluralism. In focusing on
the apparently pacifistic Moore rather than a pure product of this agonistic, adversarial
critical milieu — Yvor Winters or Laura Riding, say — I want to investigate the
imperative toward agonism that modernist critical culture contains, and think about her
strategies for registering negative opinion and aesthetic judgment without engaging in the
symbolic violence of agonistic criticism. I close by showing how Moore’s discomfort with outright agonism inclined her to work as an editor rather than a critic — a role that was as much administrative as creative, and that allowed her to wield a new kind of literary power that anticipates the administrative turn of the 1930s and 1940s.

In “Field Work,” my third chapter, I turn to the case of Sterling A. Brown, a poet-critic whose career was largely established after the crash of 1929, and whose most important administrative work was accomplished largely in collaboration with the state. Brown’s work as “Negro Editor” for the Federal government’s WPA Field Guide series relied on certain cognitive oppositions — like the class-based distinction between “house” and “field,” for instance — already manifested in his poetry. I begin by examining the theme of self-study in Brown’s early poetry — a theme he pursued less by writing in a conventionally introspective lyric mode than through his “field work” into the lives of working class and itinerant black laborers. I then demonstrate how Brown sought to combine this kind of racial self-knowledge with a performance of the Du Boisian role of “the race man” through his administrative involvements. For Brown, establishing “the Negro” as an object of academic and governmental attention was a task that both impeded and complemented his literary career, requiring him to abandon certain rights and privileges of authorship for the sake of the collective good.

This notion of “collective good” brings us to “The Foundations of Criticism,” in which I glance at one of the many ambitious administrative projects undertaken by poet-critics after World War II: R.P. Blackmur’s efforts to secure support for little magazines sympathetic to modernism from the Rockefeller Foundation. This leads me to consider the role that poet-critics have to play in organized philanthropy and, more broadly, in the
“grants economy” and the justification of literature as a social good; as we shall see, there are specific reasons why critics were particularly well suited to this task. Finally, in a brief envoi, I consider how the indisputably crucial relation of poet-critics to the university — and particularly the divergent disciplines of creative writing and literary study — nonetheless threatens to overdetermine our understanding of the variety of institutional affiliations the modernist poet-critics have pursued.

While I break off my narrative in the late 1940s, on the eve of various counterrevolutions in poetry (the Beats, the Movement, the New York School) and criticism (structuralism, deconstruction, a resurgent Marxism), I hope to indicate that the administration of culture undertaken by these and other modernist poet-critics both underlies the formidable achievements of the Anglo-American literary culture of the subsequent sixty years, and produces new problems that future generations of poets, critics, and scholars have had to reckon with. If the struggle of the modernists was to make peace with bureaucracy without compromising the purity and quality of their work, the question for those who have come after has been whether to challenge or sustain that peace. The modernist union of poetry, criticism, and bureaucracy has had many clear benefits: certainly the levels of comfort, prosperity, and productivity enjoyed by several generations of Anglo-American poets from the postwar era onward as a result of their connection to bureaucratic institutions is nothing to minimize. But the particular kind of double agency that modernist poet-critics normalized has made it harder to conceive of an autonomous poetic culture that exists apart from the supports of bureaucratic administration — and, in an age of declining resources in both the public and private
sectors, not to mention rampant anti-intellectualism, that may be exactly the future that today’s poet-critics most need to imagine.
Imperfect Poet-Critics

“We must ourselves decide what is useful to us and what is not; and it is quite likely that we are not competent to decide.”

I.

If there is a such a thing as a “perfect” poet-critic — a figure who answers to the exacting specifications for excellence and importance of both the poetic and the critical fields — it is probably T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s achievement, indeed, is double: he justifies the practice of poetry, and the perspective of the practicing poet, to a wider world of professionals (first journalistic critics, later academics); and he justifies the practice of criticism to poets, in part by demonstrating the power and autonomy that critical work could secure for poets. Edmund Wilson’s assessment of Eliot in *Axel’s Castle* — one of the earliest, and still the most lucid and suggestive, treatments of literary modernism — illustrates the remarkable impression that Eliot’s criticism made on his contemporaries. After faulting Ezra Pound for his “scrappy” prose which is nonetheless “valuable to his generation as polemic, as propaganda and as illuminating casual criticism,” Wilson goes on to praise Eliot for “establish[ing] and develop[ing] a distinct reasoned point of view … T.S. Eliot has thought persistently and coherently about the relations between the different phases of human experience, and his passion for proportion and order is reflected in his poems. He is, in his way, a complete man, and … it is this intellectual completeness and soundness which has given his rhythm its special prestige” (112). For Wilson, Eliot’s formal (as
opposed to “casual”) criticism provides the security necessary to guarantee his aesthetic of fragmentary obscurity. His “passion for proportion and order,” clearly evidenced in his critical writing, is “reflected,” not directly embodied, in his poems, though presumably this reflection would be difficult to detect without an awareness that the reflected object existed in the first place. Most revealing is Wilson’s quasi-ethical distinction between Pound’s scrappiness and Eliot’s coherence or “completeness,” which recalls the Renaissance humanist ideal of the “well-rounded” citizen. But this completeness is demonstrated not by the variety of the poems themselves — which Wilson goes on to criticize as monotonously morbid — but in the dialectical relation between poetry and criticism. To be “a complete man,” it seems, it was necessary to be a double agent.

For Langdon Hammer, too, Eliot is “the prototypical twentieth-century man of letters,” combining “the postures of the connoisseur and the academic, the snob and the scholar” and thus “giving personal taste a quasi-official authority, an institutional aura” (11-12). It is this “quasi-official,” one might even say “managerial” authority — far more than that of the intransigent, anti-institutional avant-gardism exemplified by Pound — that would define modernism as practiced by the poet-critics I consider in this study; even those who directly opposed or disagreed with Eliot were performing a social role he had developed. It was Eliot who proselytized for criticism as an essential part of the poetic

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10 In his amusing 1970 jeremiad “The Poet as Critic, the Critic as Poet, the Poet-Critic,” René Wellek returns to Wilson’s “complete man” trope but with a good deal more skepticism, declaring it an “illusion” that “the union of poet and critic … restores the original whole man, the uomo universale of the Renaissance” (273). Oddly enough, Wellek associates poet-critics (he names Eliot in particular later in the essay) with a reaction against the discourse of “pure” specialization: “Our time has reacted sharply against the ‘pure’ art, the ‘pure’ scholarship, and the ‘pure’ criticism of the early twentieth century. We don’t want to be specialists, we want to be whole men; we want to reconcile the conscious and the unconscious, the life of the senses and the intellect. We want to have poet-critics. We can hope for them, but as the Devil’s advocate, I can recommend beatification only in very rare cases, with veritable saints who have accomplished the miracle of reconciliation” (274).
calling (though he himself felt some distaste for the role of critic, as we shall see). After Eliot, poet-critics begin to attach themselves to institutions, participating in what the sociologist C. Wright Mills called “the managerial demiurge” of the first half of the twentieth century. Eliot’s theory of a necessary division of labor between “first-order” and “second-order minds,” and his instantiation of that theory in his subsequent career as both poet and critic, signaled that poet-critics were ready to report for a new kind of duty — though where and who they were to report to remained, as yet, unclear.

Louis Menand suggests that Eliot, though he never held an official academic position himself, is nonetheless an essential figure for a shift in the balance of literary critical power away from journalism and towards academia:

It may be that Eliot owed his success as a cultural figure in England in part to his arriving precisely at the moment when one style of critical discourse was yielding in importance and authority to another — when the sort of freelance, journal-based literary criticism practiced by the members of the Bloomsbury group was being displaced by a new, university-based type: the criticism of the academic with an interest in the condition of contemporary culture. … [I]t might be said that Eliot [invented] a manner — judgmental, hierarchical, but “scientific” — perfectly suited to the needs of the modern academic critic. And the scholarship that occupies such a conspicuous place on the surface of Eliot’s writing — both the criticism and the poetry — and that struck many of Eliot’s nonacademic contemporaries as idiosyncratic and excessive, was perhaps also one of the things that made him so valuable to this new audience. Defending Eliot, they seem to
have felt, meant defending the right of literary studies to a prominent place in the modern educational program. (154-155)

That Eliot had an immense influence on the culture of literary study in the universities in both England and America is obvious enough. It is interesting to note, however, that although Eliot made the institutionalization of the poet-critic possible, he was reluctant to align himself directly with an institution, and those that he did — like Faber & Faber and The Criterion — were far closer to what Menand calls “the sort of freelance, journal-based literary criticism” than to “the new, university-based type.”

Moreover, it was in relation to the field of journalism, not the more formalized academic field, that he first conceived his critical project, and though he had a university audience from a very early stage of his career, he resisted the gravitational pull of academia.\footnote{As early as 1920 — the year of publication of The Sacred Wood, his first volume of collected essays — Richards had tried to get Eliot hired by the English School at Cambridge, with “the idea that he would be the one hope for the then brand-new English Tripos … I was soon full of dreams of somehow winkling Eliot out of his bank and annexing him to Cambridge.” Eliot, however, was wary of being “annexed” to a university, as Richards goes on to explain:}

\begin{quote}
From the English Tripos angle I still believe that was the best idea there ever was. But how \textit{dangerous ideas are!} Cambridge might have prevented there being any more poetry! I think something of this might have been in TSE’s own head, when, the second time I saw him, I “sounded him out” … “No, he wasn’t at all sure that an academic life would be what he would choose.” How strange that this lapsed academic should have provided so much fodder for academics! (2-3)
\end{quote}

In fact, Eliot’s standard critique of English journalistic criticism — that it needed to become

\begin{quote}
Here Eliot seems to be laboring to preserve his extramural status with regard to the university, while Richards is pushing to bring him further inside — a move that he realizes, in retrospect, might have been harmful to Eliot’s future poetic development (“how dangerous ideas are!”), but which would have been nothing but beneficial for the fledgling English School. Eliot clearly preferred providing “fodder” for the academic world to actually becoming part of it himself.
\end{quote}
more rigorous and professionalized — would have made little sense when applied to the academic field. (In an unsigned piece for *The Egoist* in April 1918, Eliot defended literary professionalism against journalistic dilettantism: “The opposite of the professional is not the dilettante, the elegant amateur, the dabbler who in fact only attests the existence of the specialist. The opposite of the professional, the enemy, is the man of mixed motives.”)

The eventual institutional success of Eliot’s ideas — along with increasingly conservative political views — may lead us to forget that his essential stance arose out of a detached Baudelairian aestheticism: a judgment of society from the point of view of the dissatisfied, underappreciated artist. Like Pound before him, Eliot insisted on a detached, critical point of view on British society belonging uniquely to the practitioner — what the sociologist Eve Chiapello has usefully termed “artist critique”: “an umbrella term, synthesizing the many forms of critique first leveled against the new industrial, capitalist, and bourgeois society of the nineteenth century, largely by artists in the name of freedom and individual fulfillment … ‘Artist critique’ implies viewing — and positioning oneself within — modern society in a way that takes its inspiration from those values, which, over the past two centuries, have converged into a peculiar but now dominant conception of the artist” (585-586). Importantly for my purposes, “artist critique” refers not just to the critique of art by artists, but a critique of social arrangements that emerges from the modern artist’s perspective. The discourse of the modernist poet-critic, it is important to realize, comes into being not so much as a special way of viewing works of art as a

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12 The same term is translated as “artistic critique” in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Chiapello’s collaboration with Luc Boltanski, but in “Evolution and Co-optation” Chiapello insists on the difference: “Whereas many artists expressed this critique forcefully, they were not alone in doing so, which is why I prefer to speak of ‘artist critique’ rather than ‘artistic critique’” (586).
special way of viewing *society*. Poet-critics don't need to be writing only about poetry, though they often were: their status as critics, rather, stems from the fact that they are poets.

Understanding Eliot’s basic critical stance as issuing out of “artist critique” is helpful because it allows us to reconnect Eliot the radical aesthete (the inheritor of the *tradition maudit* of Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Corbière) and Eliot the quasi-official authority (the progenitor of institutionally-minded poet-critics like Tate, Ransom, and Winters). In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Chiapello’s collaboration with Luc Boltanski, “artistic critique” is contrasted with “social critique,” not in order to launch yet another sociological attack on aesthetic ideology but in order to stress how artists and social activists are frequently divided by differing perspectives on the inadequacy and injustice of their common target: modern life. Boltanski and Chiapello cite four basic sources of critical indignation toward capitalism (and, by extension, modern life in general): a sense of disenchantment and inauthenticity; a sense of oppression; a sense of poverty and inequality; and an objection to opportunism and egoism (37). Artistic (or “artist”) critique concerns itself primarily with the preservation of authenticity and autonomy, but tends to neglect equality and solidarity — issues with which social critique is primarily concerned. This difference of emphasis is what can make artists seem at best antisocial and at worst reactionary to those dedicated to the mission of social critique (and why “autonomy” gets such a bad name). “The signature characteristic of genius is the single-mindedness with which certain artists engage in their activity,” Chiapello writes:

*Ipso facto, this conception does not allow for any critique of the new society in*
the name of solidarity. In this domain, it yields this prerogative to “social critique,” much as it does regarding the democratic promotion of equal freedoms. Basically, since artists aspire to a freedom that is exceptional in nature, “artist critique” does not entail the idea that this freedom should be extended to all of humanity. “Artist critique” is in effect quite aristocratic in nature. (588-589)

The kind of social autonomy that modernist artists advocate for themselves does not lend itself to being extended to all of humanity (indeed, it’s hard to imagine exactly what such an extension would look like). It is important, however, not to confuse the modernist prioritization for autonomy and authenticity over equality and solidarity with a mandarin disinterest in political or economic realities. This bad stereotype of modernism, and modernist criticism in particular — which sees it as high-mindedly, aristocratically unconcerned with “the real” — fails to account for the fact that the critical position of a figure like Baudelaire is based in a close observation and deep-seated opposition to the social world as it actually exists, and motivated by a sense of injustice toward artists in particular. In the nineteenth century, as Chiapello points out,

[u]nrecognised artists of great quality, particularly those who had no other sources of income, were forced to carry out other activities or to compromise their talent by producing works simply to put food on their table. This took away artists' freedom to follow their inclinations alone, and to follow only those rules they deemed appropriate … Thus, the core of “artist critique” stems from what artists interpreted as society's refusal to grant them the freedom to live the only life
deemed worthy of living — a life of *authenticity*. (587)

To return from this extended sociological parenthesis to the specific case of Eliot: I would like to propose that the critical practice of modernism is continually oriented by the detached, practical perspective of “artist critique,” which he inherits from Baudelaire via the discourse of British aestheticism, and by the assumption of the intrinsic superiority of the creative artist’s aesthetic judgment over the non-artist’s. The superiority of the practitioner-critic is a standard theme of Pound’s as well, but for the early Eliot is practically an obsession; and he is, moreover, the first to draw the social conclusions from this essential aestheticist premise.

II.

The field of English literary criticism, at the time Eliot entered it in the mid-1910s, was still dominated, as it had been for decades, by competition between professionals: journalists, academic scholars of literature, and members of the political intelligentsia. Eliot, like Pound, launches his initial critique of the English critical field

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13 This cursory sketch of the English critical field is adapted from John Gross’ *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*. In large part Gross tells a story of the contestation of what had traditionally been journalistic territory by “Oxford and Cambridge products with smooth Oxford and Cambridge manners” (146) such as Andrew Lang, George Saintsbury and John Churton Collins. Those with political commitments included J.M. Robertson and C.F.G. Masterman on the liberal side and W.E. Henley, Charles Whibley and George Wyndham on the Tory; others, like G.K. Chesterton, had religious affiliations. A politically radical, but also aestheticist, tendency was represented by A.R. Orage and *The New Age*, which provided an early publication venue for Pound and Eliot. See also Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism*, which covers the same territory and more. For an excellent recent study of
from an aestheticist position. The claim of his earliest criticism is that none of the extant professional critics are able to actually read literature: only poets can do it properly, without the “mixed motives” Eliot had earlier ascribed to “the Victorian epoch.” It was therefore a significant provocation to end “Imperfect Critics” by claiming that “[t]he creative artist in England finds himself compelled, or at least tempted, to spend much of his time and energy in criticism that he might reserve for the perfecting of his proper work: simply because there is no one else to do it” (46). There were, in fact, plenty of people to do it, and plenty who were doing it: the claim was that what they called “criticism” was, in fact, not, and that it offended against the standards internal to the autonomy of art. Rather than simply enter himself into competition, Eliot wanted to change the rules of the game, and reverse the structure of power relations between the artistic and the critical fields: instead of a few poets having to prove themselves analytically powerful enough to moonlight as critics, the assumption would be that virtually any poet worth the name has a truer aesthetic experience of a literary text, and literary history, than virtually any critic. John Guillory puts it very well when he suggests that “looking at the history of poetry from the point of view of the practicing poet … is the consistent feint of Eliot’s critical prose” (147): this “feint” allowed him to win arguments with non-poets by suggesting that he could perceive the object in question without confusion, whereas they were blinded by their unprofessional “mixed motives.”

It is with this goal of revaluation in mind that, in the series of writings leading up to and partially collected in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot self-consciously assumes the mantle of poet-critic and (to adapt his phrase about Matthew Arnold) “propagandist for poet-

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criticism.” Beginning with his piece on “Swinburne and the Elizabethans” in *The Athenaeum* on September 19, 1919, Eliot writes almost exclusively about poets who had themselves produced a substantial body of critical writing, including Ben Jonson, William Blake, John Dryden, and Arthur Symons. At the same time, he insists repeatedly on the superiority of criticism written by poets to that of non-practitioners (having already spoken, as early as 1916, of “those flashes of insight which arise in the comments of one creative artist upon another”). These concerns culminate in the essays that became the first two items in *The Sacred Wood*: “The Perfect Critic” and “Imperfect Critics.” As their titles suggest, these pieces provide a kind of rapid survey of literary criticism up to the present day, with the goal of orienting the future practice of Eliot and others. (The words “perfect” and “imperfect” already announce this teleological aim, distinguishing Eliot’s essays from a mere chronicle along the lines of Saintsbury’s *History of Literary Criticism*: he is proceeding by process of elimination.) In “The Perfect Critic” Eliot considers a number of candidates for the titular honor, inspecting Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Horace, John Dryden, Thomas Campion, Rémy de Gourmont, and François de La Rochefoucauld each in turn before finally settling on Aristotle, whom he praises as the most “scientific” and “intelligent” of literary critics (13).

Although Aristotle may provide the safe classical telos toward which the investigation of “The Perfect Critic” is ultimately directed, Eliot is not really recommending a more Aristotelian criticism: his interest is not in Aristotle’s method (since, as he puts it, “the only method is to be very intelligent”) but in the quality of his mind. In any case, the real drama of the essay comes from Eliot’s attempt to come to terms not with Aristotle but with a more recent figure, Arthur Symons, whose *Studies in
Elizabethan Drama was the occasion for the essay, and whose The Symbolist Movement in Literature, published in 1899, had been a crucial text for Eliot’s early poetic development. The treatment of Symons in “The Perfect Critic” is highly important for establishing Eliot’s initial vision of the poet-critic, a fact that can be easy to miss given the faintness of the praise he accords Symons here. Thus Eliot, while largely dismissive of Symons’ style and ideas, wants to keep him in the canon on the basis of his innate taste and sensibility.

It is this, I think, which explains Eliot’s continual recourse, in an essay that generally recommends “scientific” criticism, to psychological terms in his discussion of Symons, which treats the older author less like a respected predecessor than like an experimental research subject: “He, if anyone, would be said to expose a sensitive and cultivated mind … before an ‘object’; and his criticism, if anyone’s, would be said to exhibit to us, like the plate, the faithful record of the impressions, more numerous and more refined than our own, upon a mind more sensitive than our own” (3). This is essentially a scientistic restatement of the basic assumptions of Paterian aestheticism:

See Christopher Ricks’s Inventions of the March Hare for a useful collection of Eliot’s remarks on Symons’ influence, Appendix D, 399-402. It was through Symons’s book — a history of the French — that Eliot discovered Jules Laforgue, a key early influence: “I remember getting hold of Laforgue years ago at Harvard, purely through reading Symons … I do feel more grateful to him [i.e., Laforgue] than to anyone else, and I do not think that I have come across any other writer since who has meant so much to me as he did at that particular moment, or that particular year” (399). Kermode also discusses Symons at length in Romantic Image (127-140).

Describing his initial encounter with The Symbolist Movement in Literature in “The Perfect Critic,” Eliot (using, as was his wont in that period, the royal we) writes that we remember that book as an introduction to wholly new feelings, as a revelation. After we have read Verlaine and Laforgue and Rimbaud and return to Mr. Symons’ book, we may find that our own impressions dissent from his. The book has not, perhaps, a permanent value for the one reader, but it has led to results of permanent importance for him. (5)
here, the “sensitive and cultivated mind” of the poet-critic, like the “mind of the poet” compared to a “shred of platinum” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” is valuable first and foremost as a record of sense-data, even if the possessor of that instrument is incapable of interpreting that data interestingly himself (as, Eliot believes, Symons is).

The first advantage of the poet as critic is a psychological, indeed a physiological one: whether or not the ideas or beliefs they consciously hold about literature are coherent or true, they are simply capable of reading and experiencing poetry at a level unavailable to the general public. At the same time, however, there is an implicit censure in Eliot’s deference towards Symons’ “sensitive and cultivated mind,” implying that all the “cultivation” involved in Symons’ criticism has already taken place in the course of his own development; he is not actively concerned with cultivating, or educating, anyone else’s mind, or deriving principles (or “ériger en lois,” as Eliot, echoing de Gourmont, prefers to put it) from the experience of literary quality it is inexplicably given to him to access.

This psychological theory of the poet as a perfect or “natural” critic is extended to another problematic aestheticist predecessor when Eliot makes the rather bizarre comment, later in the same essay, that “Swinburne found an adequate outlet for the creative impulse in his poetry; and none of it was forced back and out through his critical prose.”

This surprising recourse to something like a theory of repression serves to shore up a sense of the poet-critic as constitutionally superior to the non-poet: “This gives us an intimation why the artist is — each within his own limitations — oftenest to be depended

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16 Consider this parallel passage from “The Function of Criticism” (1923): “no writer is completely self-sufficient, and many creative writers have a critical activity which is not all discharged into their work. Some seem to require to keep their critical powers in condition for the real work by exercising them miscellaneously; others, on completing a work, need to continue the critical activity by commenting on it” (39, emphasis mine).
upon as a critic; his criticism will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish — which, in most other persons, is apt to interfere fatally” (6-7). This, in Eliot’s expert diagnosis, is what has happened to Symons: “I imagine … that Mr. Symons is far more disturbed, far more profoundly affected, by his reading than was Swinburne, who responded rather by a violent and immediate and comprehensive burst of admiration which may have left him internally unchanged. The disturbance in Mr. Symons is almost, but not quite, to the point of creating; the reading sometimes fecundates his emotions to produce something new which is not criticism, but is not the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness” (52-53).

In essence, this line of thought is really just a reformulation of a persistent social idée reçue — to wit, that all critics of poetry secretly want to be poets themselves, and that their frustration and envy of the creative artist inevitably interferes with their objective judgment — that was already banal by the end of the eighteenth century, here given a somewhat dubious “psychological” basis. But the psychological foundation, which assumes that there are basic differences in the types of “minds” that experience poetry, allows Eliot to argue that an accomplished and successful poet is more capable of being objective, of being a pure critic, than “most other persons,” thus ingeniously turning what might have seemed like a disadvantage for the poet-critic (their deep personal investment in the literary field) into a positive advantage. In an ingenious reversal, the very poet-critics who might themselves have been open to accusations of

17 In his essay on “Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism,” Martin Jay argues for Eliot for an exemplar of the modernist opposition to psychologism, citing his famous emphasis on impersonality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and the acknowledged influence of T.E. Hulme on his thinking. It seems to me, however, that Eliot’s theory of the poet-critic is founded on a psychological distinction between poets and non-poets — later expressed as a distinction between “first-order” and “second-order minds” — insisting on a qualitative difference between the experience of different subjectivities.
“mixed motives” — promoting their own and their friends’ work, for instance — are presented as the true disinterested professionals.

Similarly, in “Imperfect Critics,” Eliot takes Swinburne to task for his self-indulgent prose style but notes that his

style has one positive merit: it allows us to know that Swinburne was writing not to establish a critical reputation, not to instruct a docile public, but as a poet his notes upon poets whom he admired. And whatever our opinion of Swinburne’s verse, the notes upon poets by a poet of Swinburne’s dimensions must be read with attention and respect. (17)\textsuperscript{18}

Again the poet is presented to us as though he were a natural critic, one who possesses an advantage over the competition simply by virtue of being able to read and experience poetry at a higher level; and again, Eliot suggests that the critic’s status as practicing poet, far from presenting a danger of bias or partiality (a concern for “reputation,” whether critical or poetic), is actually the ultimate proof of his total disinterestedness.

Here, however, the terms of approbation are less scientific than they are ethical: the work of criticism is taken to be an act of generosity, founded on a kind of solidarity — “as a poet his notes upon poets whom he admired.” It would seem that the poet-critic’s

\textsuperscript{18} Note that when this essay was originally published in \textit{The Athenaeum}, as “Swinburne and the Elizabethans,” this sentence read: “Swinburne was writing not to establish a critical reputation, not to instruct a docile public, not like a grave condescending Arnold, but as a poet his notes upon poets whom he admired.” The dig at Arnold was removed when the essay was reprinted in \textit{The Sacred Wood}, in keeping with the “amends” Eliot makes to him in the book’s introduction (see main text, below).
innate sensitivity disinclines him to serve a public, pedagogical function: he is writing “not to instruct a docile public” but only for *himself*, for his own personal edification or pleasure. This Eliot approves, to an extent, insofar as the private ethic of pleasure and generosity foreclose the possibility of using criticism for propagandistic or self-promotional purposes. But a purely personal ethic of cultivation and gift-giving, whatever its value in safeguarding against impure forms of interest, runs the risk of making the act of criticism *merely* private, producing one single “sensitive and cultivated mind” and no more:

With all the justness of his judgment, however, Swinburne is an appreciator and not a critic … [W]e cannot say that his thinking is faulty or perverse — up to the point at which it is thinking. But Swinburne stops thinking just at the moment when we are most zealous to go on. And this arrest, while it does not vitiate his work, makes it an introduction rather than a statement. (19-20)

By regretting Swinburne’s narcissistic preference for “appreciating” poetry rather than analyzing it, Eliot has made a subtle but very significant move, from recommending poets for a job currently performed by journalists (evaluation and publicity) to suggesting they might be capable of one historically performed by philosophers (justification, and the formulation of rational principles). It is the language of formal logic, not aesthetics or ethics, that Eliot uses to claim that, whether or not it yielded practical results, such criticism would at least demonstrate “the movements of an important mind groping toward important conclusions”: 
As it is, there are to be no conclusions, except that Elizabethan literature is very great, and that you can have pleasure and even ecstasy from it, because a sensitive poetic talent has had the experience. One is in risk of becoming fatigued by a hubbub that does not march; the drum is beaten, but the procession does not advance. (20-21)

As with Symons, Eliot praises Swinburne’s perceptiveness and disinterestedness while regretting his “sensitive” self-absorption and lack of ultimate collective purpose: “the drum is beaten, but the procession does not advance.” Whether or not we care to connect this rhetoric of “advancement” directly to the military parlance of the “avant-garde” so prevalent on the Continental literary scene by 1920, it is clear that Eliot, in regretting his predecessors’ intellectual deficits, is also regretting their lack of social efficacy, and their inability to lastingly establish anything more than their own extraordinary sensitivity to poetry. The exquisite aestheticism that guarantees the judgment of poet-critics like Swinburne and Symons gets in the way of the justification they might be able to provide for the practice of poetry, a justification that would establish poetry as a common social good for others besides themselves. “As it is, there are to be no conclusions” is an assessment that links Eliot’s disapproval of the poet-critics’ style of argument (no logical “conclusions” are reached) to their sterility as aesthetic examples and the social temporariness of their literary positions (it is not possible to “conclude,” or even to continue, what they started). The terrible isolation of the aestheticist poet-critic is suggested by a key passage in his early poem “Gerontion”:
Think at last

We have not reached conclusion, when I

Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last

I have not made this show purposelessly

“As it is, there are to be no conclusions,” Eliot says of the method of Swinburne and Symons, and likewise here “not reached conclusion” means less “not yet come to the end” than “not established anything for sure”: not left our successors anything definite to proceed from. What follows can be understood as an alternative to this impasse: “Think at last / I have not made this show purposelessly” (though there is also an ambiguity here: he might have made “the show” with a purpose, an intention, that was never accomplished). Both thoughts, which like the rest of the thoughts in the poem are only transitory and temporary, are haunted by the desire to “think at last,” to produce what can be reproduced: a lasting, definitive, transmissible belief.

III.

On its own terms, Eliot’s psychologistic argument for the superiority of poet-critics like Swinburne and Symons — that poets make perfect critics because they are, on the whole, the most capable readers of poetry — is serviceable enough (and would remain so, at least until midcentury New Critical pedagogy attempted to inculcate in mere mortals the kind of exquisite formal sensitivity Eliot accorded only to practicing poets).
And however much his understanding of his own role as critic changed in the ensuing years, Eliot essentially adhered to the conclusions he reached in “The Perfect Critic” and “Imperfect Critics” regarding the relation of poets to criticism; he reasserts the faith in “The Function of Criticism” (1923), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), and “The Frontiers of Criticism” (1956).

But this theoretical conclusion about the priority of the poet-critic to the non-practitioner, once accepted, presented Eliot with a new kind of problem: one not of the exclusion of poets from the critical sphere but of their exploitation and exhaustion within it. In a way, Eliot’s strategy of displacing professional critics from their positions of authority worked far too well: for, having established that poets are better suited to supply criticism than the philosophers, academics, and professional journalists who had been supplying it, he realizes that he has transferred a tremendous amount of literary labor to the poet, thus threatening the real autonomy of writers in the interest of protecting the conceptual autonomy of literature. If “the creative artist … finds himself compelled … to spend much of his time and energy in criticism … simply because there is no one else to do it,” as Eliot suggests at the end of “Imperfect Critics,” then we have arrived at a whole new definition of “the creative artist” or, at least, a new job description, one that involves “compulsion” and, therefore, unfreedom. Such an arrangement might be good for poetry, in that it raises critical standards, and for criticism, in that it brings criticism that much closer to grasping the autonomous logic of genuine art, but it is, at best, a mixed blessing for actual poets, who are now burdened with a whole new set of tasks and responsibilities. The pithiest expression of the dilemma is given in the roughly contemporaneous “Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry,”
wherein Eliot laments that “either a reviewer is a bad writer and bad critic, and he ought not to be allowed to intervene between books and the public; or he is a good writer and good critic, and therefore ought not to be occupied in writing about inferior books” (7). Poets make perfect critics, in part because (since their passions are expended in creation, not in criticism) they are disinterested; but, by the same logic, they ought to have no real interest in pursuing criticism in the first place, preferring to focus their energies solely on creation. Too much diversion of that passionate energy — as in the case of poor Arthur Symons — would inevitably make them into very imperfect poets.¹⁹

Eliot’s most concerted attempt to resolve this structural contradiction in his vision of the proper role of the poet-critic comes in the essay “The Second-Order Mind,” first published in The Dial in 1920 and subsequently included as an untitled preface to The Sacred Wood. Just as “The Perfect Critic” and “Imperfect Critics” were, in part, attempts to come to terms with the legacies of Symons and Swinburne, “The Second-Order Mind” explicitly declares itself as an engagement with Matthew Arnold. From the essay’s first sentence, Eliot frames his remarks as a dramatic rapprochement with an old nemesis:

To anyone who is at all capable of experiencing the pleasures of justice, it is gratifying to be able to make amends to a writer whom one has vaguely depreciated for years … I hope that now, on re-reading some of his prose with more care, I can better appreciate his position. And what makes Arnold seem all

¹⁹ A parallel passage from “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” quoted by John Guillory in another connection: “We should see then just how little each poet had to do; only so much as would make a play his, only what was really essential to make it different from anyone else’s. When there is this economy of effort it is possible to have several, even many, good poets at once. The great ages did not perhaps produce more talent than ours; but less talent was wasted … When everything is set out for the minor poet to do, he may quite frequently come upon some trouvaille … Under the present conditions, the minor poet has too much to do.” (145; SW, 64).
the more remarkable is, that if he were our exact contemporary, he would find all his labour to perform again. (xi)

These belated “amends” — making use of a modernist *topos* of reconciliation with an alienated predecessor already established by Pound’s apostrophe to Whitman in his poem “A Pact” — come to terms with Arnold by historicizing him, dealing not just with his thought but, quite literally, with his “position” (implying a historical situation as well as a set of philosophical beliefs). This new, more “just” way of appreciating Arnold’s legacy, focusing on his abstract Sisyphean “labour” — much of it, as Eliot surely knew, administrative — rather than the particular content of his critical writings, proceeds by sympathetic projection, drawing an implicit analogy between Arnold’s late Victorian heyday and Eliot’s own post-Imagist, Georgian moment. (Note that Eliot instructs his reader to imagine Arnold as “our exact contemporary.”) It puts Arnold, in fact, more or less exactly in the position of Eliot circa 1920. To grasp the relationship between the two poet-critics in their respective historical situations, we can look at a passage that Eliot quotes, a little later in this same essay, from Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”:

[I]t has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of the century, had about it in fact something premature; and that from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs. And this
prematureness comes from having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient material to work with. In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough… (xi-xii)\(^2\)

Note that this is less a formal or ideological critique than an administrative one: Arnold reprimands the Romantics for “proceed[ing] without … proper data.” (Recall that Arnold was employed as one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools; the disappointed tone here is distinctly managerial.) In quoting this passage when and where he does, Eliot is implicitly comparing Arnold’s account of the English Romantics and the emerging popular consensus on English and American modernism: each movement had the “energy” but not the “material,” the force but not the culture, and because of this their “productions are doomed” not to be “lasting.” As Arnold is to the Romantics, so Eliot is to the “men of 1914”: a belated commentator rather than a participant, arriving slightly too late to the scene of literary revolution, admiring the energy of immediate predecessors but regretting that their “burst of creative activity” wasn’t better controlled by the guiding hand of cultivation and learning.

But rather than merely repeating Arnold’s claim for scholastic culture as a

\(^2\)A parallel paraphrase, from the lengthy section on Arnold in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: “he is in some respects the most satisfactory man of letters of his age … After the prophetic frenzies of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, he seems to come to us saying: ‘This poetry is very fine, it is opulent and careless, it is sometimes profound, it is highly original; but you will never establish and maintain a tradition if you go on in this haphazard way. There are minor virtues which have flourished better at other times and in other countries: these you must give heed to, these you must apply, in your poetry, in your prose, in your conversation and your way of living; else you condemn yourselves to enjoy only fitful and transient bursts of literary brilliance, and you will never, as a people, a nation, a race, have a fully formed tradition and personality’” (96-97). Again, the “prophetic frenzies” of the previous *fin-de-siècle* seem to have an obvious counterpart in the period of Symbolism and modernism.
correcting force for impetuous literary genius, Eliot turns the quotation back on its author, reflecting on Arnold’s own failure to make his critical “productions” last:

[Arnold’s] judgment of the Romantic Generation has not, so far as I know, ever been successfully controverted; and it has not, so far as I know, ever made very much impression on popular opinion. Once a poet is accepted, his reputation is seldom disturbed, for better or worse. So little impression has Arnold’s opinion made, that his statement will probably be as true of the first quarter of the twentieth century as it was of the nineteenth. (xii)

Here we have an administrative critique very much in the spirit of Arnold himself: Arnold emerges, in Eliot’s account, less as an ideological enemy than an ineffective manager. The popular post-Victorian conception of Arnold was that he sacrificed his poetic gift in order to become a critic and serve the ends of “culture”; Eliot, attracted as he was to the notion of self-sacrifice, is prepared to respect this, but still persists in pointing out that Arnold’s administrative project, in the long term, failed. “Culture,” in Arnold’s exalted sense, is no more secure in the England of the 1920s than it was in the England of the 1860s, when Arnold published Essays in Criticism and Culture and Anarchy. This is why Arnold, were he resurrected in 1920, “would find all his labour to perform again”: what Eliot is pointing to here is not the quality of the labor, or even the success or failure of the labor in its time, but the fact that it is not able to successfully reproduce itself as commonly held literary belief. The regret is double: regret that the truly energetic poetic movements (like the Romantics and the “men of 1914”) have
lacked the necessary critical culture to focus their potential, coupled with regret that when that focusing culture does arrive — always after the fact — its efforts are also largely wasted, because it lacks the means to ensure the permanent maintenance of its achievements. (As it is, there are to be no conclusions; the drum is beaten, but the procession does not advance.)

In such a situation, it is necessary for the responsible critic to become not just a critic but a “propagandist for criticism”: to justify the need for criticism, and for people of high aesthetic sensibility (such as poets) to practice it. In Eliot’s view, Arnold fulfilled this melancholy obligation, but the task kept him from the actual, constructive practice of criticism (which, in turn, kept him from his poetry):

In a society in which the arts were seriously studied, in which the art of writing was respected, Arnold might have become a critic … In Culture and Anarchy, in Literature and Dogma, Arnold was not occupied so much in establishing a criticism as in attacking the uncritical. The difference is that while in constructive work something can be done, destructive work must incessantly be repeated. (xiii)

In Eliot’s view, Arnold’s propaganda for criticism, however inevitable and necessary, was a waste of his talent, not just because it kept him from poetry or led him to enter into matters he was not qualified to address, but because it was necessarily temporary. As a program of action, it entailed primarily “destructive work” — the destruction of utilitarian misconceptions that literature should serve a clearly defined rational and social end — and this work, even when effective, does not last but “must
incessantly be repeated.” Thus, literary criticism becomes a kind of normative policing of literature’s wayward readership rather than an acculturating force directed toward the development of a lasting tradition.

Eliot had already written — and the reader of *The Sacred Wood* would soon read, in “The Perfect Critic,” the collection’s first essay — that “Arnold … was rather a propagandist for criticism than a critic, a popularizer rather than a creator of ideas” (1). In “The Second-Order Mind,” he adds the depressing caveat that Arnold’s reforms, reasonable as they were, failed to stick: “A moderate number of people have engaged in what is called ‘critical’ writing, but no conclusion is any more solidly established than it was in 1865” (xi). Criticism along Arnoldian lines is regarded as a Sisyphean task, an undertaking not even of criticism, but of *making criticism possible*. Worse, the principles of criticism established by Arnold, such as they were, were not even permanent: they were doomed to die out with his literary generation, and his would-be successors find they have “all his labour to perform again.”

IV.

Eliot’s protracted struggle with Arnold, which takes place over a series of texts, demonstrates his conflicting desires for the modern poet-critic, or, if you prefer, his puzzlement over a seemingly intractable social problem. On the one hand, he wants to reserve a privileged place in the English critical sphere for poets; on the other, he wants to protect poets from shouldering too much of the burden of critical labor. Arnold, despite his formidable taste and intellect, is not so much a role model as a cautionary tale: he
stands as the representative figure of the poet-critic’s potential martyrdom to the “journeyman-work of literature” (to borrow a phrase from Arnold’s “The Literary Influence of Academies”).

In the second half of “The Second-Order Mind,” Eliot does his best to solve the puzzle. Having made the distinction between poets and other kinds of critics, a further distinction is needed, within the fraction of poets who operate as poet-critics, to keep the truly individual talents from being crushed by an excess of critical labor. This produces a new set of terms for Eliot to manipulate in addition to “poet” and “critic”:

Not only is the critic tempted outside of criticism. The criticism proper betrays such poverty of ideas and such atrophy of sensibility that men who ought to preserve their critical ability for the improvement of their own creative work are tempted into criticism. I do not intend from this the usually silly inference that the “Creative” gift is “higher” than the critical. When one creative mind is better than another, the reason often is that the better is the more critical. But the great bulk of the work of criticism could be done by minds of the second order, and it is just these minds of the second order that are difficult to find. (xiv)

It is this insistence on a division of labor within a given era that marks Eliot’s difference from Arnold. The mode of thinking here moves from one influenced by Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history and its vision of successive epochs, each dominated by a Zeitgeist, to something closer to the concept of “organic solidarity” developed by Émile
Durkheim in his 1893 treatise The Division of Labor in Society. What Eliot is doing is folding Arnold’s diachronic schema of “critical” and “creative” eras into a synchronic whole: the claim is not that a quiescent critical epoch prepares the way for a revolutionary creative one, but that in any given era there should be some writers working primarily as critics, some as poets, and that both should share a common conception of the purpose and nature of literature, existing unequally, but harmoniously, in what Durkheim called “organic solidarity.”

Such a division of labor between “first” and “second-order minds” goes against the prevailing norms of England’s post-Romantic literary culture, criticized but not destroyed by Arnold, as Eliot recognizes: “It is a perpetual heresy of English culture to believe that only the first-order mind, the Genius, the Great Man, matters; that he is

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21 Eliot’s discomfort with Hegelianism is well known; consider these dismissive remarks from “The Perfect Critic”:

Finally Hegel arrived, and if not perhaps the first, he was certainly the most prodigious exponent of emotional systematization, dealing with his emotions as if they were definite objects which had aroused those emotions. His followers have as a rule taken for granted that words have definite meanings, overlooking the tendency of words to become indefinite emotions. (No one who had not witnessed the event could imagine the conviction in the tone of Professor Eucken as he pounded the table and exclaimed Was ist Geist? Geist ist...)

As for Durkheim, Eliot attended his lectures in Paris in the 1910s and reviewed The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, anonymously, for The Monist in 1916. (See Louis Menand and Sanford Schwartz, “T.S. Eliot on Durkheim: A New Attribution.”) Many aspects of Eliot’s subsequent critical project are distinctly Durkheimian; most strikingly, his subsequent elaboration of the theory of the “dissociation of sensibility” strongly resembles Durkheim’s concept of the conscience collective. (For an excellent analysis of the “dissociation of sensibility” thesis that does not mention Durkheim, see Kermode, Romantic Image, 164-191.) For an interesting recent reconsideration of Eliot’s relation to Hegel, see Brian Glaser, “Also F.H. Bradley: A Hegelian Reading of T.S. Eliot’s Negativity.”

22 A parallel passage from The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism may clarify: “I suppose that to many people the thought must have occurred, that at some periods when great poetry was written there was no written criticism; and that in some periods in which much criticism had been written the quality of the poetry has been inferior. This fact has suggested an antithesis between the critical and the creative, between critical ages and creative ages; and it is sometimes thought that criticism flourishes most at times when creative vigour is in defect. It is with such a prejudice in mind that people have coupled with ‘critical ages’ the adjective ‘Alexandrian.’” (10)
solitary, and produced best in the least favourable environment, perhaps the Public
School; and that it is most likely a sign of inferiority that Paris can show so many minds
of the second order” (xiv-xv). (The passing note of Francophilia is, incidentally, a nice
Arnoldian touch.) The emphasis in this passage should be placed not on “heresy” but on
“perpetual”: Eliot is identifying an English mode of thought that has perpetuated itself,
with (in his view) catastrophic effects for the national literary culture.

What Eliot seems to advocate, against Arnold’s Hegelian vision, is an artistic
division of labor arising out of Durkheimian organic solidarity: a social system in which
individuals perform different and highly specialized but interrelated functions, in which
they rely on each other’s expertise and skill, and benefit collectively from the effort of the
group. For the poet-critic to take on responsibility for the sensibility and quality of
thought of one’s entire epoch, as Arnold had, risked exhaustion and exploitation. It was
better, Eliot reasoned, to professionalize and accept a more limited responsibility,
focusing on maintaining standards and protecting the autonomy of literary practice. “The
Second-Order Mind,” in other words, marks a transition from an aesthetic and
psychological theory of the poet-critic to an economic and sociological one. Poet-critics
were not just the best practical judges of poetry, on account of their sensibilities; they
could become its best defenders, on account of their interests.

V.

The course of Eliot’s subsequent intellectual development as a critic follows from the
diagnosis of the English critical field that he completes in “The Second-Order Mind.”
Three years later, in another *Dial* essay, “The Function of Criticism” — a blatantly Arnoldian title, which significantly eschews the modesty of “at the Current Time” — he is even more alarmed about the state of English criticism, this time focusing not on its lack of aesthetic sensibility but on its disorder and violence: “Criticism, far from being a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity, from which impostors can be readily ejected, is no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators, who have not even arrived at the articulation of their differences” (69). Eliot, who had already begun the move to the right that would culminate in his infamous 1927 declaration that he was “an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics,” is joining together two rhetorical tendencies: a Burkean (and, indeed, Arnoldian) contempt for the unruliness of the democratic mob (“a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators”) and a rationalist demand for proper and administration and organization (“articulation of their differences”). The “field” of criticism in other words, begins to be looked at as a functional system in need of repair; and the poet-critic — who is, again, a disinterested professional, interested not in “contending” but in bringing order to the chaos — begins to feel the familiar administrative desire for a “simple and orderly field.”

In this field-in-the-making, poet-critics are still the most likely orators to succeed, but the rationale for their intrinsic superiority has changed; rather than emphasizing aesthetic sensitivity, it is the technical expertise of poet-critics that is stressed, and their interest in subjecting passions to reason. As Eliot himself admits, this is a less radical stance than the one taken in *The Sacred Wood*: “At one time I was inclined to take the extreme position that the only critics worth reading were the critics who practised, and
practised well, the art of which they wrote,” he recalls, but he has since “had to stretch
the frame to make some important inclusions.” What he appreciates now is not the
heightened sensibilities of poet-critics but their ability to discuss poetry rationally, coolly,
and disinterestedly: not their aesthetic passion, in other words, but their ability to contain
it. The highly specialized, technical character of the discussion of poet-critics, while
potentially off-putting to amateurs, is actually in the service of reaching the positive
“conclusions” that eluded the likes of Swinburne, Symons, and Arnold:

To the member of the Browning Study Circle, the discussion of poets about
poetry may seem arid, technical, and limited. It is merely that the practitioners
have clarified and reduced to a state of fact all the feelings that the member can
only enjoy in the most nebulous form; the dry technique implies, for those who
have mastered it, all that the member thrills to; only that has been made into
something precise, tractable, under control. (74)

We might say that Eliot has given up the psychological foundation on which he
originally constructed his defense of poet-critics, and built a new one based on an ethical
argument about the social value of professionalism:

The second-rate artist, of course, cannot afford to surrender himself to any
common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences
which are his distinction: only the man who has so much to give that he can forget
himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute … Here, one would suppose, was a place for quiet cooperative labour. The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks — tares to which we are all subject — and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment. (69)

The shift in rhetoric from the more individualist critiques of *The Sacred Wood* is quite significant: Eliot is speaking of poet-critics not as beings with an inherent superiority but as contributors to “cooperative labour” and a “common pursuit.” Indeed, while Eliot’s earlier defense of the poet-critic was built on an aestheticist psychologism — it was only those “rare, unpopular, and desirable” aesthetic sensibilities that could truly appreciate poetry, and these were likely to be both poets and critics — he now conceives of poets as something much more like a professional class who use criticism as a means to protect their interests, and to make a case for that interest as something desirable for everyone; closer, in fact, to that professional class of journalists, academics, and men of letters that the poet-critic originally sought to displace. The new theory is no less elitist — in both cases, an elite clerisy of poet-critics determines value, both of individual art-works and of the practice of art as a whole — but the *reasons* for the elite’s superiority are quite different: in the former case they are a different kind of person; in the latter, they have interests (the interest in regulating the world of art) that serve the common good.

This last point — a notion of the common good, brought about by a coordinated collective labor — is the most important addition of “The Function of Criticism”: it finds
a way of adding the element of solidarity missing from Eliot’s earlier artistic critique.

The “functional” poet-critics Eliot imagines in “The Function of Criticism” operate on a collective level; the arrogant individualism that plagues the likes of Symons, Swinburne, and Wilde is replaced by a kind of guild corporatism, in which each poet-critic looks out simultaneously for their own interests and for the interests of their professional group. This displaces the focus of criticism from individual aesthetic judgment to collective social justification: “The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks — tares to which we are all subject — and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment.” Autonomy and authenticity has not been rejected as goals, but their conquest has been reconceived as part of a collective project; while autonomy for the individual leads to isolation, a drive for collective autonomy among a group provides a powerful sense of cohesion and purpose. Indeed, Eliot’s rejection of individualism in “The Function of Criticism” is quite explicit:

For to those who obey the inner voice (perhaps “obey” is not the word) nothing that I can say about criticism will have the slightest value. For they will not be interested in the attempt to find common principles for the pursuit of criticism. Why have principles, when one has the inner voice? (72)

The need for that collective autonomy, and for “common principles” that would make its justification possible, is what Eliot established. In “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot, in the spirit of Durkheim’s “organic solidarity,” calls for a regulation of the social processes
that criticism has set in motion, and an end to violence and conflict. The agonistic, dialectical vision represented by “a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators” is rejected in favor of a “simple and orderly field of beneficent activity,” an agricultural figure we will find recurring again and again in the language of future modernist poet-critics.

But note that poetry itself, for Eliot, always escapes regulation: he advocates “principles” of criticism but not of poetry, which (Eliot will consistently maintain) must remain “autotelic.” Thus, in “The Function of Criticism,” he takes care to clarify that “art may be affirmed to serve ends beyond itself; but art is not required to be aware of those ends, and indeed performs its function, whatever that may be, according to various theories of value, much better by indifference to them” (32). It is exactly this last point that the other poet-critics discussed in this dissertation would question.
Picking and Choosing

“Distaste which takes no credit to itself is best.”

– Marianne Moore, “Snakes, Mongooses, Snake-Charmers, and the Like”

I.

In January of 1919, Marianne Moore wrote a letter — the first of many — to her fellow poet-critic Ezra Pound.23 Pound had initiated the correspondence after encountering some work Moore had submitted for publication in the Little Review, seeing in her work some similarities to his own. After politely deflating most of his conjectures (“The resemblance of my progress to your beginnings is but an accident so far as I can see,” she writes) she makes so bold as to advance an unsolicited opinion of Pound himself:

I have taken great pleasure in both your prose and your verse, but it is what my mother terms the saucy parts, which have most fixed my attention. In 1911, my mother and I were some months in England and happening into Elkin Matthews’s

23 For a thorough account and analysis of the correspondence between Pound and Moore, see Lois Bar-Yaccov’s “The Odd Couple: The Correspondence between Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, 1918-1939.”
shop, were shown photographs of you which we were much pleased to see. I like a fight but I admit that I have at times objected to your promptness with the cudgels. I say this merely to be honest. (122-123)

The whole passage has a typically Mooresque ambiguity of tone — the attention she pays to Pound and his work is decorous, flirtatious, and disapproving in equal measure — but the phrase that jumps out is the penultimate one, which characterizes not Pound but Moore herself: “I like a fight but I admit that I have at times objected to your promptness with the cudgels.” This qualified, partially self-negating criticism encapsulates a characteristic mode of Moore’s writing: what I will call her antagonism toward agonism. This is not the same as a simple abhorrence of confrontation or violence; after all, Moore admits that she does “like a fight,” and is also, not incidentally, picking a fight here, and with a formidable opponent, by “object[ing]” to his aggressive behavior. But the fact that Moore, at this relatively early stage of the development of modernism and of her own career, felt the need to register an objection, not to any particular attack of Pound’s but to his tendency to attack in general, is deeply significant.

Moore’s early tête-à-tête with Pound provides a rather neat, and surprisingly early, indication of the quality of their relationship — this was Pound and Moore’s first communication; they would not meet in person until 1939 — and of her relationship to her male modernist cohort as a whole. As with Pound, so it was with the poet-critics William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, and even Eliot: writers whose vitality and engagement Moore admired but whose aggression she could not. Moore had much invested in being regarded as a peer by these writers (as, in the main, she was), and
recognized that these men showed their mutual regard in large part by arguing passionately with one another.

Moore never fit easily into this quarrelsome modernist company: her criticism, unlike that of her contemporaries, seems allergic to argument, reluctant to take up or defend abstract positions, and to go in fear of negative evaluations and judgments. Yet just as she was obviously modernist in her aesthetics, despite her reluctance to disparage or abandon the modes of the nineteenth century, she was just as obviously a full-fledged poet-critic: her collected critical prose comes to much more than either Stevens’ or Williams’, for instance, and, as many have noted, seems more of a piece with her poetry than any of her contemporaries (with the possible exception of Pound): a random sentence of Moore’s — “The acknowledgment of our debt to the imagination, constitutes perhaps, its positive value,” for instance, or “Ecstasy affords the occasion and expediency determines the form” — could just as easily be drawn from her criticism as her poetry; the two corpuses mirror, complement, and inform each other.24 If Moore belongs among the other major modernist poet-critics of her era, how do we account for her extreme reluctance to enter the agon and annihilate (or anyway cudgel) her peers? Or, moreover, how did she account for it, and turn what would seem to be a fatal defect into a kind of strength?

24 The first sentence is taken from Moore’s 1921 review of Kora in Hell by William Carlos Williams (Complete Prose, 56); the second from “The Past is the Present,” a poem originally published in 1917.
II.

The strong sense of Moore’s oddity among her literary contemporaries, and the underdeveloped notion that it had something to do with her relation to criticism, is an old one. If we look to the earliest evaluations of Moore’s work, we find the key words “critical” and “criticism” employed over and over again. Mark Van Doren, for instance, reviewing Moore alongside Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anna Wickham under the heading “Women of Wit,” writes: “For better or worse, these women have contracted marriages with wit, have committed themselves to careers of brains … [Their poetry] is independent, critical, and keen, a product oftener of the faculties than of the nerves and heart; it is feminine; it is fearless; it is fresh” (33, emphasis mine). Similarly, the influential critic and anthologist Louis Untermeyer, in a 1923 piece entitled “Poetry or Wit?” speaks of Moore’s “highly intellectualized dissertations in the form of poetry” and states that “all of her work displays a surface of flickering irony, a nimble sophistication beneath which glitter the depths of a cool and continually critical mind” (47, emphasis mine).

As these excerpts suggest, an implied contrast between “critical” and “lyrical” poetry — already shadowed by an equivalent contrast between “masculine” and “feminine” temperaments — was crucial to early assessments of Moore’s writing. Some commentators even go so far as to suggest that Moore is claiming the wrong genre for her work. Untermeyer, for example, finds that “practically all the contents of Poems are essays in the disguise of verse, arguments or statements which seem continually to be seeking their prose origins … [T]he critical faculty predominates … [O]ne finds it
difficult to understand why this analyst writes so little in what seems to be her native medium” (49). Untermeyer’s dismissive assessment of Moore being out of her “native medium” betrays some of the familiar modernist suspicion about feminine writing, but with the terms oddly reversed: while much writing by women was rejected by modernist-era critics for being insufficiently tough or intellectual, Moore is taken to task as too clinical, too analytical, too oriented toward “arguments” and “statements” as opposed to the cognitively vague lyric utterances expected of a turn-of-the-century poetess.25

For her early readers, Moore appeared as a conspicuously “critical” poet, working in a mode unfamiliar in general, and especially surprising given the fact that she was a woman. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has observed, Moore was often paired in this connection with her contemporary Mina Loy, notably by Pound in a 1917 review that tagged both women as practitioners of “logopoeia” (defined as “a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas”). In contrast to the more conventionally feminine lyric writing that DuPlessis terms “poesy,” “a writer of logopoeia produces a poetry of ideas and wordplay, intellectual allusions made in poetry, dissenting resistant analytics, discursive gear stripping.” DuPlessis goes on to make a convincing argument for logopoeia as grounded in “a feminist analysis of the gender assumptions of lyric” arising from “poetry written from the subject position of the New Woman”: “The desire not for beauty but for diagnosis,” DuPlessis writes, “— a diagnosis that undercuts poesy — is most imperiously a diagnosis of poetry’s own gender assumptions” (77).

25 Demonstrating that disapproval of Moore’s “critical” poetic was not an exclusively masculine prejudice, Harriet Monroe, in her 1922 “Symposium on Marianne Moore” published in Poetry, writes that Moore’s “mood yields prose oftener than poetry … No amount of line-patterning can make anything but statement and argument out of many of the entries in this book” (38).
While DuPlessis is correct that Moore’s poetry was frequently faulted (and also, on occasion, admired) for its cold, critical, even unlyrical objectivity, it is interesting to observe that her critical writing was often accused of the opposite crime: viz., of being too sensitive, or impressionistic, or “poetic” in a stigmatized, feminized sense. Even otherwise sympathetic readers frequently advance this charge against Moore: Donald Hall, for example, describes her critical pieces as “impressionistic and unaimed,” and Bernard Engle damns them with faint praise by calling them “graceful presentations of observations and impressions, the kind of statement one might expect from a good reader rather than from a professional critic” (quoted in Martin, 33). While her poetry is often criticized as too intellectual and argumentative, Moore’s criticism tends to be seen as just the opposite: graceful and sensitive but lacking in intellectual rigor, innocuous and a little old-fashioned, as well as fatally reluctant to advance clear positions or offer negative judgments. Perhaps the harshest assessment of Moore’s criticism along these lines is also

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26 Even critics more enamored of Moore’s poetry tend to emphasize her intellectuality and austerely “critical” disposition. Yvor Winters, for example, calls her a “genius,” but also states that “[t]his exacting moralist, who enforces with such intricate resonance the profound convictions of her ethical and emotional fastidiousness, has dumfounded [sic] most of those readers whom she has not completely subjugated” and remarks on “the painfully sharp observation with which she scrutinizes everything — animals, persons, and ideas. Her control of what one might call the visual epigram is appalling” (64-66). Similarly, in his 1925 review of Observations Aldington describes her as “the best poet now living in America” but also claims that “Miss Moore’s poetry is entirely intellectual” and quails with terror before her critical judgment:

The most prominent quality of Miss Moore’s work is a whimsical and sophisticated irony … This, of course, gives her a most menacing superiority; one is conscious of a clear piercing gaze and an unfavourable judgment of oneself somehow emanating from the pages. Instinctively one straightens one’s tie and tries hard to rub up a claim to something more than insignificance. I always feel I ought to apologise for having the presumption to read Miss Moore’s poems; and at the thought that I am actually trying to review them the pen trembles in my hand. (In fact, I am so frightened of Miss Moore that I am making an awful hash of this article.) (74-75)
one of the earliest, published by Gorham B. Munson in his 1928 book *Destinations* while Moore was still serving as editor of *The Dial*:

The critic must be ambitious and Miss Moore is not. She attempts to make no more than a sensitive impressionistic sketch of her reading, a sketch that is always liberally studded with quotations from the author under review, and carries a valuable sentence or two of acute technical understanding for good measure. The quotations are ably selected for the object she has in mind, which is to give the “flavor” of the author. But, after all, the “flavor” is in the book and each reader of it may garner his own impressions. The critic must do more than that. At any rate, he should not be backward about handling ideas. (99-100)

In contrast to an ideal “ambitious” critic (conspicuously gendered male, as are the “poet” and the “editor” elsewhere in Munson’s essay), Moore is “no more” than “sensitive” and “impressionistic,” and is by implication “backward” when it comes to the supra-aesthetic business of “handling ideas.”

The condescension and sexism underlying remarks like Engel’s, Hall’s and Munson’s is blatant enough not to need much underlining, but they do index the degree to which Moore’s sense of the relation between poetry and criticism was out of step with prevailing tastes in early twentieth-century literary discourse. The 1910s, when Moore began making her reputation, was already an age of poet-critics: Pound, Eliot, Williams and a host of others were almost as devoted to bringing a new, more exacting, specific, argumentative and agonistic style to literary criticism as they were in finding new forms
for poetry. In an era that saw many modernists repudiating the legacies of “impressionism” and “aestheticism” as part of a larger intellectual revolt against Victorianism and the American genteel tradition, Moore was continually vulnerable to the charge of being outdated, old-fashioned, or behind the times, qua critic if not qua poet. 27

I argue that these symmetrical tendencies in Moore’s reception — the tendency to view her poetry as unusually (or fatally) “critical” and the tendency to view her criticism as unusually (or fatally) “poetic” — are something more than misunderstandings; that, in fact, they point to something that later and otherwise more generous and sophisticated readings of Moore’s poetry and criticism neglect. 28 This picture of Moore as at once “too critical” for poetry and “too poetic” for criticism, while inadequate as a qualitative judgment on one or both sides of her practice as a poet-critic, does call attention to the deep-seated ambivalence toward critical agonism and, more broadly, toward all forms of negative affect — what the theorist Sianne Ngai has lately termed “ugly feelings” — that Moore manifested throughout her writing career. In fact, Moore was at times somewhat more than ambivalent toward the ugly feelings of agonism and negativity: she was openly

27 Again, as in the case of Moore’s poetry, the more sympathetic accounts only soften the judgments of the negative ones. In his 1956 review of Predilections entitled “Likings of an Observationist,” for instance, Moore’s old Dial colleague Kenneth Burke writes that “[h]er critical ‘predilections’ are the perfect analogue of her poetic ‘observations.’ She shifts so naturally between the liber scriptus of art and the liber vivus of nature, one is never quite sure whether her subject is personal conscience or poetic imagination” (125). This “natural” vagueness — “one is never quite sure” — is implicitly opposed to the technical precision of the academically dominant New Criticism, with which Burke was loosely allied: Moore, on the other hand, “can infuse an almost pedantic literalness with the moodiness of impressionistic criticism” (127).

28 A brief overview of the most important criticism on Moore in the past thirty years would have to include Bonnie Costello’s Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions; Grace Schulman, Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement; Cristanne Miller, Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority; and Linda Leavell, Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color. All present sensitive, informed readings of Moore’s criticism but, to my mind, smooth over the anxious relationship between the criticism and the poetry by reading them as too mutually consistent.
antagonistic toward them, an apparent paradox that I will do my best to resolve over the course of this essay. Both of Moore’s signature styles — her (too-) critical poetry and her (too-) poetic criticism — have their root in a single, complex desire: to avoid an overt posture of agonism without sacrificing the critical agency associated with negative judgment. To satisfy this desire, she must move through three distinct phases, which I will examine in the readings that follow: first, a working out of the consequences of her constitutional antagonism toward agonism (as represented by the poem “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity”); second, an intermediate identification with the passive, self-pleasing connoisseur over the active, domineering critic (an identification explored in the pivotal “Critics and Connoisseurs”); and, finally, the discovery of a new social role she can play, that of editor, a role that preserves some of the active authority and prestige of the agonistic poet-critic without forcing her to compromise her natural reticence (articulated through my readings of her mature poems “Picking and Choosing” and “When I Buy Pictures”).

III.

Moore was aware of the occasional annoyance her oblique critical style engendered. In the 1958 article “Subject, Predicate, Object,” for instance, she writes: “I have been accused of substituting appreciation for criticism, and justly, since there is nothing I dislike more than the exposé or any kind of revenge” (504). Such reticence can look like mere good manners, but I submit that there is more at work in such statements than a tactful, courtly aversion to causing offense or doing harm, even if Moore herself,
especially towards the end of her life, often put her work in just these moralistic terms. Moore’s antagonistic attitude toward agonism well predates her old age, and goes far beyond mere tact or politesse. And Moore did indeed, as she put it to Pound, “like a fight”; as numerous items in her poetic oeuvre (from “To Military Progress” and “Reinforcements” to “In Distrust of Merits” and “Combat Cultural”) attest, she was fascinated by violence, warfare, argument, opposition, and critique — in other words, by agonism in all its forms.

Why, then, did Moore become increasingly uncomfortable with taking up any kind of agonistic or openly aggressive critical stance herself? Helen Vendler has posited a gradual change in Moore’s attitude toward agonism, noting that her “early poems … are the work of a girl who knows what she likes, and knows even more what she dislikes” but speculating that “after 1918, when [Moore] and her mother moved to New York, she lost her isolation and, with it … some measure of her gift for despair, dismissiveness, and denunciation” (62; 59). Vendler also notes that Moore’s first published critical pieces are closer in spirit to the sharp-edged early poetry: “Her early reviews in *The Dial* display the same short way with fools exercised in the early poems” (64). As the years went on,  

29 Besides Vendler’s essay, there are a number of interesting considerations of the early Moore in light of this question of critical agonism. Robert Pinsky and, closer to Moore’s own time, her friend Glenway Wescott both relate the agonism of her early poems to the poems’ “social” content: that is, their concern with socializing and the practice of socialization. Thus Wescott: “These perceptions belong chiefly to the domain which is called ‘social’: domain of encounters, where the consciousness meets with episodes or objective creatures. An untrampled field of experience presents itself to Miss Moore’s unquailing and untroubled stare” (42); and Pinsky, on “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity”: “Moore can write in the mode of colloquy without writing colloquially … The poem is indeed about conversation that does not take place, words that are withheld, language as a social weapon that goes unused except in Moore’s powerful imagination … Moore’s ambivalent attraction to the idea of communal life expresses itself, then teasingly cancels itself, characteristically, in a conversation that is not conversation … [Her] two most characteristic rhetorical modes, apostrophe and quotation, amount to a kind of parody, or at
however, Moore’s mixed feelings about agonistic negativity led her toward a certain trademark indirection in her prose style. Her biographer Charles Molesworth notes that, in her “Comment” columns for The Dial in the late 1920s, “she very frequently had recourse to double negatives: ‘it is not disappointing not to know,’ ‘not all of it is without usefulness,’ ‘it is not impossible not to be ashamed,’ ‘a superiority … need not be even to uncommercial eyes, illiterate…’ and so forth” (232) — a catalogue that could easily be extended much further. Moore herself, in a 1961 interview with Donald Hall, admitted her weakness for double negatives: “I don’t approve of my ‘enigmas,’ or as somebody said, ‘the not ungreen grass’” (31). Whether as a conscious rhetorical device or an unconscious tic, the double negative offered itself to Moore as a way to register possible or potential disagreement — and thus preserve the force of an active, selective critical intelligence — without actually landing a blow, and thus opening herself up to potential counter-attack.

As with Moore’s “poetic” criticism, so with her “critical” poetry: as Vendler observes, many of Moore’s early poems are marked by a strong distaste for male figures who are more or less aggressive and critical, and who impinge on the comfort and self-

least a blatantly artificial reconstruction, of discourse between people” (14). Taking a somewhat different tack, Sandra Gilbert notes the “overt misandry” of Moore’s 1915 poems (including “To Statecraft Embalmed,” “To A Steam Roller,” and “To the Soul of Military Progress”) given that the objects of her satire are typically male, a stance she relates to her view of Moore as a “female female impersonator” (35). Cristanne Miller, finally, relates the early Moore’s fascination with agonism to the context of World War I, positing a “general shift in Moore’s poetic” away from the riddling satires of unpleasant men and towards more ethically complex understanding of agonism (Leavell, Critics, 57).

30 The “somebody” in question is most likely George Orwell, who in his 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” wrote: “One can cure oneself of the not un- formation by memorizing this sentence: A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field” (283). It is interesting, but characteristic, that Moore would contrast her own tendency to indirection with such a fierce polemicist as Orwell.
confidence of others, often unwittingly, by their open exercise of these faculties. (As a subtly devastating couplet in 1923’s “Marriage” states: “men have power / and sometimes one is made to feel it.”) Notably, however, Moore’s poetic engagement with these obnoxious men is as likely to be tinged with admiration, or even envy, of their formidable critical powers as it is with righteous anger or pious disapproval. The capacity for critical agonism, in other words, is something that they have and she lacks: and whether or not she wants to have it, the lack is always registered.

In the chapter on “Envy” in her *Ugly Feelings*, which develops Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic concept of “envy” from her 1957 paper “Envy and Gratitude,” Sianne Ngai points out that “envy lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities, even though it remains the only agonistic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object” (128). (She also notes the pervasive “feminization and moralization of envy,” which often causes it to appear as a less efficacious affect than anger or hatred: “forms of negative affect are more likely to be stripped of their critical implications when the impassioned subject is female,” 130.) But for Ngai, envy, far from being a petty or self-defeating “ugly feeling,” is a highly productive affect for criticism, one which allows the subject — and particularly the female subject — to negotiate relations with objects that would ordinarily be emulated and admired and arrive at an independent critical stance toward them: “envy enables a strategic way of not identifying which … preserves a critical agency whose loss is threatened by full-blown idealization of the attribute admired … precisely in order to convert her admiration into polemicism, qua critical force or agency” (161). We see something like Ngai’s “strategic way of not identifying” operating in Moore’s “To Be
“Attack is more piquant than concord,” but when

You tell me frankly that you would like to feel

My flesh beneath your feet,

I’m all abroad; I can but put my weapon up, and

Bow you out.

Gesticulation — it is half the language.

Let unsheathed gesticulation be the steel

Your courtesy must meet,

Since in your hearing words are mute, which to my senses

Are a shout. (79)

Like many of Moore’s poems from this period, “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity” narrates a tense intersubjective encounter — perhaps social, perhaps literary, most likely some combination of both — between a well-behaved, intelligent individual (presumably female) and a brash, steamrolling, cudgel-wielding one (presumably male). Faced with his “frank” threats, the speaker is not “all aboard” (comfortable or “on board” with his aggressive behavior) but rather “all abroad” (perhaps
far away, perhaps raising a broadsword, perhaps momentarily reduced to a mere girl or “broad”).

But while the speaker’s dislike of her companion is the most immediate impression given by the poem, there are other affects circulating under the surface as well. The poem alludes obliquely to Thomas Hardy’s novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Robin Schulze informs us in her indispensable *Becoming Marianne Moore*, in which “the inexperienced young heroine, Elfride Swancourt, finds herself attracted to Harry Knight, an austere, sharp-tongued intellectual” whose “‘piquant snubbings’” she secretly enjoys (218). From the subtle play between Moore’s text and its intertext we may gather that the speaker does after a fashion *admire* her attacker, in a way analogous to Elfride Swancourt in Hardy’s novel. Unlike Elfride, however, Moore’s speaker is not merely succumbing to her masochistic admiration, but attempting to convert it into a viable critical stance of her own. She does this by describing herself as a warrior opposed to war — a strategy that seems paradoxical until we read it through the affective prism of critical envy. Because, in the social world the young Moore inhabited (the new world, that is, of literary and artistic modernism), “attack is more piquant than concord” — that is, disagreement between worthy adversaries is regarded as more interesting and desirable than consistent, convivial agreement between friends — her speaker inevitably envies the agonist she confronts: she imagines having her own “weapon” to “put up” in emulation of his.

Clearly, envy performs some very useful psychological work here, allowing Moore to reach a new position *vis-à-vis* agonism, one that neither completely accepts nor rejects its terms. Glossing Klein’s theory of envious aggression, Ngai suggests that “envy would facilitate a transition from desire to antagonism that might enable me to articulate
what I have been trained to admire as something possibly threatening or harmful to me” (163). But because the quality here acknowledged, envied, and ultimately “spoiled” (to adopt another Kleinian term) is agonism itself, the speaker’s response is a silent one, her weapon “unsheathed gesticulation” rather than brandished speech. The poem’s curious portrait of a passive, “mute” aggression expresses an early version of Moore’s trademark antagonism toward agonism, an affect that emerges, via the mediation of envy, from a previous, or simultaneous, attraction to it. “To Be Liked By You…” skirts the calamity of the speaker herself identifying too closely with the aggressor she both hates and envies, and thus becoming an aggressor herself; she does this by borrowing the aggressor’s mode — a liking for a fight — but refusing to fight on the same terms.

IV.

This was not easy for Moore to balance: a desire for full mutual engagement with her hostile male contemporaries such as the agon provides, coupled with an innate distaste for agonistic confrontation. The perceptible strain of Moore’s affective position in early poems like “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity” mirrors the difficulties of the enigmatic qualifications and double negatives in her critical writing. In her early career Moore was searching for a way to engage the burgeoning society of modernist poet-critics on her own terms, and to acknowledge its spirit of critical agonism without fully accepting that critical disposition for herself. Nowhere is this more evident than in her prose, which she modeled after Victorian and Edwardian men of letters like Ruskin.
and Saintsbury rather than imitating the more “piquant” French critics admired by Pound and Eliot such as Sainte-Beuve and Rémy de Gourmont. Moore of course realized that the nineteenth-century discourses of impressionism and appreciation that were so influential on her critical writing were coming to be seen as outmoded, but she felt unwilling to give them up if the alternative was open “combat cultural” modeled on political or philosophical argument. She understood that the heated exchanges on aesthetic, political, and personal matters between male modernists like Pound, Eliot, Williams, Munson, and Burke (whose temperature owed much to the even more violent controversies common in French literary society) were essential to the process of mutual solidarity and communal self-definition. Yet she herself refrained from polemic in all but the most oblique, indirect ways.

But if Moore neglected to enter into these violent modernist debates, she was certainly aware of them, and indeed strongly affected by them. Her poem “Critics and Connoisseurs” can be read as an early presentation of her mixed feelings about agonism, aesthetics, and the social practice of criticism: a retreat from the charged encounter of “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity” to the safer, but less exciting, world of pure aesthetic contemplation.

“Critics and Connoisseurs” was first published in July 1916 in Others, a little magazine published out of Grantwood, New Jersey that served as Moore’s primary publication outlet prior to the 1920s. The ethos of Others, while not defined precisely, was in the main radical, bohemian and progressive, seeking to cultivate opposition to the American status quo more than boosting any one aesthetic tendency: “its poets defined
themselves as outsiders,” as Suzanne Churchill puts it, and maintained a basically agonistic stance not only toward the existing American literary culture but also toward society in general (48). In this charged context, “Critics and Connoisseurs” strikes a rather equivocal note:

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious fastidiousness. Certain Ming products, imperial floor coverings of coach wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen something that I like better — a mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal stand up, similar determination to make a pup eat his meat on the plate.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford with flamingo colored, maple-leaflike feet. It reconnoitered like a battle
ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the staple ingredients in its disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was not proof against its proclivity to more fully appraise such bits of food as the stream bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it to eat. I have seen this swan and I have seen you; I have seen ambition without understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand by an ant hill, I have seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick, north, south, east, west, till it turned on itself, struck out from the flower bed into the lawn, and returned to the point from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as
useless and overtaxing its
jaws, with a particle of whitewash pill-like but
heavy, it again went through the same course of procedure. What is
there in being able
to say that one has dominated the stream in an
attitude of self-defense,
in proving that one has had the experience
of carrying a stick? (77-78)

“Critics and Connoisseurs,” while formally experimental enough to consort well
with the rest of the material included in *Others*, is a very strange match for the magazine
in terms of tone. 31 While the contributors to *Others* typically took a provocatively

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31 Moore’s first poem explicitly on the subject of aesthetic judgment was also, as Linda Leavell
notes, itself an aesthetic breakthrough: the appearance of “the first fully realised Moore stanza”
(72). In other words, according to Leavell’s sensitive reading, the theme of the poem echoes its
form: “‘Unconscious fastidiousness’ … describes the paradoxical nature of Moore’s stanza that
she was just perfecting at the time she wrote ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’” (167). This is important
because it links Moore herself, qua poet, to the “critics and connoisseurs” she discusses, a point
that has not been self-evident to Moore scholars. In *The Poetry of Engagement*, for instance,
Grace Schulman reads the poem as an outright allegorical attack on shallow sophistication: “As in
the fable, there is a moral: ‘ambition without understanding’ is futile. An ant in the speaker’s
memory, like the unenlightened swan, is unable to learn from past experience and carries heavy
burdens though it knows the procedure is useless … [T]he swan and ant … embody the condition
of being the dense pretenders of the title” (37; 53). This excessively negative reading of the poem
seems unwarranted, however, when one considers the degree of appreciation that the speaker has
for the fastidiousness (both conscious and unconscious) of the swan and the ant, and her
admission that “[t]here is a great amount of poetry” in their movements. Leavell is closer to the
mark when she claims that “[m]ost critics do themselves an injustice when they give it [the
poem’s opening lines] the negative interpretation, ‘There is no poetry in the conscious
fastidiousness of critics and connoisseurs’ … [W]hen she describes the fastidiousness of the swan
agonistic stance toward traditional literary culture, the speaker of “Critics and Connoisseurs” is at best ambivalent about all such stances. The poem is a fable about criticism, and a meditation on two different ways of experiencing an art work, ways that are allegorically associated with the critic and the connoisseur, or the swan and the ant, respectively. At the same time as the poem exhibits Moore’s typical fascination with agonistic criticism, there is a sense that the speaker fundamentally distrusts the motives of those who “dominate… the stream in an / attitude of self-defense,” like the Oxonian swan she describes (and who I am arguing represents the “critic” as opposed to the “connoisseur”). The swan, despite its confidence and elegance, is ultimately mercenary and self-interested: presented with a piece of food, it gives up its strategic position and cynically “[makes] away with what I gave it to eat.”

Nothing could be further from this extravagant display of agonism than the actions of the ant, associated throughout with the “connoisseur.” Where the swan acts strategically, the ant goes unthinkingly through the motions: we’ve moved from a headmaster dictating rules to a dutiful student undertaking a “course of procedure.” (The description of the “particle of whitewash” as “pill-like” also suggests a child obediently taking his medicine.) Moore’s sympathy for hard-working students is well known, and I find it hard to read her evocation of the ant’s pointless industriousness as anything but admiring. While its idiotic ritual of appreciation is also, in the final analysis, a form of intellectual “ambition without understanding,” Moore greatly prefers it to the swan’s crafty critical maneuvering.

and ant in ‘Critics and Connoisseurs,’ she also speaks with admiration, qualified only by the fact that she likes unconscious fastidiousness better” (165).
So there is a significant distinction being made between the “critic” and the “connoisseur,” despite their common trait of “ambition without understanding,” one which has apparently eluded some of Moore’s best commentators. The “critic” is consciously fastidious (like the swan dominating the stream in an attitude of self-defense), while the “connoisseur” is unconsciously fastidious (like the ant carrying the stick to no apparent purpose). The swan/critic, in other words, corresponds closely to the disagreeable figures in Moore’s barbed early poems, while the ant/connoisseur, while recognized as bearing a close similarity to the critic, is closer to the veiled self-portraits of her later work (like “The Pangolin” or “Elephants”). Both are examples of “ambition without understanding,” but there is only one of these “forms” that Moore herself wants to wholly disclaim: the aggressive, reconnoitering critic.

One might say, then, that Moore is associating herself with the lesser of two evils here, pledging allegiance to the unconsciously fastidious, habitually discerning practice of the connoisseur rather than the consciously fastidious, purposive activity of the critic. (The perfect attitude to art, of course, would be held by the artist or poet, a role the unfailingly self-deprecating Moore is unwilling to claim for herself, even under cover of allegory.) And we already know the answer to the final rhetorical question — “What is / there in being able / to say that one has dominated the stream in an / attitude of self-defense, / in proving that one has had the experience / of carrying a stick?” — by virtue of the way it echoes the first line of the poem: “there is a great amount of poetry in” these things. Moore is, in effect, claiming even these agonistic critical habits, along with more congenial “connoisseurship,” for the cause of poetry, or the poet, while at the same time
making a clear distinction: these habits are not themselves poetry, though there is a great amount of poetry in them.

But the other, idiomatic meaning of “what is there in it” also asserts itself in the poem’s final sentence: as in “what’s the point of it?” Here Moore’s essential skepticism about the public assertion of aesthetic judgment reemerges, and here is where there is a final subtlety in the poem’s argument, again unnoticed by most commentators. My contention is that the entire final sentence of the poem describes only the critic’s attitude, even though it borrows from the imagery previously used in connection with the connoisseur (“carrying a stick”). In other words, “proving one has had the experience” is what the critic, not the connoisseur, does. Critics not only have aesthetic experiences, but must also labor to prove they’ve had them; whereas connoisseurs simply have, and cultivate having, such experiences, to no purposive end and with no desire for a posteriori justification or demonstration. While it may seem that Moore is keeping up the symmetry between swan and ant of the previous passages, she is in fact emphasizing a fundamental asymmetry in the comparison: both critics and connoisseurs approach works of art in the same way (ambitiously, without understanding), but only the critic feels the need to provide proofs of aesthetic experience after the fact.

All of these conceptual tensions are very elegantly resolved within the parameters of “Critics and Connoisseurs” itself; like all allegories, it has a pleasing completeness to it once deciphered. But Moore’s connoisseurial solution to the problem of agonism raised serious problems for her with regard to the larger project of modernist sociability that was, by 1916, rapidly gaining momentum. The relevant issue is this: if Moore does
indeed identify herself with the unconsciously fastidious connoisseur, in an era in which
the agonistic poet-critic was starting to become a de rigueur modernist persona, does that
make her not quite a modernist — or even not quite a poet, if being a poet means being
recognized by one’s peers as such? This is the unsettling concern lurking beneath the
smooth surface of “Critics and Connoisseurs”: that is, is connoisseurship a role in which
there is only “a great amount of poetry,” but which is not in fact productive of poetry
itself? Furthermore, what social place can the connoisseur — who is firmly committed to
art but not necessarily to writing or reasoning about art — have in an increasingly public,
exchange-based cultural economy? By eschewing an agonistic stance, Moore stands to
forfeit her place in the modernist public sphere of mutual interaction entirely. However
much she disapproved of their strikes and maneuvers, their battleship-like reconnoitering,
Moore must have seen that the adversarial stances and agonistic habits of writers like
Pound and Williams and little magazines like Others facilitated sociability and solidarity
among modernist writers, and even, in a certain sense, constituted modernism, a
movement unified by its metadiscourses and its social affiliations and tensions as much
as by its aesthetic characteristics. Being who she was, Moore could not participate in this
form of agonistic sociability to the same extent as her peers. Beyond her personal ethical
reservations, there were of course other obstacles to her assumption of the mantle of the
poet-critic: her gender and her Presbyterian religious background made it difficult for her
to be as comfortably aggressive as some of her male peers. Yet to abjure any relation to
the new society of modernist poet-critics that was being formed, in large part, through
agonistic debate and mutual self-criticism would have been disastrous for Moore as a
relative newcomer to that world. Her solution was to maintain a crucial relation to these
arguments and interactions, but not an agonistic or “critical” one: namely, that of
managing editor. This change of vocation — from poet-critic to poet-editor — brings
Moore to the third and final phase of her antagonism toward agonism.

V.

It is significant, however, that when Moore finally began to get involved in the
editorial side of a little magazine in the early 1920s, it was not the one that had been
publishing her work consistently for years but a periodical much closer to her own
concerns. While Others offered free rein to her experimental tendencies, Kreymborg’s
magazine was far more adversarial and agonistic in tone than Moore wanted to be by
1920. Given this situation, it’s not at all surprising that in the early 1920s Moore began to
move away from Others and toward The Dial as a more appropriate forum for her
work. Recently acquired by Scofield Thayer and Sibley Watson, The Dial was in this
period sloughing off its old identity as a progressive political organ (from 1918 to 1921 it
printed John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Randolph Bourne and Lewis Mumford) and
refashioning itself as America’s premier journal of “pure” art and literature.32 If Others
tended toward the agonistic, The Dial was devoutly pluralistic: indeed, as historian
Nicholas Joost puts it, “its pluralism that occasionally seemed to amount to indifference
to the values of opposing ideas” (112). Put simply, it refused to take positions in matters

32 For a useful overview of the transfer of editorial power at The Dial during this period, see
Nicholas Joost, Scofield Thayer and The Dial: An Illustrated History, 3-23. A less detailed
account is given in William Wasserstrom’s The Time of the Dial, 57-82.
of aesthetics or politics, much less to defend such positions or elaborate them at length. For this reason, the new *Dial* was immediately mistrusted by two sets of important potential allies: on the one hand, political progressives like Mumford and Dewey who would have liked to see it take a more definite ideological stance; and on the other, representatives of the artistic and literary avant-garde who disliked its lack of critical policy and its hospitality to pre-modernist literature. But despite critiques of this kind, Catholicity of taste continued to be the *Dial’s* modus operandi, a fact they proudly proclaimed in an “Announcement” of June 1925: “We did not, and do not, deem that it is feasible, in aesthetic matters, to judge by reference to any detailed theoretic code” (89). The *Dial’s* resistance to theory, at least as a determining factor on aesthetic judgment, was implacable.

A partial reconstruction of this contentious social context can help account for the intriguing defensiveness of Moore’s poems from the early 1920s, and the difficulty

33 An eloquent spokesman for the latter is the aforementioned Gorham Munson, who in the first issue of his little magazine *Secession* makes the case against *The Dial* with his usual stridency:

*The Dial* is, I suppose, generally considered to be America’s leading magazine of literary expression. One critic has even called it the recognized organ of the young generation! … What, then, is our “leader” like? It boasts: “We have freed ourselves from commercialism and manifestos, from schoolmen and little schools, from a little nationalism and a snobbish cosmopolitanism.” That is, it has freed itself from a fixed point for judging, the absence of which for morality Pascal found so lamentable, but which happily exists for art. It has liberated itself from a definite direction. It feels no obligation to homogeneity. Naturally, its chief effect is one of diffuseness. It is late Victorian, Yellow Book, philosophic, naturalistic, professorial, dadaistic, traditional, experimental, wise, silly, international and nationally concerned in a developing literature. … A stringent catholicity is admirable, but where is the reconciliation here? With this array of irreconcilables, it is no wonder a copy of the *Dial* gives the impression of splitting apart in one’s hand. (22)

Munson’s contempt for *The Dial’s* aesthetic neutrality — its air of being above the fray, and lack of need for “a fixed point for judging” or “a definite direction” — joins together the progressive and the avant-garde critiques of the magazine’s evolution into a single blast.
today’s readers have in converting them without remainder into universal *artes poeticae* or *criticae*. Moore, herself in transition from an early interest in women’s suffrage and progressive politics to a more explicitly aestheticist phase (and, ultimately, a more conservative political position as well), was certainly in tune with Thayer and Watson’s editorial intentions. It is especially appropriate that Moore’s first appearance in *The Dial* in April 1920 was with “Picking and Choosing,” a poem that imagines aesthetic judgment as an act of individual selection rather than agonistic contention:

> Literature is a phase of life: if
>
> one is afraid of it, the situation is irremediable; if
>
> one approaches it familiarly,
>
> what one says of it is worthless. Words are constructive when they are true; the opaque allusion — the simulated flight
>
> upward — accomplishes nothing. Why cloud the fact that Shaw is selfconscious in the field of sentiment but is otherwise re-

warding? that James is all that has been

said of him, if *feeling* is profound? It is not Hardy the distinguished novelist and Hardy the poet, but one man
“interpreting life through the medium of the

emotions.” If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that the
critic should know what he likes. Gordon Craig with his “this is I” and “this is mine,” with his three
wise men, his “sad French greens” and his Chinese cherries — Gordon Craig, so
inclinational and unashamed — has carried

the precept of being a good critic, to the last extreme;

and Burke is a

psychologist — of acute, raccoon-

like curiosity. *Summa diligentia*;

to the humbug, whose name is so amusing — very young and ve-

ry rushed, Caesar crossed the Alps on the “top of a
diligence.” We are not daft about the meaning but this familiarity

with wrong meanings puzzles one. Humming-

bug, the candles are not wired for electricity.

Small dog, going over the lawn, nipping the linen and saying
that you have a badger — remember Xenophon;

only the most rudimentary sort of behaviour is necessary
to put us on the scent; a right good

salvo of barks,” a few “strong wrinkles” puckering the

skin between the ears, are all we ask. (97-98)

While this poem (once one has tracked down the references) seems at first blush to be self-sufficient enough without need of a wider context beyond what Moore herself provides, it in fact benefits greatly from its reinsertion into the very specific social milieu of The Dial and its editorial policies. “Picking and Choosing,” while posing as a statement of general principle, expresses The Dial’s particular form of aesthetic connoisseurship, and can even be read as a proleptic statement of purpose for Moore’s own editorial activities there (or even, if you like, as an early audition for the job). I contend that Moore is writing not just about her subjective preferences, or even about the process of selection necessarily involved in criticism, but about the kind of “picking and choosing” that has immediate and concrete effects on the composition of literary society.

Regarding the poem from this angle, one sees more readily why the editor of a prominent and closely scrutinized magazine might be “afraid” of literature, or resist “approach[ing] it familiarly” — that is, with preconceptions or favoritism. The maxim “Words are constructive when they are true,” similarly, has a different resonance when
applied to a rejection note than to a critical statement. At the same time that Moore reserves the right to judge negatively, however, she is also marking distance between The Dial’s ideal of criticism and the more theoretical, agonistic mode favored by Pound, Williams, and the Others group. Against them and their brand of vigorous critique, Moore posits the British theater designer and critic Gordon Craig, “so / inclinational and unashamed — has carried / the precept of being a good critic, to the last extreme.” Here Moore appears to be advocating a subjective, evaluative, “inclinational and unashamed” criticism over a more objective, analytical one: “If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that the / critic should know what he likes.”

“Picking and Choosing” concludes with the speaker’s proud refusal to fully justify or rationalize her subjective aesthetic judgments: judgments of taste, or editorial

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34 We shouldn’t allow ourselves to be overly distracted, as several Moore scholars have been, by the conspicuous references to Shaw, James and Hardy. While the selection of these particular writers has been read as an expression of Moore’s own debt to them, I read the list primarily as indicating Moore’s refusal to bow to previously established literary authority in her judgments. (She would later reject or request revisions from well-known writers at The Dial, after all, including James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Hart Crane.) In contrast to other commentators, I hesitate to put too much emphasis on the specific examples Moore takes, which I tend to read merely as examples of constructive criticism. John Slatin observes that in “an early draft … Moore clearly contemplates omitting the names altogether and replacing them with algebraic equivalents: the letters B and D stand in for such names as Shaw and James, for instance, while disyllabic names like Hardy are represented by the combination ‘BD’” (126).

35 The “inclinational” critic typified by Craig is immediately juxtaposed to the mysterious “Burke,” a figure Moore has identified as the philosopher Edmund but who, in the context, inevitably brings her Dial colleague Kenneth Burke to mind as well. (Most contemporary readers of “Picking and Choosing” seem to have assumed it was Kenneth). As in the case of “Critics and Connoisseurs,” the “and” here is really a “whereas” — one of Moore’s tactfully ambiguous connectives. Both Burkes have an equal right to be called “psychologists” (especially if “psychology” is taken in its older sense that is closer to philosophy of mind) rather than critics; both are distinguished from someone like Gordon Craig, who is pure opinion and inclination: Burke(s) want to know why they are inclined one way or another, not just what their inclinations are. In other words, Craig is a “good critic,” whereas “Burke” (Kenneth or Edmund) is something else: not a critic at all but a psychologist, albeit one of “acute, raccoon-like curiosity.” (The animal comparison may not even be entirely complimentary: Moore may be thinking of how raccoons like to go through people’s garbage.)
scrupulosity, are, for Moore, simply not the sorts of things that one can account for absolutely, nor should one waste time trying. They are, instead, instinctive and irrational, belonging to the animal rather than the human order of intelligence: and she, the all-powerful editor of The Dial, is on the aesthetic level analogous to the “small dog” who exhibits a “rudimentary” but nonetheless adequate sense of interest and value. The business of criticism, for Moore, is not fundamentally about arguments and positions, contests and contentions, but about choices, selections, which are private and unjustifiable.

VI.

In conclusion, I turn to one final poem of Moore’s from this period, which suggests the tensions inherent in her seeming victory over the necessity of agonism. While Moore’s trajectory as I have traced it here is in many ways a narrative of triumph, a passage from one fragile and ambiguous position to another without betraying her own subjective principles, she required an intermediary in order to achieve her mid-career success, and she found one in the person of Dial publisher Scofield Thayer.

Thayer is, in many ways, a crucial figure for Moore’s early period, perhaps the individual with the most direct impact on her personal and professional circumstances and, I am arguing, the development of her poetry and criticism as well. The heir to a Massachusetts wool mill fortune and a Harvard contemporary of E.E. Cummings and
T.S. Eliot, Thayer went in a brief span of time from being a contributor to *The Dial* to an investor to co-owner (with Sibley Watson), editor and publisher. As impresario of *The Dial*, he was largely responsible for initiating and overseeing the changes to the magazine’s aesthetic policy discussed in the previous section. It was at Thayer’s behest that *The Dial* began publishing Moore’s work in 1921, and he quickly became her most vocal champion and patron, praising her work in his editorial “Comments” and granting her the *Dial* award for 1924. In addition to his literary interests, Thayer was also a prolific collector of modern art, and though he exerted power over all aspects of *The Dial*, he was particularly strongly associated with the visual art reproduced in the magazine.\

All of this makes Thayer an obvious figure to consider in connection with Moore’s poem “When I Buy Pictures,” which, like “Picking and Choosing,” is subtly but importantly transformed by reading it in the context of her professional association with *The Dial* (I include the title below since, as is often the case with Moore, it forms part of the poem):

36 After 1925, when Moore took over managing editorship of *The Dial*, Thayer’s direct sphere of influence was circumscribed to visual art alone. By contrast, “Moore’s relation to the pictures in *The Dial* [after becoming editor] continued to be one of appreciation rather than of industrious engagement with their selection. Pictures continued to be bought by Scofield Thayer and Dr. Watson — usually by Scofield Thayer” (97-98). For an instructive discussion of the place of visual art in *The Dial*, see Joost, 46-52.

Linda Leavell has recently argued that Thayer had a romantic interest in Moore, even to the point of proposing marriage, a conjecture on which my argument does not depend but which, if true, makes her psychological “investment” in him still more fascinating. I would particularly like to draw attention to a passage quoted by Leavell from a letter Moore wrote to her brother Warner in 1920, describing an early encounter with Thayer: “Scofield has a gorgeous library … about 3 walls full of light calf bindings or blue bindings, a grate full of ashes a foot deep and a yellow desk like yours, not quite so large … He showed me his art treasures (upon request), a large black marble, nude, some Beardsley pen drawings — a ‘cubist painting’ and some drawings of dancers” (*Selected Letters* 135, qtd. by Leavell 67). Already by 1920 (a year before the original version of “When I Buy Pictures” was published) a specific interest in Thayer’s “art treasures” accompanies her general impressions of his wealth and social prestige.
When I Buy Pictures

Or what is closer to the truth,

when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,

I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments:

the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernible than

the intensity of the mood;

or quite the opposite — the old thing, the mediaeval decorated hat-box,

in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hourglass

and deer and birds and seated people;

it may be no more than a square of parquetry; the literal biography perhaps,

in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse;

an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hieroglyphic in three parts;

the silver fence protecting Adam’s grave, or Michael taking Adam by the wrist.

Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, detracts from one’s enjoyment;
it must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be
honored —

that which is great because something else is small.

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,

it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;

it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it. (101)

The use of the first person — relatively rare in Moore’s poetry — in the first three
lines invites us to read “When I Buy Pictures” as a dramatic monologue; but who is
speaking — and, potentially, buying — here? While the first person speaker implied by
the title encourages us to read it as a kind of confessional poem issuing from Moore’s
own subject position, this “I” actually makes more sense if delivered from the perspective
of a wealthy art collector like Thayer than it does from a lower-middle-class poet-critic
like Moore, who could not often afford to purchase works of art for herself. (Most of the
art objects in her home, even in later years, were gifts from more prosperous friends
rather than personal acquisitions.) Is it Thayer, then, who is speaking? In fact, the poem
wavers between a total identification with Thayer and a partial one. Look again at the
poem’s first lines, which run continuously on from the title’s syntax:

Or what is closer to the truth,
when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,

I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments…

The immediate concern to get “closer to the truth” than the title has already brought us may indicate that Moore has momentarily allowed herself to imagine being Thayer, a wealthy connoisseur who purchases things purely for the sake of his own pleasure, only to be snapped back to the reality of her own circumstance as an impoverished art lover who can only afford to be the “imaginary possessor” of expensive artworks. Thus the “I” is both Moore herself and the person she would like to be, namely Thayer (or someone like him).

In 1921, this was nothing but a slightly embarrassed fantasy: Moore imagines herself as the buyer she couldn’t practically become, and goes on to give a fanciful list of features she would use as criteria for her purchases if she could. What follows this highly qualified opening clause is a list, characteristic of Moore’s work in this period, of aesthetic qualities and features that she finds or has found pleasing in various artworks: “it may be no more than a square of parquetry … an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hieroglyphic in three parts,” et cetera. This litany of impressions and observations concludes with a kind of anti-critical mission statement that has something of the tone of “Picking and Choosing”:

Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, detracts from one’s enjoyment;
it must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be honored — that

which is great because something else is small.

Just as, in “Picking and Choosing,” Moore dismissed critical explications and rationalizations as overzealous “humbug,” here she comes out against “too stern an intellectual emphasis on this quality or that,” thus undermining even the descriptive and comparative methods of criticism along with its claim to a rational basis. In contrast to the earlier poem, however, her anti-critical stance in “When I Buy Pictures” doesn’t oppose a different, purer type of criticism, “inclinal and unashamed,” to intellectualist theorization. Instead, she opposes something else to criticism of both kinds, imagining herself not as a critic or connoisseur at all, but as a different kind of social agent entirely: a consumer. Where, in “Picking and Choosing,” the “inclinal and unashamed” critic could dispense with the exhausting theoretical justifications of the psychologist, now the consumer can dispense even with the apparatus of criticism. In matters of pure selection, taste is all: de gustibus non est disputandum.

Furthermore, if we grant ourselves the liberty of reading “When I Buy Pictures” back from the retrospective vantage of Moore’s 1925 Dial appointment, four years after the poem was first published, it is even harder not to see this act of highly selective consumption as a metaphor for the activity of editing a little magazine. As editor of The Dial, Moore would in a certain sense be “buying” material, but not in order to take possession of it herself. Acting as editor thus allows her to indulge her tastes and desires
as the connoisseur would, but without any of the guilt of personal want satisfaction, without any question of greed to trouble Moore’s scrupulous Presbyterian conscience. After all, she is not just “buying” on behalf of herself — although the aesthetic judgments behind the purchases are hers and hers alone — but disinterestedly, on behalf of a cultural institution and a grateful public: The Dial and its readers. Thus she is able to preemptively deflect some of the adverse personal criticism that might be directed at her, either for her self-indulgence or even, possibly, her deficits of taste. Similarly, the humble appeal to “what would give me pleasure in my average moments” suggests not an aesthetic extravagance but an almost ascetic labor of self-denial or public service, an attempt to judge fairly based on what is “average” in her own subjectivity: “It’s not for me; it’s for them.”

Unlike the ant-like, futilely industrious, unconsciously fastidious connoisseur of “Critics and Connoisseurs” or even the “inclinational and unashamed” connoisseur-critic of “Picking and Choosing,” the speaker of “When I Buy Pictures,” though still a connoisseur and not a critic, is a connoisseur with a practical social role to play: that of “picking and choosing” to some common collective end. Again, if we decide that the poem’s speaker is, or imagines herself to be, a magazine editor, then her resistance to “stern … intellectual emphasis” makes even more sense: editors, after all, routinely dismiss the kind of minute analysis indulged in by criticism as incidental to the larger practical question of aesthetic choice, i.e. acceptance or rejection (“yes or no?”). “When I Buy Pictures” short-circuits all of that untidy agonistic activity that made Moore so ill at ease: the speaker can, at last, simply pick and choose the good from the bad without worrying at all about “intellectual emphasis” or rational justification.
The sense of epiphany and celebration in this rather joyful poem is linked to Moore’s late discovery of her true métier: that of poet-editor, a role that resolves the tasks of critic and connoisseur into a single function. Certainly this is one way to read the poem’s closing lines:

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,

it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;

it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

The frank, decisive “It comes to this” is not the subjective statement of a critic or a connoisseur: it is the “bottom line” as laid down by a practical social agent, such as a magazine editor. It appears as if Moore has finally resolved the great problem of her early career — how to express her own strong preferences and judgments in a way that involves her in the society of modernism, without engaging in acts of aggression or critical agonism — and indeed, for all intents and purposes, she had. In becoming editor of The Dial, Moore positions at into what the sociologist Michel Callon would call an “obligatory passage point” for aspirants in the society of modernism: no longer a direct competitor of other poet-critics, or a participant in their agonistic activities, she now established herself at a site through which those poet-critics had to pass in order to gain entry to the modernist agon themselves.\(^{37}\) Thus, by “picking and choosing,” and,

\(^{37}\) “Obligatory passage point” is a term that originates in sociologist Michel Callon’s “Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay.”
furthermore, buying and acting as an “imaginary possessor,” Moore was able to make
herself indispensable to the society of literary modernism without accepting the
uncongenial role of the agonistic poet-critic. No small accomplishment; and we should
not be surprised that a certain self-satisfaction attends it. In Moore’s self-created world,
connoisseurs have power, and sometimes critics are made to feel it.

It has been developed subsequently by Bruno Latour, most notably in Science in Action. Latour
and Callon both specify that such “passage points” can be non-human objects and institutions just
as easily as human agents.
Field Work

“Whuh folks, whuh folks; don’ wuk muh brown too hahd!”

– Sterling A. Brown, “Scotty Has His Say”

I.

On June 19, 1928, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson wrote to the poet-critic Sterling A. Brown praising his recent work. At a time when many of his contemporaries were settling in Harlem and enjoying the benefits of a lively, close-knit intellectual society, Brown was building an academic career by traveling around the American South, teaching at various agrarian institutions — with the result that Brown, though the same age as prominent Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, was getting a slightly later start on literary fame. But in the process, Johnson suggested, he had obtained other advantages. “You have been compensated for your period of teaching in Virginia and Missouri by a command of the Negro folk idiom which is truly delightful,” Johnson wrote:

I was remarking to [Countee] Cullen the other day that I felt that your poetry has shown the most distinctive and superior contribution of any of the younger writers since 1926. It seems to me that there is a great struggle, even among the most brilliant ones of that earlier period, 1922-1926, against going to seed. I wondered if it is to be the fate of many of them to flash early and die. One hope lies in
getting in contact with the actual source material and in keeping abreast of the best that is being done in the world of letters. You have a distinct advantage here and, unquestionably, you are using it.38

What is most notable in Johnson’s letter is how deeply the essentially pastoral, Romantic idea that a great writer ought to take inspiration from folk culture is entwined with the notion of competition and comparison between writers: Brown’s feel for folk culture is not only “delightful,” it is also “distinctive and superior,” and gives him “a distinct advantage” over his peers. The two discourses — of agriculture and of organized competition — are etymologically united in the term “field,” which Johnson doesn’t use here (though his reference to other writers “going to seed” is close) but which, as we shall see, crops up frequently in this period.39

Despite Johnson’s reassurance that Brown’s work “in the field,” as it were — that is, away from the urban centers of African-American literary life — was having a salutary effect on his poetry, there is no question that Brown’s distance from Harlem, and his academic affiliations, made a decisive difference in the course of his career. As

38 Charles S. Johnson, letter to Sterling A. Brown, 19 June 1928, Moorland-Springarn Research Center (uncatalogued collection; hereafter referred to as MSRC). Johnson returns to the trope of “superiority” and “advantage” in his letter of May 25, 1932: “I told my class that you were drawing a new pattern… You have a superior advantage, from the point of view of the classical tradition, to most of the writers today (without even considering Aunt Hagar’s children) and in turning to the medium of the folk Negro for expression, it is the supreme mark of the conscious Negro artist.” Johnson, letter to Brown, May 25, 1932, MSRC.

39 Since I will be playing on the various senses of the word “field” throughout this chapter, it seems useful to provide some etymological background. The use of the English word “field” in the specifically professional sense that Brown and Johnson use it here — on the analogy of the military (6) and sporting (8) senses, as in “field of battle or contest” — seems to be a very late development. The OED lists “field of study” from 1825, but the first example of the term referring to an area of expertise outside academia is from 1911 (12e). The strictly agricultural sense, by contrast, dates back to the 12th century; and the use of the term “in the context of work or research: the world or environment outside the study, office, laboratory, headquarters, etc.” dates to 1610 (13).
Lawrence Jackson puts it in *The Indignant Generation*, his study of Brown’s cohort of African American intellectuals, “Brown's early success as a poet seemed nearly secondary to his career as a professional advocate of black arts” (37). In addition to sheaves of critical articles and reviews for little magazines like *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*, Brown composed teacher’s guides (his 1931 “Outline for the Study of Poetry of American Negroes” was one of the first on this subject); worked from 1938 to 1940 on the landmark Gunnar Myrdal study of race relations in America; and, in the 1940s, co-edited mass market anthologies like *The Negro Caravan* and *A Primer for White Folks*. Though identified and lauded throughout his long career as a poet — and a highly acclaimed, influential, and important one — Brown published just one book of poetry in the first seventy years of his life: 1927’s *Southern Road*. A second volume, *No Hiding Place*, was completed in the mid-30s but never appeared, a casualty of the Depression’s disastrous effect on the nascent market for African American literature, as well as Brown’s increasing involvement in academic and government work. (He did start publishing poems again late in life, and finally brought out a second volume, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill*, in 1975.)

Though many of Brown’s peers expected him to be one of the great writers of his generation, his role in the collective project of African American literature would prove, in the event, to be primarily critical and administrative rather than creative or literary. Not that the two were cleanly or easily separable. As we have seen, Brown comes to an interest in “folk materials” through his work as a poet; and his poetic work was frequently praised for its authenticity and fidelity to African American folk culture. If Brown’s initial interest in folk culture stemmed in part from the advantage it gave him in
the poetic field, however, he was soon drawn, via the logic of expertise, into other pastures entirely. As it happened, the 1930s were a boom time for the collection of African-American folk materials: the work of folklorists like Benjamin Botkin and Alan Lomax was being subsidized by the federal government, under the aegis of the Library of Congress. In 1935, the Federal Writers’ Project launched an ambitious series of state-by-state Field Guides, and director Harry Alsberg — at the suggestion of prominent African-American intellectuals like Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson — tapped Brown as “Editor of Negro Affairs” for the entire project.

The Federal Writers Project, like the rest of the New Deal’s Federal Project Number One, was conceived primarily as a relief effort for America’s unemployed cultural workers, but it had the side effect of throwing together writers normally separated by social, racial, and professional mores. “[A]s an effort to extend federal assistance to unrecognized artists, writers, and performers [Federal One] was unique in American history,” the New Deal historian Michael Hiltzik writes:

There had been government arts programs before … but these typically involved established artists whose works were selected by professional juries. Federal One would employ not only established artists and talented novices, but also the worker ants of the cultural world — technicians, journeymen, craftspersons. The historian and critic Bernard DeVoto, looking back on the Federal Writers' Project in 1942, observed “without any shadow of derogation” that “most of the people employed by the Project have never been, even in the humblest sense, genuine writers. … It has been, in fact, a project for research workers.” (286)
In addition to the invaluable financial assistance it provided to unemployed writers through some of the worst years of the Depression, the Federal Writers’ Project is remarkable for the way it collapsed social distinctions — always tenuous — between “genuine writers” and “research workers,” “established artists” and “worker ants.” Here we see the Eliotic contrast between first-order and second-order minds translated into institutional terms: in a time of crisis, it becomes clearer than ever that the fates of the two are intertwined. “Alsberg wrestled with the question of how to define writer,” Hiltzik notes, “a term that could embrace doggerel poets, advertising copywriters, and newspaper scribes, as well as novelists of transcendent craftsmanship. Since the number of available nonfiction and technical writers vastly outstripped writers of real refinement, he decided to unify his motley staff by focusing them on a single overarching project. The result would be the WPA Guides, a monumental collection of 152 state, local, and city guidebooks” (293). The Guide project provided a kind of lowest common denominator for unemployed writers of all kinds: poets, novelists, journalists, critics, and social scientists could all be of use. Brown was a perfect fit for the FWP, in that his own work was proudly, overtly research-based in a way that few poets could claim — “field work,” in various senses of the word, was always his métier — yet he also possessed the charisma and prestige of the “genuine writer.”

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40 Michael Szalay makes a similar point in *New Deal Modernism*: “What exactly makes a person count as one of the nation’s unemployed, for example? That this question was particularly vexed in the case of writers and artists who previously had been ‘employed’ only to the extent that they had been selling their work is the partial subject of my first chapter. Because it was not clear before the advent of the WPA what made a writer a ‘professional,’ it was doubly unclear how to consider the employment status of writers who had never been successful to begin with” (14).
Nonetheless, Brown felt considerable hesitation about accepting the administrative position. “I have been up to my neck in work during the past year,” he wrote to Alsberg in 1936, “school work, finishing up a couple of books, which will not finish, and directing dramatics (a full job in itself) … I was surprised at my appointment, and not sure of my ability to handle this large undertaking. I want to get as much advice as possible … I want advice upon the material relating to the Negro that should be included in the American Guide, and available, qualified people who might help in the project, either as workers or advisors.”\(^{41}\) With his African American peers, Brown was even more honest about his trepidations. “[This is] a cry from Macedonia — ‘Come on over and help us,'” he wrote to Johnson, who was then on the national advisory board for the WPA, in May 1936. “I am serving as editor of Negro material on the American Guide [sic]. I have no illusions about my editorial ability.”\(^{42}\) Still, Brown recognized the historic opportunity that the program represented. “The advantages of such a project are numerous,” he wrote. “In the first place material that will be more authentic will be on hand to offset some of the stuff probably being written, and a few more Negroes, who can certify, may get jobs.”\(^{43}\)

Thus it would appear that Brown’s reasons for taking the job were as much ideological as practical: he felt he had an opportunity to dispel certain deeply entrenched misunderstandings about African American life and culture; in effect, to instrumentalize the social critique he had been advancing in the pages of little magazines like The Crisis and Opportunity about the corrosive effects of negative racial stereotypes. It also allowed him to employ out-of-work friends, students, and colleagues who had been suffering

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\(^{41}\) Brown, letter to Walter Alsberg, 14 April, 1936, MSRC.

\(^{42}\) Brown, letter to Johnson, 27 May, 1936, MSRC.

\(^{43}\) Brown, letter to Johnson, 5 August, 1936, MSRC.
under the Depression, and to help bring legitimacy and financial support to the
underfunded black academic institutions that had supported his career to date. Writing to
Charles Jones of the National Urban League in January 1939 in defense of the Federal
Arts Projects, then under attack from a Congressional committee formed by
Representative Martin Dies to ferret out Communists within Federal One, Brown admits
that

\[\text{[a]s far as the Negro is concerned, these projects, of course, still leave something
to be desired. Employment of Negroes, especially in the South, is far too little.}
\]
\[\text{Discrimination in rank and salary has taken place … But in the main the projects}
\]
\[\text{have great importance for a number (not large enough) of Negro artists, research}
\]
\[\text{workers, etc. The projects afford one of the Negro’s important opportunities for}
\]
\[\text{work in the white collar field … I know that the Project has given employment to}
\]
\[\text{needy Negroes who otherwise would have had little or no chance to use their}
\]
\[\text{training and ability. These people in many cases developed skill, learned a great}
\]
\[\text{deal, and made definite contributions to the charting of America.}^{44}\]

Here we see a dual justification for Brown’s own involvement — and, by
extension, the support of the black middle-class, as represented by the National Urban
League — with the federal government’s work: not only will it record African-
American history and culture more faithfully, it will also employ Negroes in high-status
positions in “the white collar field.” Brown uses much the same argument in another
letter later that year to T. Arnold Hill, another National Urban League official:

\[^{44}\text{Brown, letter to Charles Jones, 14 January, 1939, MSRC.}\]
The Negro has been so unfairly represented on the white collar projects, that I feel some such action is imperative. These young people should not lose their jobs. They have learned research and editorial techniques, and many have learned more about writing than any college can teach them. They tell me this experience has been educational for them. For them to be deprived of self-respecting and partly creative work now would be an injustice.

The “self-respecting and partly creative work” that Brown wants to vouchsafe for black white-collar workers is implicitly contrasted to his own wholly creative work, which his administrative tasks defer and delay interminably: “I think you realize that I am not asking for my own job. The sooner I get off the project, the sooner I’ll get my long due novel finished. But I don’t want all I’ve done to be wasted.”

II.

It’s no surprise that Brown’s interest in supporting the rise of his African American contemporaries in “the white collar field” trumped his own ambition as an artist. The Federal Writers’ Project represented not only an opportunity for economic relief — indeed, as Jackson has emphasized, the actual relief to the African American community was quite small — but a symbolic watershed, one of “the Negro’s important

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45 Brown, letter to T. Arnold Hill, 11 August, 1939, MSRC.
46 In The Indignant Generation Jackson reports that “the numbers of black writers on the [WPA]
opportunities for work in the white collar field.” The neologism “white collar,” referring to a non-manual worker, had been coined by novelist Upton Sinclair in *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism*, which mocked “the petty underlings of the business world, the poor office-clerks, who, because they are allowed to wear a white collar, regard themselves as members of the capitalist class” (78). For the sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose 1953 book *White Collar* helped to define the term more precisely and bring it into wider circulation, the new white collar middle-class were not, like the old entrepreneurial middle class, property-owning; their status was conferred, instead, by their jobs. “Negatively, the transformation of the middle class is a shift from property to no-property,” Mills writes; “positively, it is a shift from property to a new axis of stratification, occupation. The nature and well-being of the old middle class can best be sought in the condition of entrepreneurial property; of the new middle class, in the economics and sociology of occupation” (65). It was not what you owned or even how much money you made but where and how you worked — what “field” you were in — that conferred status for the middle-class white-collar worker.

Moreover, access to these metaphorical, high-status “fields” meant leaving the actual fields of agricultural production as far behind as possible. In Mills’ account, the rise of the white-collar worker defined by occupation was a byproduct of the decline of American agriculture and the urbanization of much of the country’s population, a process that he believed to have altered the very nature of American work. Strangely, in his

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project nationwide ranged from a low of about 85 to a high of no more than 150. In southern states like South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, the offices refused outright to hire blacks unless the Federal Writers Project provided money for dual facilities … Virginia, New York, and Illinois were the notable exceptions, though even these states never had more than token black representation. In late 1937 … there were about 106 blacks working on the project that supported about 4,500 writers nationally. The next year all of those numbers would be trimmed dramatically” (53).
discussion of the transition from agricultural to industrial production “since the Civil War,” Mills makes no mention of African Americans, but his analysis of the expansion of the “white-collar field” can be usefully supplemented by considering the growth of the “black bourgeoisie” over roughly the same period, as described by another sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier’s early work was on the effect of urbanization on the African American family, but he is now best remembered for his 1957 sociological bestseller *Black Bourgeoisie*. Frazier, too, uses the term “white collar”: "The black bourgeoisie is constituted of those Negroes who derive their incomes principally from the services which they render as white-collar workers,” he writes. The African American population had begun as an undifferentiated mass of slaves; class and status distinctions emerged first as a result of the division into “house” and “field” servants, then the small number of (mostly mixed-race) slaves who were freed by their masters, and finally the “slow occupational differentiation” after Emancipation that allowed “a class of white-collar workers [to acquire] a dominant position among Negroes” (43). The black bourgeoisie were a mixture of the descendants of mixed-race Freedmen who had managed to accumulate some wealth and status before abolition and the hard-working strivers who had distinguished themselves in the professions in the decades since.

While Mills’ book was for the most part descriptive, Frazier’s was an unapologetic critique. In Frazier’s view, those African Americans who had managed to ascend to the middle-class fetishized the cultural status they had attained and paid insufficient attention to the condition of the black proletariat:

Because of its struggle to gain acceptance by whites, the black bourgeoisie has
failed to play the role of a responsible elite in the Negro community. When the opportunity has been present, the black bourgeoisie has exploited the Negro masses as ruthlessly as have whites. As the intellectual leaders in the Negro community, they have never dared think beyond a narrow, opportunistic philosophy that provided a rationalization for their own advantages. (235-236)

This failure to play the role of a responsible elite, Frazier believed, was the result not just of economic conditions but of cultural factors as well:

As the result of the break with its cultural past, the black bourgeoisie is without cultural roots in either the Negro world with which it refuses to identify, or the white world which refuses to permit the black bourgeoisie to share its life …

Lacking a cultural tradition and rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other, the black bourgeoisie has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex. In order to compensate for this feeling of inferiority, the black bourgeoisie has created in its isolation what might be described as a world of make-believe in which it attempts to escape the disdain of whites and fulfill its wish for status in American life. (24-25)

Frazier also strongly implies that the basis for the economic and social inequalities between the black bourgeoisie and the working class are rooted in the equalities between “house” and “field” Negroes: “Where the plantation acquired the
character of a social institution, it provided the means by which the Negro slaves could rapidly take over European culture … While all of the slaves were always under the surveillance of the whites, the house servants lived constantly in close association with their masters. Very often these house servants had associated from childhood with their masters. Consequently, they early acquired the speech of their masters, a fact which set them off from the more isolated field hands, who spoke a dialect” (12). The implicit suggestion is that the relationship between the black bourgeoisie and the working class mirrors that of the house to the field slaves.

There is an irony, of course, in the fact that Frazier’s coruscating assault on the pretensions of the upwardly mobile black middle classes was launched from the university, the educational institution being — as Frazier himself admits — the preeminent vehicle of economic and social mobility for African-Americans (as for everyone else) throughout the twentieth century. Frazier, like Brown, was very much a member of the black middle class he criticized; what’s more, both were nothing if not white-collar. The relationship between Brown and Frazier was quite close; in a 1980 interview with John Edgar Tidwell and John S. Wright (published in Callaloo in 1988), he remarked that “there is a great deal of relationship with sociology. [E. Franklin] Frazier called me his favorite literary sociologist” (360). Still, favorite or not, Brown’s sensitivity to the kind of critique leveled by Frazier must have been particularly acute, since his own standing as a member of the “black bourgeoisie” was a matter not just of personal occupational achievement but of inherited privilege. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. neatly encapsulates Brown’s cultural and educational trajectory:
For a “New Negro” generation too conscious of character and class as color (and vice versa), Brown had all the signs of the good life: he was a mulatto with “good hair” whose father was a well-known author, professor at Howard, pastor of the Lincoln Temple Congregational Church, and member of the D.C. Board of Education who had numbered among his closest friends both Frederick Douglass and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Brown, moreover, had received a classically liberated education at Dunbar High School, Williams College, and Harvard, where he took an M.A. in English in 1923. Indeed, perhaps it was just this remarkably secure black aristocratic heritage that motivated Brown to turn to the folk. (60-61)

As Gates suggests, Brown’s interest in African American dialect and folk culture was strongly influenced by his own class position and academic background. The question of the relation between the rising, urbanized African American middle class and the predominantly rural, working-class “folk” population was a crucial one for Brown’s generation, and it’s in this context that Brown’s early, enthusiastic embrace of folklore and anthropology has to be understood. In essays like “Our Literary Audience” (1930), he rails against unflattering depictions of the folk in African-American literature and asserted that “[t]he dominance of the lowly as subject matter is a natural concomitant to the progress of democracy” (144). In the same essay, Brown takes issue with the black intelligentsia’s “distaste for dialect,” which had fallen out of favor with “respectable” Negro audiences shortly after the heyday of Paul Laurence Dunbar: “There is nothing ‘degraded’ about dialect. Dialectical peculiarities are universal. There is something about
Negro dialect, in the idiom, the turn of the phrase, the music of the vowels and consonants that is worth treasuring” (144-145).

Brown’s defense of dialect formed part of a larger appeal to the black bourgeois readers of *Opportunity* (where “Our Literary Audience” was first published in February 1930) to reconnect with their folk heritage:

It seems to acute observers that many of us, who have leisure for reading, are ashamed of being Negroes. This shame makes us harsher to the shortcomings of some perhaps not so fortunate economically. There seems to be among us a more fundamental lack of sympathy with the Negro farthest down, than there is in other groups with the same Negro … We are cowed. We have become typically bourgeois. Natural though such an evolution is, if we are *all* content with evasion of life, with personal complacency, we as a group are doomed. If we pass by on the other side, despising our brothers, we have no right to call ourselves men. (146-148)

It was imperative to Brown that the African American middle class cast off the “shame” that kept them from acknowledging and aiding “the Negro farthest down.” Like Frazier, he did not call for an abandonment of Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth” strategy whereby an elite remnant of the African American population would rise in class and status by virtue of merit and hard work, but both insisted on remarking the “fundamental lack of sympathy” that the rising black bourgeoisie had shown toward those it had left behind.
All this should be kept in mind when considering Brown’s “relationship with sociology.” In a period when a sharp critique of the aspirational “black bourgeoisie” was beginning to become a commonplace topic for African-American intellectuals, Brown looked not to the traditional humanities but to the social sciences, and in particular to the emergent disciplines of folklore, anthrology, and sociology, as means to effect solidarity and efface class distinction between middle-class intellectuals and the black working class. Thus, the bright line between the social sciences and the humanities that the New Critics insisted on — as John Guillory and Stephen Schryer have shown — never seems to have existed at all within the African American academic community. (Indeed, the two had already been thoroughly hybridized in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who inhabited the roles of sociologist and man of letters simultaneously, and without contradiction.) Brown was significantly less interested in constructing a conceptual firewall between literary study from sociology — or, for that matter, between “literature” and “society” — than were most white poet-critics of his time. What Brown was looking for in the social sciences — sociology, anthropology, folklore and related fields — was not literary autonomy but solidarity and self-reflexivity, as expressed through the study of

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47 It should also be recalled that academia was not an automatic, or even an obvious, destination for an ambitious young black poet in the late 1920s and early 30s. With the notable exception of James Weldon Johnson, of Brown’s major poetic predecessors — Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay — had not been academics; neither were his peers and contemporaries — Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay. The other prominent African American university professors of Brown’s generation were not poets or creative writers at all but political scientists, philosophers, and sociologists like Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, Ralph Bunche, and Frazier. Brown had close intellectual relationships with all these figures.

48 See Guillory, “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines” and Schryer, Fantasies of the New Class, especially 7-10 and 29-32. This tension between the disciplines of literature and sociology dates back to the early nineteenth century, as demonstrated by Wolf Lepenies in Between Science and Literature: The Rise of Sociology.

49 I am grateful to Lindsay Reckson for pointing out to me that Du Bois’ magazine The Crisis which provided one of the earliest venues for Brown’s critical writing — devoted space in almost every issue to the NAACP’s “field work.”
folk culture.

Just as his “relationship with sociology” marks a definite difference between Brown and his white poet-critic contemporaries, his place in the university setting separates Brown from his African American peers associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Brown’s academically mediated interest in folk culture was something rather different from the romanticism of working-class life and blues vernacular that Harlem Renaissance writers sometimes indulged (and which Brown and Frazier both criticized). In his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes scorns the member of “the Negro middle class” that “is never taught to see … the beauty of his own people [but is] taught not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it” and exalts instead “the low-down folks, the so-called common element.” This perceived divide between the “Negro middle class” and “low-down folks” is one that Sterling Brown, a scion of the black bourgeois establishment who “had all the signs of the good life,” could easily end up on the wrong side of.

Unsurprisingly, then, Brown, while attracted to Hughes’ populism, resisted the demagogical terms of an essay like “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” He, too, was deeply interested in the life of rural lower-class African-Americans of whom “the black bourgeoisie” tended to be ashamed. But whereas Hughes wanted to figure real African American art and poetry — or, at least, his own work — as something directly and authentically “of the people,” better understood by “the so-called common element”

50 Tensions between the Southern-based African-American academia and the Harlem Renaissance were longstanding. In “La Bourgeoisie Noire,” the 1928 article published in Modern Quarterly magazine that eventually spawned Black Bourgeoisie, Frazier criticizes the New Negro movement as insufficiently radical, “restrict[ing] itself to the purely cultural in the narrow sense … The New Negro functions in the third dimension of culture; but so far it knows nothing of the other two dimensions — Work and Wealth.” The 1957 book publication softens this critique of the movement considerably.
than by bourgeois sophisticates, Brown tends to emphasize a kind of institutional mediation between the poet-critic (the middle-class writer and intellectual) and the “low-down folks” he observes and describes. For Brown, however, a meaningful connection between the black bourgeoisie and the working classes is made possible only through the intervention of big bureaucratic institutions like the university and the state, and the ascendance of a black elite to positions of white collar respectability. By participating — wholeheartedly, and unreservedly — in the institutional life of the United States, the black academic intellectual could continue to keep a weather eye on folk culture: not forgetting or being ashamed of his agrarian heritage but, on the contrary, cultivating them as a “field” of study.

Indeed, it is interesting how often, in his criticism, Brown has recourse to what seems like an extraordinarily literal-minded conception of African American literature and culture as a “field,” drawing heavily on the word’s agricultural sense. In the crucial 1939 essay “The American Race Problem as Reflected in American Literature,” written as the Federal Writers’ Project (and Brown himself) were under attack as communist propagandists, Brown respectfully dissents from his mentor W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous anti-aestheticist insistence that “all art is propaganda” while at the same time meditating on the legacy of slavery, not just for African American literature but for American

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51 We can productively see Brown’s work as part of an effort to bridge the worlds of the pro-assimilationist, pro-urbanist university professors like Locke, Johnson, and Frazier and the folk-minded literary community represented by unattached writers like Toomer, Hughes, and Hurston, who, in the words of Sonnet Retman, “worried that the black working class’ encounter with mass consumerism would destroy a distinctly rural vernacular culture.” But, in practice, the Harlem Renaissance did little to communicate its ideas or aesthetics to those rural communities; it was, as much recent scholarship on the period has shown (and as Brown understood quite early), inextricably bound up with white patronage, and the modernist market for exotic and novel forms of art, literature, and culture.
literature as a whole. He ends up shifting from Du Bois’ language of politics and “propaganda” to that of agricultural development:

Not many Negro writers have followed Art for Art’s Sake. Even so … many problems remain untouched … The field, except in well-ploughed patches, has barely been scratched. Certainly it has received only the first turning over. (66)

“Art for Art’s Sake” — a concept usually construed, in the literary and philosophical tradition, as an escape from arduous collective work into a realm of pure speculative play — is here figured as a common pursuit, a common labor: a “field” that needs to be “turn[ed] over.” And again, a few pages later, Brown comments that there are more African American authors depicting African American life, but “they are still very few to harvest the wide field.” In Brown’s rhetorical usage, the ready-made metaphor of the arts as a “field” unites the usual sense of a collectivity of laborers (a number of people each doing the same kind of work in, and on, the same kind of terrain) with a sense of development and progress, but he hews much closer to the term’s agricultural origin than is the norm. In this sense, all of Brown’s work — from his early poetry, to his literary criticism, to his teaching, to his governmental activities — can be understood as a kind of “field work”: a way of at once cultivating a historical tradition that pre-exists him as an object of study, and marking out a space for its development as part of an ongoing collective project.
III.

One crucial reason Brown gravitated toward the discipline of sociology is that it was, by the 1920s, coming to define itself as an academic discourse both of and by African Americans, one that bridged the class divide, identified by Frazier, between the rural, undereducated lower classes (as subject) and the urbanized, university-educated middle classes (as scholars and students). American sociology had not always been so progressive. In the nineteenth century, Social Darwinists like William Graham Sumner characterized the Negro race as occupying a more primitive stage of development than the white man. Dating from around 1890, however, and increasing thereafter, as the racist presuppositions of nineteenth century American social science begin to lose ground and the opportunities for African American scholars began to increase, there is a sea change in what “sociology” and “anthropology” come to mean for the black intellectual: from a largely racist, white-controlled discourse of pathology to an unprecedented opportunity to study oneself and one’s own culture.

It was important that the field of sociology was allowing African Americans to be the scholars as well as the subjects — a transition that literary criticism, as Brown consistently pointed out in his early work, had yet to accomplish. In his seminal early

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52 Michael R. Winston notes that there was an explosion of black PhDs between 1920 and 1943 and that “[b]y 1943, 40 per cent of the Ph.D.’s held by Negroes were in the social sciences, and of those, 53 per cent were in the fields of history and sociology,” many of them focusing on so-called “Negro subjects” (693-694).

essay “Negro Character As Seen By White Authors” (first printed in the Journal of Negro Education in 1933), Brown insists that “if one wishes to learn of the Negro, it would be best to study the Negro himself … It is likely that … the exploration of Negro life and character rather than its exploitation must come from Negro authors themselves” (182). It is only through an unprecedented combination of literature and sociology that the Du Boisian standard of “the race man” can be carried forward into the future, allowing the African American scholar to study himself (and his own culture) while also continuing to serve as an exemplar to that culture. To study and observe, to describe and exemplify, simultaneously, and, in doing so to legitimate one’s cultural identity as an object worthy of professional academic study: this was the promise that academic sociology held out to the African American intellectual in the first half of the 20th century.

Brown thus claims a very peculiar, and rather unstable, kind of authority vis-à-vis the souls of the black folk he studies. It may be easiest to see how this works out in his poetry since, as is so often the case with poet-critics, anxieties that are resolved into dogmas or precepts in literary and cultural criticism are manifested and dramatized in poems. Of the many different styles exhibited in Brown’s first book Southern Road, I am most interested in what I call Brown’s “ethnographic lyric” mode: a mode that combines the sociological or anthropological techniques of “interview” and “observation” with the new “blues poem” form being developed by writers like Hughes, and welds them together via the traditional English form of the dramatic monologue.

Admittedly, this mode bears some similarity to work being done by Brown’s contemporaries Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, and there were also some white poets on parallel courses, like Charles Reznikoff and Muriel Rukeyser. But Brown’s own
account of the genesis of this style traces it to older African American dialect writers like Dunbar but to an older generation of white poets like Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters, which he first encountered as a graduate student at Harvard. 54 This scholastic distance from folk culture would persist. Indeed, not only the form but even the raw material for Brown’s first published poem, ‘When de Saints Go Ma’ching Home’ — which is also, in a way, his first ethnography — has an institutional mediation. Brown met the poem’s subject and dedicatee Big Boy Davis through students at Virginia Seminary College in the mid-20s. As he recounts in a 1974 interview with Charles H. Rowell:

The kids at Seminary knew my interest. I was writing these poems, and they brought to my room one night … my room was a gathering place for bull sessions, because these students were about my age. They were old to be in school, and I was young to be out of school. They were coal miners, farmers, hard workers, waiters down at the hotel. This was called Virginia Seminary College. Many of them were studying to be ministers, but they had to work like hell in order to make enough money to come for those school months. So these kids knew my interest, and they brought Big Boy to the room … He was an education for me. (812-813)

54 From the same interview with Rowell referred to in the main text above: “Now I’ve always been interested in language and did my first years of graduate study at Harvard. I went over to Boston one day and bought a copy of [Louis] Untermeyer’s Modern American Poetry … This is a long way to Big Boy. I read Edwin Arlington Robinson, particularly the poems about Tilbury Town, where he takes the poor, the undistinguished, and the ordinary; he gets at the extraordinary in their lives … I always loved language, I loved slang, and I loved the folk stuff I knew … I go to college, and I get this book. I read Frost and I read Sandburg and I read Edgar Lee Masters. I saw what could happen with the American idiom. But I hadn’t seen it done with the Negro folk idiom much” (812). Note that Brown’s poetic discovery of “the Negro folk idiom” comes not through firsthand contact but through an academic encounter: “I go to college, and I get this book.”
We might pause to consider the rather baroque economic and academic dynamics in play here: First, we have Brown the upper-middle-class professor, the product of the elite Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. We have the student seminarians (the same age as Brown, or older) from rather humbler backgrounds, aspiring to enter the middle-class by studying to be ministers. They provide the conduit to Big Boy, an itinerant laborer with no apparent interest in upward mobility, to whom someone of Brown’s class background might not have otherwise had easy access. (The poem’s epigraph tells us that Big Boy was later “Chased Out of Town for Vagrancy”). The “education” which one would normally assume would be passed down from teacher to student to non-student in fact circulates much more complexly here. “Big Boy”’s name itself encodes confusion about whether he’s a student or a teacher. (The trope of Brown’s “education” by his Virginia students recurs in a later autobiographical remark: “I learned the Arts and Sciences at Williams, I learned the Humanities in Lynchburg, Virginia.”)

Unlike some of the other poems in Southern Road, “When the Saints Go Ma’ching Home” is not a straightforward “blues poem.” The speaker of the poem is, presumably, Brown himself, or else one of his seminary students (no distinction is made between them; the group is always referred to in the plural, as “we” or “the boys”). Indeed, “Saints” seems to provide an especially striking example of what Brent Hayes Edwards sees as one of the properties of every “blues poem”:

the specific effect of the blues poem is rooted precisely in its not being the ‘same’ as the vernacular blues ... [I]t is a reduction of the poem to relegate it to the status
of a song lyric. It demands to be considered as much a formal transcription of a performance … as a score to be realized. (585, italics Edwards’)

“When the Saints Go Ma’ching Home” makes this act of lyric transcription described by Edwards a part of the structure of the work itself. The poem begins in medias res, toward the end of a longer musical performance by Big Boy:

He'd play, after the bawdy songs and blues,

After the weary plaints

Of “Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul,”

Always one song in which he'd lose the role

Of entertainer to the boys. He'd say

“My mother's favorite.” And we knew

That what was coming was his chant of saints

“When de Saints go ma'chin' home . . .”

And that would end his concert for the day. (26)

What does it mean here that Big Boy is “los[ing] the role of entertainer” — in order to become what? A teacher? A case study? That some kind of transformation of Big Boy’s role, and of his intersubjective relation to his auditors, is taking place is further
suggested by the beginning of the second stanza:

Carefully as an old maid over needlework,

Or, as some black deacon, over his Bible, lovingly,

He’d tune up specially for this. There'd be

No chatter now, no patting of the feet

After a few slow chords, knelling and sweet …

He would forget

The quieted bunch, his dimming cigarette

Stuck into a splintered edge of the guitar;

Sorrow deep hidden in his voice, a far

And soft light in his strange brown eyes,

Alone with his masterchords, his memories… (26)

Behind the surface sentimentalism of Brown’s tone, we can trace Big Boy’s surprising metamorphoses: first he’s feminized (“an old maid over needlework”), then he takes on a religious authority (“some black deacon”). His performance is clearly designated as such (“He’d tune up specially”) yet also seems to transcend the context of mere performance, as he “forgets” his audience and stands “alone with his masterchords,
his memories.” (“Masterchords” may be a neologism, or it may allude to William Caldwell Roscoe’s Victorian-era lyric “The Master-Chord”; it also brings to mind the term “masterclass.”)

All throughout these early stanzas we are preparing to enter Big Boy’s interiority — Brown is ceding the floor to him, letting him fill the space of the poem with his own lyric expression. But, at the same time, we are studying him from an ethnographic remove: Big Boy is figured as a mystery, with “sorrow deep hidden in his voice,” his “strange brown eyes.” (The echo of Brown’s own name appears continually throughout the poems in Southern Road; and Big Boy is, precisely, a “strange Brown,” an uncanny double of the poet’s own subjectivity.) Thereafter, Brown shifts in and out of dialect, using both free indirect discourse and quotation to render Big Boy’s speech patterns and idiom:

The chap’s few speeches helped me understand

The reason why he gazed so fixedly

Upon the burnished strings.

For he would see

A gorgeous procession to ‘de Beulah Land’

Of Saints — his friends — ‘a climbin, fo’ deir wings.’

Oh, when de saints go ma’chin’ home

Lawd, I wanna be one o’ dat nummer
This takes us from the very Anglo-inflected “chap’s few speeches” and “the burnished strings” (with its self-conscious echo of *Antony and Cleopatra*, as well as Eliot’s *Waste Land*) to the likes of “*a climbin, fo’ deir wings*” — cleverly stitching together two dialects — and two social classes — with the thread of a rhyme.

The poem ends with Big Boy taking his leave of the boys, in a brief six-line section:

> He'd shuffle off from us, always; at that,—
> His face a brown study beneath his torn brimmed hat.
> His broad shoulders slouching, his old box strung
> Around his neck; — he’d go where we
> Never could follow him — to Sophie probably,
> Or to his dances in old Tinbridge flat. (30)

(Sophie, by the way, is Big Boy’s “brown” — i.e., his lady friend — one of the folks Big Boy specifically tells us will *not* be allowed into Heaven.) The expression “to be in a brown study” (already almost archaic by 1927) dates back to 14th century England, and describes a state of melancholy, pensiveness, or reflectiveness. It functions
here to jolt us out of Big Boy’s idiom and back into the speaker’s: Big Boy himself, presumably, would not use such a high-toned phrase. But note that Brown doesn’t exactly say that Big Boy looks like he’s “in a brown study”: he says that Big Boy’s face is a brown study, as in “a case study,” a study in brownness. Here again we have the echo of Brown’s own name, at once linking him to Big Boy, the authentic lyrical blues voice, and distinguishing them from one another. The moment of communion between “the boys” and Big Boy has given way to an inevitable separation: “he'd go where we / Never could follow him.” (Well, they could, but presumably it would be at the risk of breaking social or ethical taboos; we already know that Sophie, for instance, would be expelled from Heaven, and we can only imagine the effect she’d have on a bunch of innocent seminary students.)

This earnest desire to “follow” Big Boy and other members of the “folk,” and the difficulty or impossibility of doing so, is felt strongly throughout Southern Road. If Big Boy is the subject of study, he’s also, here and elsewhere, a figure to be imitated, or “followed.” A running theme is Brown’s desire — and, by extension, the desire of the educated black bourgeoisie as a whole — to identify with Hughes’ “low-down folks” without denigrating his own class, to find points of connection and common labor to perform together — or, at least, to supervise and record their labor for posterity.

Indeed, Brown is deeply interested throughout the book in the labor that stoic African-American men like Big Boy (the “strong men,” as he admiringly calls them in another poem) perform. Where Hughes tended to view his blues men as figures of freedom from labor — unattached, and unconstrained — or else as tragic victims of social oppression, Brown is more neutral, interested, like Wordsworth’s speaker in
“Resolution and Independence” confronting the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor, in how they cobble together their livings. The poem “Odyssey of Big Boy” (delivered, this time, entirely in Big Boy’s voice) is for the most part a catalog of such random jobs of work: “Done stripped tobacco in Virginia fiel’s”; “Done mined de coal in West Virginia”; “shocked de corn in Marylan’”; “Busted suds in lil’ New York,” et cetera. (Note the geographical variety of Big Boy’s jobs, which take him all over the country. The second poem in Southern Road, “Long Gone,” is even more forthright about the desirability of such mobility: “Jes’ my name and jes’ my habit / To be Long Gone…”)

Though plenty of these jobs are unpleasant, Big Boy’s “Odyssey” is not a lament or jeremiad: the tone, as so often in Brown’s poetry, is one of stoic resignation, and pride in fortitude: “Done took my livin’ as it came, / Done grabbed my job, done risked my life … I done had my women, / I done had my fun; / Cain’t do much complainin’ / When my jag is done.” Brown himself commented about this poem:

The jobs Big Boy had in “The Odyssey of Big Boy” he never had: I just got a bunch of jobs together, all different kinds of work … I wanted to get a picture of the itinerant Negro worker in all these various jobs. It is possible that one man could have had all these jobs. (815)

Brown’s concern here for the “itinerant Negro worker” and his abiding interest in vagrants and rambling men certainly owes something to his own youthful rambling from institution to institution in the first thirty years of his life. (Lawrence Jackson refers to it as a “peripatetic odyssey along the black college circuit” [38], no doubt deliberately
invoking “Odyssey of Big Boy.”) Indeed, the man with many jobs, who puts no particular stock in one over the other, is the poet-critical persona that Brown prefers to the Eliotic/New Critical type, suited for one particular kind of labor who is forced or obliged to perform jobs that are uncongenial but, for whatever reason, necessary. Brown not only accepts the burden of “the journeyman-work of literature”: he refuses to even see it as a burden.

These pragmatic attitudes toward work displayed by Big Boy and Brown can both be read, in different ways, as a heritage of an “institution” of a different kind than those I have been considering up to this point: the historical institution of slavery. It’s worth recalling, as Mark Sanders does in his introduction to A Son’s Return, his edited collection of Brown’s criticism and nonfiction, that Brown was part of “the first full generation [of African Americans] born free” in the United States, and that “the New Negro Movement constituted the politically self-conscious attempt on the part of African Americans to define themselves as a post-slavery, post-agrarian people” (xi). There were many ways of performing this work of self-definition, though. One could argue that the Harlem writers’ frequent emphasis on leisure and play over work was meant to stand for liberation from the era of slavery, which was so closely associated with backbreaking, involuntary labor. Against this hedonistic tendency, Brown emphasizes (and values) the autonomy of the temporary economic contract — the odd job — precisely because it is a symbol of freedom and mobility, the freedom to act as an economic agent, to go where one pleases, to “take one’s living as it comes.”

The nature and purpose of work was very much in flux for Brown’s generation of African Americans; the transition from agrarian to industrial and (in rare cases) “white-
collar" work had symbolic consequences far outweighing those felt by their white contemporaries. Brown’s decision to become a poet-critic — that is, to be an explainer as well as a practitioner, to work in contexts only tangentially related to the field of poetry, or even unrelated to it completely — thus had a very different valence from the same choice undertaken by white poet-critics of his generation. If, from one angle, Brown looks like the consummate “organization man,” or institutional poet-critic, from another he looks a lot like Big Boy: an African-American laborer looking to make his way in post-slavery America, resisting specialization precisely because what exactly he may be called upon, or be able, to do is not yet entirely clear.

IV.

I have claimed that all of Brown’s work was, in one sense or another, field work, and this does like an adequate expression for his poetry and criticism. The case of his involvement with the Federal Writers’ Project, however, with which this chapter began, is perhaps better understood as “office work”: that is, administrative supervision of those who work in the field. The ethnological skills Brown had developed as a poet came into play at one remove in his administrative and editorial role as “Editor of Negro Affairs” for the FWP. Specifically, he oversaw these researchers, who were actively engaged in the field work that Brown, owing to his responsibilities as a college professor, could not conduct himself. He did, however, consider it his responsibility to instruct them in proper anthropological procedure. “I hastily approve your going to the rural sections and not to
books,” he wrote to Harmon in October of 1936. “The latter might serve as guides to procedure. But a sympathetic approach to the people, which means no condescension and marked curiosity, should help even more.” Here Brown is recommending a kind of Wordsworthian anthropology that has more in common with the pastoral tradition than it does with social scientific methods. Brown’s role, in fact, was to teach researchers to act more like lyric poets: to respond to the lives they were chronicling not as data but as material for art. “One word of advice,” he tells Harmon. “Don’t rush the people. They may be suspicious. Just soak in the life. If you tell some of the folklore you know yourself that might help. In the main, though, I think you know as well as, or better than I, how to go about it.”

This emphasis on sympathy for the ethnographic subject and the importance of qualitative field work was necessitated by a countervailing, bureaucratic tendency to conduct as much of the research away from the field as possible. “[W]hat I want to know is this: am I doing the right thing with this material?” Brown’s student Ulysses Lee, who he had hired as a researcher on the Washington, D.C. project, asks him in a letter of June 30, 1936:

Mr. Braxton wants me to change to cataloguing statistics on the number of slaves sold in the District of Columbia and the number of “literary critiques” teaching on Howard University’s faculty and laws involving the Negro passed by the various District governments … Of course there would be less work in lifting those statistics from the files of the Library of Congress but, I thought, that the division of labor in this office would be such that Miss Roberts would do the library

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55 Brown, letter to J.H. Harmon, Jr. 27 October, 1936, MSRC.
research while I would go hiking over fields (and the fields of Brightwood and the hills of Burville are no grassy meadows). I could, of course, send bulkier packages working at the library and I would eliminate all danger of sunstroke but, meanwhile Mrs. Patterson (a delightful old lady with a throaty giggle who has promised to tell me about downtown Vinegar Hill) could die and Vinegar Hill could die with her. Perhaps I’ve put too much stress on the experiences of the people themselves but, I think, it is more nearly possible to get an idea of the economic and social history of Washington Negroes from casual conversations with these old people than from a rhapsody in figures. Maybe I’m wrong but if I am, I know where to find the figures whereas, two weeks from today, I may not know where to find any one of the old people to whom I now have introductions.56

The ethical responsibility that African-American intellectuals felt toward the life histories of the people they were interviewing inevitably clashed with the bureaucratic protocols of data collection advocated by the state. The contrast between field work and white collar work (or, in another register, qualitative and quantitative methodologies) here takes the form of a racialized division of labor, in which Lee himself sees his research role as primarily that of a field worker, literally “hiking over the fields” to gather up evidence of “the experiences of the people themselves,” while the (presumably, white) Miss Roberts does “the library research,” composing a “rhapsody in figures.” (The echo of George Gershwin’s 1924 Rhapsody in Blue — a white appropriation of black music in a more “sophisticated” form — is almost certainly deliberate.) Both Lee and Brown saw

56 Ulysses P. Lee, letter to Brown, 30 June, 1936, MSRC.
the African American researcher as both grounding and spiritualizing the administrative work of the WPA: ensuring that the bureaucratic “rhapsody” retained some basis in lived folk experience, just as Gershwin’s sophisticated orchestral composition has its roots in jazz and blues vernacular. In this way, he performs a service for the federal government similar to that performed for African American literature by the original turn to the folk tradition in Brown’s poetry, while at the same time helping a proletarianized generation of African-American intellectuals raise themselves to the dignity of skilled white collar work.

Lee’s complaint about the sterility of statistics and “literary critiques” gains force from the fact that almost all of the administrative personnel on the Federal Writers’ Project were white. Brown, of course, was an exception. Though he did write prose essays based on the research collected by Lee, Roscoe Lewis, and other field workers — one of which, “The Negro in Washington,” is today considered a classic of its genre — much of Brown’s activity for the FWP proved to be strictly managerial, or “white collar”: it consisted primarily of resolving the various conflicts that workers like Lee and Lewis encountered in the course of their work; and, secondarily, of trying to correct and counteract ideological flaws built into the government’s research program. The former involved such mundane matters as travel reimbursements, understaffing, tensions surrounding the racial integration of the project’s workforce, the inclusion of pictures, and a protracted series of conflicts between Lewis and his immediate supervisor, Virginia project director Eudora Richardson, who consistently rewrote and re-edited his copy, introducing factual errors and stereotypes in the process.

This ideological struggle over control of the *Virginia Field Guide* gradually began
to expand to become one involving authorship or, more specifically, credit. Brown had not joined the FWP expecting to assert his rights as an author: the prospect of publication in book form was apparently first introduced by Walter Alsberg after the project was already underway. “Alsberg wants some guarantee that the product of this new project should not be cast upon the Virginia broomsedge, but that it stands a reasonable chance for publication,” Brown wrote to Roscoe Lewis in September 1936. “I told him that I had not known of such an eventuality, that my greatest concern had been to get Negro material collected and Negro workers employed. I am to talk to him today about this publishing end.” The possibility that the Virginia research would result in an actual published book seems to have engendered first a burgeoning pride (“Your job is the best one I’ve ever had,” Lewis writes to Brown on October 20, 1937; “I do think we are really getting along on a book… It’s really beginning to take shape”) and, subsequently, a great anxiety. Lewis was consistently excluded from editorial decisions by Eudora Richardson; in a long, undated letter, most likely from 1937, he complains that Richardson has added “a summarizing paragraph apologizing for the ex-slave testimony” and that “[s]he made it perfectly plain that I have nothing to do with the book now that my task of ‘collecting material’ is completed.” The racialized division of labor described by Ulysses Lee recurs, with the black field worker “collecting material” and the white woman handling the more properly white-collar clerical work of collation and compilation.

It is possible, of course, to see Lewis’s frustration as arising not from institutionalized racism but from the larger artistic philosophy of the New Deal itself, which, in Michael Szalay’s account, viewed art-making “not [as] a system of commodities at all, but [as] an administratively coordinated process of production.

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57 Brown, letter to Roscoe Lewis, 4 September, 1936, MSRC.
Ideally, there would be no literary artifact the demand for which the state needed to enhance; instead, art would become an entirely procedural activity” (6). The fact that finished books resulted from this “administratively coordinated process of production” was beside the point: “Producing ‘books’ was most assuredly not a ‘necessity’ … when writers were paid for their efforts … Offering a wage for the labor of creation, but no dividends from an artifact over whose marketing and consumption a worker had no control and for which he or she was never cited as author, the Federal Writers' Project assimilated working-class politics, wage labor, and a performative aesthetic each to the other” (28). Viewed in terms of Boltanski and Chiapello’s dialectic of the artistic and the social critiques, the Federal Writers’ Project asked writers to trade autonomy and authenticity — which included, in many cases, the right to authorship — in exchange for solidarity and equality (in theory, at least; in practice, as we have seen, the division of labor was very unequal indeed). One could write, and be paid for writing, in return for neither choosing one’s subject nor determining the fate of one’s work.

Despite the best efforts of Eudora Richardson and other WPA functionaries, however, the investment of African American white-collar workers like Brown, Lewis,

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58 As Szalay points out, the FWP’s anti-authorial policy was justified by reference to both folk culture and to Eliot’s theory of impersonality: “To be sure, such equality came with a price. ‘The craftsmen who worked on the cathedrals were anonymous,’ Alsberg told the congress, and so were all Project members … particularly those at work on the Guide Series, who, as a rule, did not receive individual credit for the material they contributed. Some grumbled, but head of the Writers’ Project folklore division Benjamin Botkin touted this impersonal form of authorship as one of the Project's most laudable attributes. Echoing T.S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) Botkin maintained in ‘The Folk and the Individual: Their Creative Reciprocity’ (1937) that the federal writer must ‘live the life of the people he writes about … so that when he writes about them he becomes not merely an interpreter but a voice — their voice, which is now his own.’ Botkin goes on to claim that a writer should be eager to accept the ‘loss of sense of authorship’ if he understands that ‘it did not mean extinction, but extension and integration of the personality, through identification with his audience and complete submergence in his materials.’ Submerged in his materials, fused with his audience, the Project writer becomes indistinguishable from his subject matter and his readers” (73).
and others in the project was clearly an authorial, as well as a political, one. “Now that it appears that a book is going to be published, there crop up in my mind a dozen changes I wish to make almost every day,” Lewis writes to Brown in a long, undated letter from the late 1930s. To the injury of his exclusion from the editorial process is added the imagined insult of having to purchase a copy of the final product himself: “I’m going to make a determined effort to get hold of a copy of the proof so that I can find out what is in the book. Also I imagine I’m going to have to buy a copy.” Here the difference between “self-respecting and partly creative” white collar work and the wholly creative, respectable work of authorship becomes eminently clear: Lewis should not expect that his labor entitles to him to any benefits or privileges beyond the contractual wage the government pays him.

For Lewis, this is a hard lesson: “It’s just a Goddam shame,” he writes, later in the same letter. “Just when I had begun to think that the book was a book she chops the hell out of it, three times in the last ten months … Well, the way I feel, the hell with the project and with Eudora.” No sooner had Lewis “begun to think that the book was a book” — i.e. a work of art or literature, with some of the autotelic qualities that implies — than its status as a purely bureaucratic make-work project is reasserted. Lewis reacts to this reassertion with disgust: “Sometimes I feel that I don’t want a goddamned thing to do with this book. In many respects it is not what I wrote, and whatever ‘credit’ comes as a result of it, she can have. Frankly, I’m ashamed of it in its present form, though I admit I haven’t seen its present form.”

It was Brown’s job, as administrator, to manage the expectations of field workers that they might have a greater influence on the finished product, and his reply to Lewis attempts to assuage his hurt pride with practicality and

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59 Lewis, letter to Brown, [n.d.], 1937/1938, MSRC.
humor: “Take it easy, Greasy, you’ve got a long way to slide.” But the very fact that he continued to correspond with Lewis on these subjects indicates an interest on his own part not strictly administrative.

By March of 1939, in any case, Lewis’s frustration had given way to total disenchantment:

I had just returned from Richmond feeling very miserable after seeing what Mrs. Richardson had done to my article on the Negro for the Guide … Its [sic] a long story. I’ve been cutting and cutting and inserting and inserting. Got it down finally to 7500 words and she said it would have to come down to 5000 … She cuts out the sentence about mulattoes in the big house but retains the one about Mammies — I was a fool to put it in, I realize now. And, in cutting, she has taken out all the life of the article, if there was any there. I hate to bother you about this but I presume it is coming to you and I want you to know that its not my essay any longer.

The story of Lewis’s (and, to a lesser extent, Brown’s) alienation from the products of their collective labor would seem to call for a classical Marxist analysis. It is thus bitterly ironic that one of the crucial sticking points — the lack of proper credit for Lewis, Brown, and other African American contributors to the guide project — was justified, at least in part, by recourse to the collectivist, communitarian spirit favored by the WPA in general. “Confidentially about the by-line,” Brown writes to Lewis in

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60 Brown, letter to Lewis, [n.d.], 1937/1938, MSRC.
61 Lewis, letter to Brown, 8 March, 1939, MSRC.
September 1939. “I mentioned it to Newsom as a foregone conclusion, was startled to
hear his unreadiness. Said the Project was supposed to be cooperative. I said it was your
book. He said all these books are one-man jobs really, but that the boys on Capitol Hill
and on the Project object like hell to single name books.” The WPA’s desire to project
an undifferentiated image of a seamless, non-egoistic, “cooperative” society resulted in
the government’s failure to acknowledge the contributions of some of that society’s most
disadvantaged and underrepresented citizens.

This was a strange, but not altogether unfamiliar, kind of exploitation. Brown and
Lewis, like many African-American intellectuals of the time, dealt with their sense of
disappointment and disillusionment by reaffirming the bonds of friendship and solidarity
between each other, a connection that was only strengthened by the compromises each
was making to the state. In a 1939 letter, Brown teases Lewis about his developing
fluency in bureaucratese: “Received your stuff shirt letter … You oughta be ashamed …
I’m using parts of the letter as an example of Negro achievement (not of fooling the white
folks) — and because it makes my office look as if its accomplishing something, getting
letters like this.” Here, a facility with the language of white collar “white folks” is a

62 Brown, letter to Lewis, 11 September, 1939, MSRC.
63 Brown, letter to Lewis, 21 April, 1939, MSRC. This arch, playful tone is common in the
correspondence of African American intellectuals doing government work in the 1930s; consider
also Charles S. Johnson’s letter to Brown of October 4, 1937: “The other day a gentleman on one
of the writers’ projects did telephone to inquire if I had any ex-slaves running around our
building. He said that Washington had ordered that they find some and get from them some of
the nice things that happened weh back yonduh that wasn’t written down because although their
hearts was as white as any white man’s some of them couldn’t write, and now Washington
wanted to make this a part of official history. He went on to say that his Mammy was one of them
but she died long before the project started and so he had to find another one, and if he doesn’t
(by implication at least) there wouldn’t be much of a project very much longer. He wanted me to
select very carefully and find one who wouldn’t get over into controversial matters, because
many of them, you know, being old, have bad memories and remember only bad things about
those days.” Brown’s reply (October 7, 1937): “The paragraph on the Tennessee writer looking
for the ex-slaves is a classic, and I think that I’ll embody it in my final report. The avoidance of
point of ironic pride, “an example of Negro achievement.” But in subsequent correspondence an undertone of alienation intrudes, as the two black white collar workers, navigating their way together through an ocean of red tape, slip more and more into the old language of the plantation. “[T]he biggest thing which bothers me is to have you worry about the thing after you have left it,” Lewis had written to Brown in September 1937, when the latter was briefly considering leaving the program. “I’d hate to have you feel that you need to still run things through me — anticipate shipwreck, straighten me out. If its going to disturb your peace of mind you’d better let Alsberg get a big nigger for the job.”

Brown, too, implicitly likens their bureaucratic superiors to slave masters: “In the chaotic upturning of the project here — being ordered to move, being ordered to stay, to move, to jump out, to jump back, honey, jump back — one chapter got away from me — ‘Labor’ — but I had the carbon you left with me and it was legible enough.” And the disjunction between flat, neutral, bureaucratic language and the more pungent lingo of Southern racism is highlighted in a fake memorandum Brown sent to Lewis shortly after being reinstated as Editor of Negro Affairs:

Approved: Florence Kerr

Read by: Bumpley in Richmond Office

Dictated but not read: Sterling Brown (Editor on Nigger Affairs)

Read but not understood: T.C. Walker (Nigger in charge of the W.P.A.)

controversial matter reminds me of the dear old lady, who found that each ex-slave narrative she had collected had contained something about whipping or cruelties. So she cut that part out from all except two. ‘I do not want the readers to be bored,’ she said. ‘They all say the same thing, that they were whipped.’”

64 Lewis, letter to Brown, 7 September, 1937, MSRC.
65 Brown, letter to Lewis, 11 September, 1939, MSRC. “Jump back, honey, jump back” is a refrain from “A Negro Love Song” by Paul Laurence Dunbar.
Dictator but not Red: Martin Dies

This is my first official letter. I’m back on the payroll. Damn, I sho’ needs to be. Damn. It sho’ took time.

I don’t see why you’re singing the blues about the essay. If all gets in that Eudora sent up it’s the best N__ (Afro usage) essay we’ve ever had. After all this is a Virginia book, not one of “our group.” Peace.

You’ve done a job in that essay that shakes from my back a whole heap of history Ph.D’s and English majors. It’s a good and valuable job. Peace.66

Brown’s letter is a small masterpiece of the art of signifying, mixing together the modes of bureaucratic communication (“Dictated but not read,” the mock-scholarly notation of “Afro usage”) with that of African-American vernacular (“singing the blues,” “Peace”) and fellow traveler bonhomie (“Dictator but not Red” — recall that Martin Dies was the Senator who had accused the Federal Writers’ Project, and Brown directly, of Communist ties.) Though Lewis’s essay is figured in the terms of emancipation — it “shakes from [Brown’s] back” the burden of poor academic scholarship on African-American folk culture — their shared project is also relentlessly ironized, as if to indicate that whatever pride they may take in it must be tempered by an awareness that the book, in the end, doesn’t represent “our group.”

66 Brown, letter to Lewis, 6 April, 1939, MSRC.
It’s bad enough that the administrative positions that were supposed to signal the Negro intellectual’s graduation to white collar respectability ends up reminding them of nothing so much as the old master/slave dynamic. Even more alarming, though, is that the necessarily hierarchical structure of bureaucracy — in which there’s always someone above you — resurrects, in their own collaborative relationship, the specter of the slavery-era distinction between “house” and “field” Negroes invoked, however obliquely, by Frazier as the source of contemporary African American status inequality. Decades later, Brown would call this very distinction into question in his 1974 interview with Rowell:

Folklorists and historians make too many generalizations about what people were singing in the quarters. I think that is oversimplification. In the first place, all the divisions between the house Negro and the field Negro dismiss too many social facts about history. In the first place, most white farmers weren’t planters; they weren’t landlords; they just had four or five servants. What the hell is going to keep a man from working in the house after the breakfast cleaning up, and gettin the hell out in a field to pick the hell out of cotton in the afternoon? I mean, he could be both a fieldhand and a house Negro. What in the world would there be to do in those houses for all the people you call “house Negroes”? There wasn’t that much house … So what you get is simplification, and this is the kind of thing that I think LeRoi Jones and all the rest are guilty of. I think Adam Clayton Powell fell for it. It’s political, and what he wants to do is set up a certain division. I mean Adam Clayton Powell has an unbelievable section where he insists that he’s a black
man, a descendant of field Negroes, and that he’s a field Negro… (799-800)\textsuperscript{67}

A “field Negro,” in this sense, would describe exactly what Brown is not, or fears he isn’t, or can’t be: an African-American whose connection to the “low-down folks” is unquestionable and absolute. Rejecting the terms of a divisive intra-African American identity politics, Brown posits a pragmatism that allows for a certain itinerancy; in his account, the supposedly rigidly stratified and hierarchized system of slavery \textit{already} allows for a variety of types of labor, where one man “could be both a fieldhand and a house Negro.” A rigid division of labor, Brown argues, would not have been possible under the straitened, primitive conditions of slavery. Therefore, the lingering cultural distinction between “field” and “house” Negroes is founded on a myth.

But of course to win this historical argument is something of a Pyrrhic victory: that the same slaves were, as a matter of historical fact, exploited equally in the house and in the fields does not exactly invalidate the argument about complicity with exploitive institution that the metaphor implies. And if the system of slavery \textit{already} allowed for the kind of work that Brown sees as essential to the African-American cultural project, how progressive or transformational can that project really be?

This line of thinking, obviously, opens up much larger issues about autonomy, security, and exploitation that resonate far beyond the literary sphere. Brown, like other middle-class African American intellectuals of his time, was vulnerable to charges of complicity with the white establishment, especially as his bureaucratic involvement went beyond historically black institutions like Howard, Lincoln, and Fisk and began to extend

\textsuperscript{67} It’s odd here that Brown mentions Jones and Clayton Powell in this connection and not Malcolm X, whose 1963 “Message to the Grass Roots” speech in Washington did much to popularize the “field Negro”/“house Negro” distinction.
to entities like the WPA and the Gunnar Myrdal project. Brown was aware of such
accusations; one response to them was given in 1944’s call to arms (literally: it was
meant to justify African American military service) “Count Us In”:

What segregationists denounce as “wanting to be with white folks,” Negroes think
of as participating in the duties and enjoying the privileges of democracy. This
means being with white folks, undoubtedly, since whites have nearly monopolized
these duties and privileges. But it means being with them in fields and factories, in
the armed forces, at the voting booths, in schools and colleges, in all the areas of
service to democracy. (87)

That Brown specifically mentions “fields and factories” — the two sites, from
a certain perspective, of the African American’s most rigorous exploitation — may strike
some as a terrible irony. It was an irony he was willing to live.
The Foundations of Criticism

“Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well.”

– Theodor Adorno, “Culture and Administration”

I.

In 1945, R.P. Blackmur published a short essay in the Sewanee Review entitled “The Economy of the American Writer.” The piece was something of a departure for him, in that up to that point he was primarily known as a close reader of texts, not as a social critic, and had even taken a strong stand against Marxist critics like Granville Hicks in the 30s, in essays like “A Critic’s Job of Work” and “Heresy Against Heresy.” Nonetheless, here we have Blackmur trying his hand at cultural criticism, beginning by quoting no less a past master of the form than Alexis de Tocqueville: “Democracy not only infuses a taste for letters among the trading classes, but introduces a trading spirit into literature” (175). This “trading spirit,” in Blackmur’s estimation, had never been stronger in the United States than it was now, at the dawn of the postwar era, nor had there ever been more men and women of letters looking to trade their wares. He calls attention to the Census of 1940, in which “some 11,806 persons reported themselves as professional authors, and some 44,000 additional reported as editors and reporters” (179), noting that “[e]ven in a society so populous as ours, there cannot possibly be, unless the creative ability of man should profoundly change, 11,806 professional authors, and if there were they could not possibly be read. A few hundred good authors of all kinds — a
half dozen great authors of any kind — would be the greatest stroke of luck plausible”
(184). What the U.S. had, Blackmur claimed, was not a great literary culture but a vast
literary market, oversaturated with producers, in which the good and the great competed
for resources and attention with the mediocre and the delusional.

In Blackmur’s hybrid artistic-social critique of the postwar American scene, we
can clearly see the influence of Eliot’s Arnoldian analysis of the British literary field
discussed in the first chapter (itself, we should recall, a postwar document). In the United
States, Blackmur argued, the growth in what he elsewhere calls “the new literacies” has
inevitably had powerful transformative effects on the world of literature, but these effects
had never been checked by any institutional oversight: “The trade of writing is the chief
positive obstacle, in our world, to the preservation and creation of the art of literature,” he
wrote,

and it is an obstacle all the harder to overcome because there is a greater and
negative obstacle, which goes with it, in the absence, through all our societies, of
any social, public, or quasi-public institution which consistently and continuously
encourages the serious writer to do his best work. (176)

In the postwar period, Blackmur realized, “the art of literature” — which, for him
and his cohort, meant, first and foremost, the under-recognized, unfinished project of
modernism — would require institutional support on a scale unprecedented in American
literary history.

Not that modernism had entirely lacked for powerful institutional support in the
past, of course. The culture of literary and artistic experimentation had always been sustained by small institutions sponsored by the largesse of a few wealthy patrons, as Lawrence Rainey shows in *Institutions of Modernism*. In that book, Rainey influentially argues that Anglo-American literary modernism, threatened with the hostility and indifference of a new mass public, adopted the temporary solution of transforming itself into a luxury commodity in order to compete in a market increasingly dominated by popular culture. Blackmur may have had something like this half-measure in mind when he complains that even the existing literary institutions merely reflected the values imposed on American society as a whole by the market: “his readers if he has any, and his institutions if he can find any, both seem to judge him by the standards of the market and neither by the standards of literature nor by those of the whole society” (176).

Modernism had been spared immersion in the hostile environment of open competition, but only at the cost of being transformed into a luxury commodity for a moneyed coterie. It had, in other words, not escaped the logic of the market, but merely opted for a smaller, less competitive one.

This had been the way of modernism’s first two decades, but Blackmur now had something grander in mind. The precedent of Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration — for which Blackmur and his wife Helen, like many other literary people of the time, both worked — had emboldened literary intellectuals to feel that they could finally make the case for the deliberate perpetuation of the support of “serious literature” as a social good. The working assumption that modernism could come to some kind of compromise with the market had been shaken by the Depression. “[T]he theory of a cultural market does not work,” Blackmur asserts:
[T]he market system of open competition does not work at all from the point of view of our presumed over-all social aim: the fostering and evaluation of the serious arts and the discouragement and devaluation of, not the frivolous, but the plain bad arts … The market system as it affects writers is very much like the market system as it affects society as a whole; it dissolves all but the lowest values and preserves only the cheapest values: those which can be satisfactorily translated into money … In the market system the automatic adjustment of economic value under free competition is supposed to take care of all the human values which make economic value significant, and it is supposed to do so by natural law. (181)

While Blackmur’s anti-mercantilist attitude is fully consistent with what Michael Szalay has described as “New Deal Modernism” and would seem to point to a Keynesian solution, he is conspicuously silent on the subject of state support for the arts in “The Economy of the American Writer.” Perhaps surprisingly, the macro-actor that Blackmur’s preferred solution to this problem of the interaction of the market and literature is not government interference — he in fact goes out of his way to disparage the Soviet system, which is no more conducive to aesthetic values than the American one — but a more carefully and expertly managed capitalism. Capitalism has not been especially beneficial to literary values up to this point, Blackmur concedes, largely because of its laissez-faire character of Gilded Age industrialization: “our society has been administered more by the forward drive of its inertia in the mass, which happened to be accelerating
and therefore kept ahead of its problems, than it was administered by direct intelligence and imagination” (178). “The Economy of the American Writer” is a clarion call for the administration of the United States’ uniquely numerous literary populace by direct intelligence and imagination.

But what would allow for literary administration on this enormous scale? Blackmur puts forward two “existing institutions which show potential aesthetic bias — the universities and the Foundations.” “Must not all serious artists … grasp, both for their livelihood and for anchorage for their art, at any institutions, no matter how otherwise unlikely, that remove their values from the market?” he asked (185). The rhetorical question here is a little disingenuous; or, at least, he had already answered them for himself in the affirmative. At the time of “The Economy of the American Writer”’s publication, Blackmur had already been teaching at Princeton for five years, and the essay itself grew out of a report for the Rockefeller Foundation. It is important to note, too, that Blackmur voices important reservations about academia:

In this country writers and artists have for some years been penetrating the universities; but it is too soon to tell with what results. The risk in the experiment is that the universities are themselves increasingly becoming social and technical service stations — are increasingly, that is, attracted into the orbit of the market system. (185)

Whereas other modernist poet-critics like John Crowe Ransom tended to see the academy as a safe haven, Blackmur the autodidact keenly perceived the university’s crucial
relation to the national labor market as a whole. The risk was that universities, while employing poets and critics as teachers, and thus keeping them from having to debase their work by adjusting its value to the fluctuations of the market (i.e. by selling it), would reintroduce market values into literature by virtue of the university’s unacknowledged function as a “social and technical service station” — that is, a training ground for the professional-managerial class. This, for Blackmur, would be missing the point of the academy’s sponsorship of modernism, protecting literature from one market (the market for literary commodities) by yoking it to another (the market for skilled labor). Blackmur concludes the essay with a warning that “the universities will need the courage as well as the judgment to see how vitally implicated are their own standards in the experiment. All's Alexandrian else” (185).

II.

The philanthropic foundation, on the other hand, did appear to present a real alternative to the market system; and though Blackmur does not take up the theme in “The Economy of the American Writer,” his faith in the foundations is borne out by his subsequent administrative activities. Blackmur’s philanthropic career grew out of his friendship with John Marshall, the associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities Division, whom he had known since their adolescent years in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the early 1920s, when the former was an undergraduate at Harvard and the latter the owner of a bookstore that was a hub for Cambridge literary life.

Even before the war, Marshall had been exploring new ways of subsidizing
literary culture in the United States. Since its inception in 1913, the foundation had funded major national and international projects in medicine, public health, and rural and agricultural education. In common with the other big American philanthropies, the Rockefeller Foundation had historically put the bulk of its energies and assets into scientific research, including research into the military and national defense; from the 1930s onwards, it had also been a crucial player in the development of the social sciences. Support for the arts and humanities, by contrast, was comparatively underdeveloped.\footnote{My information on the Rockefeller Foundation’s history is drawn chiefly from Waldemar A. Nielsen, The Big Foundations (New York, 1972); Abraham Flexner, Funds and Foundations: Their Policies Past and Present (New York, 1952); and Patronizing the Public: American Philanthropy’s Transformation of Culture, Communication, and the Humanities, ed. William J. Buxton (Lanham, Md., 2009). Buxton writes: “the Humanities Division lacked the prestige of the other major Rockefeller Divisions. Its lower status was reflected in its modest budget [$750,000 per year], which made it difficult for it to have an impact comparable with that of the better-funded Divisions” (Buxton, “John Marshall and the Humanities in Europe,” 133–34). The “neglect of the humanities” was rued by one-time General Education Board director Abraham Flexner: “The thoughtful reader of these pages must have been struck by the crying inadequacy of the funds devoted to humanistic studies — to languages, literature, art, archaeology, philosophy, music, history. . . . Can one imagine the triumphant shout of approval that would greet such action on the part of a foundation in position to furnish the means for such a development?” (129-30).}

What funding the foundation did provide for the humanities tended to take the form of grants to established academic institutions in support of traditional scholarly disciplines like archaeology and classical philology. The Rockefeller Foundation functioned as a supplement to the administrative budgets of elite American universities but did little in the way of actively shaping the institutional culture of the humanities in the way it did that of the natural and social sciences.

By the mid-1930s, however, this conservative approach toward arts funding was beginning to change. Marshall’s arrival at the foundation in 1933 coincided with a larger shift, under the directorship of David H. Stevens, away from the accumulation of traditional scholarship and toward the democratic goal of wide public dissemination of
culture. It was natural enough that, when Marshall shifted the focus of his philanthropic attention to the humanities, he would turn to Blackmur, who served as the foundation’s resident literary expert in much the same way that prominent social scientists like Harold Lasswell and Paul Lazarsfeld had served as communications experts before and during the war. In keeping with Marshall’s focus on the public sphere rather than academia, the institution toward which Blackmur diverted his philanthropic energies (and the Rockefeller Foundation’s resources) was not the university but the little magazine. As much of the best recent scholarship on twentieth-century literature and culture over the course of the past decade has confirmed, little magazines were absolutely crucial to the development of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century. Legendary publications like *The Dial*, *The Little Review*, *Hound and Horn*, and *Poetry in America* and *The Criterion*, *Scrutiny*, and *New Verse* in England provided publication outlets for

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69 My emphasis on extra-academic projects, particularly in communications, follows Buxton’s. Nielsen is less impressed by Stevens and Marshall’s attempts to expand the humanities program beyond the academy: “The Division of the Arts and Humanities under David H. Stevens inherited a rather academic tradition from its predecessor in the GEB and dutifully perpetuated it. The program continued to emphasize archeology, scholarly research in ancient cultures, and classical humanistic research. The general effect, as various observers, including the director of the foundation’s program himself, remarked, was to buttress ‘scholasticism and antiquarianism in our universities’” (59-60).

70 For an excellent overview and analysis of these Rockefeller projects that places them in the context of a larger historical argument about the “revis[ion of] traditional democratic theory by removing the idea of a competent public from its center, replacing it with technocratic experts,” see chapter 3, “Mobilizing for the War on Words: The Rockefeller Foundation, Communication Scholars, and the State,” of Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York, 1999), 3.

71 The first comprehensive history of the Anglo-American little magazine — Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* — was published the same year the survey discussed in this article was conducted. For excellent recent accounts of the little magazine and its role in the development of modernism, see Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905–1920* and the *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford, 2009).
new and innovative creative work, for important critical arguments, and essential publicity for the various trends and tendencies that competed for dominance in those years. But, by the end of World War II, most of the original modernist little magazines had folded, victims of the disastrous effects of the Depression on the economy and of the shifting focus of their core readership away from art and literature and toward politics and the war effort. These had been replaced by a few new publications — among them Partisan Review (founded in 1934), the Kenyon Review (1939), and the Sewanee Review (established in the 1890s but revitalized in the early 1940s) — which were prestigious but financially unstable. By the mid-1940s, the rapid growth and potentially leveling effects of postwar consumer culture were already obvious to most literary intellectuals, and the little magazine’s days appeared to be numbered.

The Rockefeller little magazines project shows Blackmur’s commitment to the possibilities of administration by committee, and his developing sense of the role that the loose cadre of poet-critics to which he belonged might be able to play in shaping postwar American literary culture. It was not difficult for Blackmur to determine which individuals were best equipped to administer the necessary dose of intelligence and imagination. The cohort of modernist poet-critics who had been attending to questions of aesthetic value and autonomy since the late 1910s were ready and, for the most part, willing to take their turn at the managerial wheel. Eliot’s call, in “The Function of Criticism,” for a “quiet cooperative labour” in which the critic would “compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment” was, two decades later, suddenly a realistic possibility; the day of judgment appeared to be at hand.
First Blackmur enlisted Malcolm Cowley and Lionel Trilling, both of them frequent contributors to little magazines themselves, to the cause. On 18 September, 1946 Marshall informed his superiors that Blackmur, Cowley, and Trilling were assembling “a larger panel” of experts to “recommend a list of not more than eight magazines which they regarded as worthy of RF assistance.” The selection process was to be a matter of private administration, not public debate, as Marshall specified that “this small panel would be protected throughout by remaining unidentified and it would probably be desirable that even the larger panel should not in any way be announced.” The support to the little magazines would not be massive, but it would be enough to allow them to raise the level of payment for their contributors: “as suggested by Blackmur, $7.50 for a page of 300 words of prose, $10.00 for a comparable page of verse.”

In October 1946, Blackmur drafted letters cosigned by Cowley, Trilling, and himself to many of the most prominent literary figures in the United States, including the poet-critics W. H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Kenneth Burke, Randall Jarrell, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, and William Carlos Williams. The letters begin:

For reasons that will later become apparent, we should be very grateful for your best opinion as to what literary magazines now being published in the United States are of the most use to literature. . . . On the safe assumption that literary magazines like these always need money and that their contributors are always paid too little, if at all, the object of our question is, first, to take advice as to what existing

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72 John Marshall, letter to David H. Stevens, 18 Sept. 1946, box 7, folder 17, R. P. Blackmur Papers (RPBP), Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J.
magazines most deserve such help and, on their record, why; and second, to devise methods of obtaining and distributing such help.

Blackmur goes on to specify four criteria to bear in mind with regard to a little magazine’s quality: “Introduction of new writers; Support of talented writers, young and older; Maintaining of critical standards; Interest in the other arts and in society.” The letters end on a note of considerable urgency: “Our interest in what you may have to say could not be more serious or more immediate. In short, we are writing to you in the belief that, with your aid, genuine action might shortly become possible toward the consistent support of several literary magazines. Certainly any effort, not plainly futile, is worth making.”

The intention was thus both to compile a list of potential grantees and to gather suggestions about how support could be best administered. This kind of survey of the American literary intelligentsia wasn’t entirely unprecedented; the format in certain respects resembles symposia conducted by the little magazines themselves, such as the one Partisan Review published in 1939 on “The Situation in American Writing.” However, the flat bureaucratic tone of the letter, and the fact that it made no mention of any future publication of the survey’s results, resulted in many of the writers contacted giving exceptionally candid responses. A few acknowledge the unusual secrecy of the survey (Edmund Wilson refers to “your mysterious letter” and Eric Bentley calls it “nothing if not cryptic”), but it seems to have been generally understood that some kind of foundation support was involved — quite possibly because Blackmur’s links to

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73 Blackmur, letter to various respondents, box 7, folder 17, RPBP.  
74 Edmund Wilson, letter to Blackmur, 6 Nov. 1946, box 9, folder 12, RPBP.  
75 Eric Bentley, letter to Blackmur, 10 Nov. 1946, box 1, folder 10, RPBP.
Marshall and the Rockefeller Foundation were already known by his friends in literary circles at this point.

Unsurprisingly, most of the respondents are eager to declare their enthusiasm and support for the Foundation’s grand undertaking. “Delighted to get your letter this morning and to know that some movement is under way to help the magazines in this country that really care about literature,” Alfred Kazin wrote, and F.O. Matthiessen concurred that “any coherent plan of subsidy for these or similar magazines would have unmistakably profound value for our culture.” Robert Penn Warren was equally laudatory: “If you all can see that some money gets turned into the little magazines, I shall applaud. I think the country would be a lot poorer without them.” Burke wrote: “I think your suggestion is a very good one indeed. And if carried out, it might well have quite a startling effect. At least, there is much to be gained by subsidizing serious literature. And there is much to be gained by finding new ways of doing so (ways that will have a certain jolt value). The same sums, expended in the usual ways, would [probably have] a less stimulating effect than if thus suddenly presented.”

More interesting and revealing, however, are the critiques of the proposed project — almost all of which, notably, come from poet-critics. One predictable point of controversy, in these early years of the cold war, was the Left political orientation of Partisan Review, which had originally aligned itself with the American Communist Party and, by the mid-1940s, was still associated with a heterodox anti-Stalinist Trotskyism. Marianne Moore’s short response is mostly taken up with registering the fact that she

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76 Alfred Kazin, letter to Blackmur, 1 Nov. 1946, box 5, folder 3, RPBP.
77 F. O. Matthiessen, letter to Blackmur, 10 Nov. [1946], box 5, folder 11, RPBP.
78 Robert Penn Warren, letter to Blackmur, 11 Nov. 1946, box 9, folder 5, RPBP.
79 Kenneth Burke, letter to Blackmur, 18 Nov. 1946, box 2, folder 9, RPBP.
“strongly disliked the propagandist period of PARTISAN REVIEW (I have not seen more than one or two issues since that time).” One may assume that Moore, an outspoken proponent of American patriotism during World War II (and, as we have seen, an inveterate antagonist toward agonism) objected to the Partisan’s antinationalist position during the war. But even those respondents closer to the magazine’s ideological position express reservations about the Partisan’s politics. Jarrell, for instance, responding on Nation stationery, voices a representative suspicion of the intermingling of aesthetics and politics in the little magazine:

Although its politics are doctrinaire and academic in that funny New York professional-left way, they haven’t prevented it from printing other groups, Stalinists excepted. It’s an awfully shrewd, professional, competent magazine, so far as the editing is concerned. The worst things about it are its extraordinary limitations and lack of imagination: everything is looked at from the point of view of someone who’s semi-Marxist, fairly avant-garde, reasonably Bohemian, anti-bourgeois, cosmopolitan, anti-Stalinist, lives in New York, likes Mondrian, etc., etc., etc ... 

Typically, Jarrell’s primary objection to the magazine’s “professional-left” orientation is not its potential political influence but rather its distortion of the existing literary field; Partisan Review’s politics are objectionable not in themselves but because they impose a limitation of authorial perspective and an overrepresentation of a particular group of 

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80 Marianne Moore, letter to Blackmur, 2 Nov. 1946, box 6, folder 8, RPBP.
81 Randall Jarrell, letter to Blackmur, c. 1946, box 4, folder 17, RPBP.
writers and critics. Indeed, as Jarrell continues his critique, it becomes clear that the problem is not so much ideology as it is favoritism: “Partisan itself is too much of a movement: the editors will print bad things by ‘our’ people that they wouldn’t consider from outsiders — take Paul Goodman, take Elizabeth Hardwick’s story about [Paul] Tillich, etc.” Jarrell contrasts to this an ideal of perfect editorial disinterestedness, which he associates, like Eliot before him, with those who are or have been practicing artists or writers themselves:

A thoroughly good magazine would require editors who like things simply because they’re good; people who care for intrinsic values first of all, and who understand better — either because of memory or because of imagination — what it’s like to make a work of art.

The ever-outspoken William Carlos Williams takes an even more radical and uncompromising line on the subject of ideology, lumping what he calls the “big three” reviews together and likening them — somewhat improbably, given the virulent anti-Stalinism of American intellectual culture at the time — to organs of Soviet propaganda:

To hell with them all with their scholarly editors each with his prejudices and predilections, Kenyon, Sewanee and Partisan: each with some sort of axe to grind. To me that is beyond the field of the arts, this side of the field of the arts. . . . All the little magazines today seem small imitations of some Soviet-like direction
implicit in their editorial policies.\textsuperscript{82}

For Williams, the “scholarly” and the political are equally pernicious in that they imply a “direction” of the arts, and of literature in particular, toward certain predetermined ends, with “axe[s] to grind” other than a desire to showcase and stimulate artistic production. Presumably he would favor an approach closer to the little magazines he was involved with in the 1920s, such as \textit{Others} and \textit{Contact}, which took a relatively hands-off approach to editorship.

But while his response is clearly colored by nostalgia for the period of high modernism, Williams’s use of the epithet “Soviet-like” suggests that the Cold War conjuncture is not irrelevant here. The respondents’ widespread suspicion of political ideology was \textit{itself} a kind of ideology, and their concern for pure, disinterested taste — for “intrinsic values” and an undirected “field of the arts” — was reflective of a more general distrust of large institutions, epitomized by the Soviet Communist state. While the issue under discussion here is private philanthropic and not government funding, many of the respondents appear distinctly uncomfortable with the very idea of funding for the arts by a large bureaucratic organization. The fear of ideology, of a “Soviet-like direction,” displayed by Williams is in part a classically modernist gesture toward autonomy, but also a distinctly postwar fear of bigness per se, of bureaucratic interference — whether from the state or from a foundation — in the pristine, self-organizing “field of the arts.”

The common distrust of the big from all sides helps explain why even respondents less committed to the modernist concept of autonomy than Williams don’t imagine a bold new future for the little magazine in America, or a reorganization of the existing literary

\textsuperscript{82} William Carlos Williams, op cit.
field, but simply increased support for the regime they already know. While Jarrell and Williams’s critiques are framed in the language of aesthetic autonomy, they are compatible with a nascent postwar liberalism founded on distrust of bureaucratic administration and faith in efficient markets. A representative of this kind of laissez-faire liberal attitude is that of Auden, who proposes a kind of ratification of the literary economy that already exists:

As I see it, there ought to be three kinds of magazines. The real little mags, i.e. small mags [run] by little groups of intolerant eager young men who all think each other geniuses and pay each other almost nothing but get into print. Of these there should be as many as possible.

The Middle magazines, like P. R. + Kenyon who select the promising writers from the first group. Here I think the important thing is to keep the number of such magazines down so that (a) the standard of any one is not lowered too much by competition + (b) Any capital available for such a venture is concentrated and they can afford to pay more for contributions which will keep the established writers with them a little longer.

The Big magazines, e.g. New Yorker, Atlantic, Harpers, the fashion mags etc. which really have the big money. Here the important thing is ceaseless propaganda as their editorial policy to persuade them to take more “highbrow” stuff.83

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83 W. H. Auden, letter to Blackmur, 11 Dec. 1946, box 1, folder 9, RPBP.
It was widely assumed, and not just by Auden, that there would continue to be a thriving upscale market for serious poetry and fiction in big magazines like *The New Yorker*, and if the big magazines were going to continue to publish the “best” writers, then the little magazine is little more than a feeder or farm team for the bigger ones. In this sense, the perspectives expressed by many of the survey’s respondents are uniformly, even classically conservative, foregoing even the mode of “artistic critique” in favor of an utterly complacent consolidation of the status quo. The question is how to assure the continued existence of the “good literature” that already exists, against the force of the market, not to radically alter existing arrangements so as to produce an entirely new and more equitable kind of literary society. Contrary to the pluralistic intentions of Marshall, there is less concern here with democratization or expansion of the literary field than there is with consolidation of the status quo.

Such a consolidation does not necessarily entail an expansion of the field of little magazines at all (though this was in fact what would happen, especially in the 1950s and 60s, largely as a side-effect of the expansion of the educational system). Rather, it might mean a winnowing of the field, with available resources being divided between only a few little magazines (the “biggest,” as it were). To some respondents, even the reduced field of 1946 looked overcrowded; Matthissen, for instance, complains that “new ‘little magazines’ are always being started with the result that now the danger is that too many of them cover the same ground and get in each other’s way in point of circulation and chance for survival. It might well be more effective if there were fewer of them and those few with far greater subsidies.” Auden, too, is dubious:
To be quite frank, I can’t read more than one or two contributions in any of the magazines you mention. They all start off well in the first few issues because all the fairly good writers rally round to give the editor (whom they usually know personally) a rousing send-off. After that they develop a cliquish cove [?] of constant contributors stray new arrivals. It is obvious that no magazine, let alone several competing ones, can keep up a really high standard because there simply isn’t enough first-rate stuff available at their prices. The established writer is obviously going to sell his wares in the dearest market and once he has a name, the little magazines can’t afford him.

While most of the respondents assert that the little magazines should be protected, few of them relish the idea of there being any more of them than there already are. And some don’t care if there are any at all. Louise Bogan is the most dismissive of the overall project of reviving the glory days of the modernist little magazine, which she sees as a relic of a vanished interwar world:

Let me begin by saying that I believe the little magazine in America, at the moment, is in a state of obsolescence. The whole literary situation which prevailed during the period when the little mag. flourished has changed to such an extent that new terms must be applied to new conditions. Publishers of the commercial kind are now so eager to get new writers of talent that they sign them up right out of the pages of the periodicals . . . in which they first appear. I do not think that any good poet appearing in America, just now, could fail to get some sort of appreciation,
almost immediately . . . The little magazine, therefore, now prints, almost exclusively, second-rate work.84

While Bogan feels little sympathy for the “little,” she does advocate a medium-sized magazine “of a serious yet readable and lively kind” modeled on Cyril Connolly’s *Horizon*, which “demonstrate[s] how a kind of worldly, informed, and witty approach can bring new material into being, and give it an audience and a market.” Bogan, then, does imagine serious literature growing bigger, in the sense of reaching more of the lay readers modernism had lost or abandoned. Her lack of interest in the little magazine is in part, no doubt, an aesthetic one, grounded in a general distaste for experimental literature: “The life has now gone out of rebellion and experiment as such, in literature. What we need is widening and deepening of a field already conquered.” “Good” American poetry, having been nurtured by the coterie-based economy of the modernist little magazine, is now finally in a position to compete in a wider literary market alongside other cultural products. Thus the little magazine appears as, at best, a sort of vestige of a previous stage in the evolution of American literature; the goal should not be to preserve its former function of encouraging “experiment” but to “widen and deepen” the literary culture it has allowed to come into being.

Finally, it’s fascinating to track the way that the New Deal-era social democratic ethos that underlies Blackmur and company’s concern for the autonomy of modernism — an ethos which holds that the arts, like other public goods, must be supported and protected from the vagaries of the market — confronts obstacles in the form of a mandarin aristocratic worldview, which, with in its rejection of the vulgar economization

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84 Louise Bogan, letter to Blackmur, 21 Aug. 1946, box 1, folder 11, RPBP.
of the aesthetic, to be sympathetic to such a proposal. Perhaps the most considered and thought-provoking formulation of this perspective comes from Wallace Stevens, a poet-critic whose credentials as an administrator were actually quite strong. In the first of two separate letters written in response to Blackmur’s inquiry, Stevens questions whether the proposed scheme of revitalizing the little magazines could even be realistically accomplished without astronomical levels of capital:

_Poetry_ as the beneficiary of a trust fund would require something like $1,000,000.00 to carry on. . . . Even with all this, _Poetry_ would be a modest establishment. But no-one will write for it any longer for love. _The New Republic_ would discover that it was the tool of the luxurious. Everyone would expect poets to buy the drinks, and so on.

Stevens, like the sober insurance executive he was, is closely attentive to the bottom line here, but also, more interestingly, to the possible cultural effects of the private endowment of literature; that is, he considers not merely whether the support for little magazines will be effective but also whether that effect might transform literary culture beyond recognition. For Stevens, the work of literature is done, first and foremost, not for money but “for love” and, to adopt a word he uses frequently in his second letter, for “honor.” The introduction of a financial motive — or even just the ability to make a viable living as a writer or editor — compromises the basic terms of the economy of art, making literature and the little magazines into a “tool of the luxurious” rather than a preserve of the domestic, aristocratic values of love and honor. Speaking as eloquently
for the mandarins as Auden and Bogan had for the liberals, he concludes his first letter thus:

let me wind the thing up for the present by saying that the objects in the attic of life never seemed dearer to me than now when I see the three of you approaching them with pots of gilding. I hope you won’t think that I am not interested. Personally, I have a horror of the sort of thing that is done for money. That is about all there is nowadays. It has nothing whatever to do with what means anything to me nor, I believe, to you and the other two men who signed your letter.85

Granted, Stevens expresses his genteel abhorrence of market exchange in rather gothic, and fetishistic, terms (regarding literature as a collection of secret “objects” stashed in “the attic of life,” and money as an encroaching “horror”). But it is interesting that he is the only respondent to consider how the motivation of writers and the very constitution of literary culture might be affected by the introduction of private subsidy. What’s more, Stevens argues, it’s not only that writers might become greedy and self-interested; the infusion of large amounts of money would dramatically change literature’s fundamental relation to the public sphere — the very one from which, on Rainey’s account, it had been forcibly alienated in the late nineteenth century:

It is clear enough that an adequate endowment of merely the better existing magazines would run into something fantastic. A lot of new things now suppressed might be looked for and [people] would talk about the privileged few, the social duty of the trustees, etc. A man with any money at all is beset with other people’s plans for spending it.

Stevens recognizes the danger of literature becoming beholden to a sense of “social duty” — a familiar modernist anxiety about the interaction of art with public culture, but stated here in terms of obligation rather than contamination or leveling. For Stevens, this anxiety is commingled with more practical problems of administration:

Everyone whom you asked to contribute would know in advance that the universal practice in the administration of chests is to specialize in a group of donors. Who is going to contribute on such a scale to such a project? What special claim have literary men to such preference?

Very presciently, Stevens suggests that, in allying itself with the Rockefeller Foundation and other charitable institutions, literature is taking on the burden of having to justify itself, having to make a “special claim” for its preeminent cultural status — and not just to a “public” but to a small number of “donors” who possess the economic capital necessary to underwrite literary activity on this vast scale. Literature could perhaps become big without selling out to the market, but at the cost of making itself explicable, rationalizable, justifiable; an object, that is, of perpetual critique.
It is worth emphasizing that the critiques offered by the poet-critics surveyed by Blackmur emerge from the same kind of practitioner’s point of view that Eliot’s critique of the journalistic field; here, too, they provide a general artistic critique. This is especially important since Roosevelt’s New Deal, the most obvious existing model for what Blackmur, Cowley, and Trilling have in mind, is based solely on what Boltanski and Chiapello call social critique, concerned primarily with issues of equality and security. Such a critique, these poet-critics argue, is inadequate for the purposes of the administration of literary culture. Just because social security and “serious literature” are both social goods doesn’t mean that the exact same logic can be brought to bear. The critiques of Blackmur’s plan offered by Williams, Auden, Bogan, and especially Stevens demonstrate the importance of the artistic critique for the development of the specific institutions devoted to supporting and preserving art.

The importance of the artistic critique to the postwar administration of literature helps us understand the emphasis on “criticism” and “critical standards,” which was built into the survey from the start. Though they carried fiction and poetry, publications like the Partisan, the Kenyon Review, and the Sewanee Review were seen, first and foremost, as critical magazines; their most important characteristics, for most of the survey’s respondents, were their frequent publication of literary criticism (and cultural criticism, in the case of Partisan Review) and their maintenance of aesthetic standards. But if the fundamental social problem under consideration was the fundamental one of “use to
literature,” why support literature through the little magazines at all? Why not fund publishers, bookstores, or literary societies, or even make monetary grants directly to writers, as Stevens tentatively suggests?86 If the ultimate goal was to promote American literature, why fund criticism rather than literature itself?

I have already suggested that poet-critics appealed to mid-century foundation officers like Marshall for the same reason they appealed to university administrators of the same period: in the unique compromise they embodied between the apparently antithetical values of charisma and bureaucracy, they were perfect management material. As self-interested agents worried about the decline and even disappearance of literary culture, they had strong incentives to align themselves with institutions — whether capitalist or communist — that sought, in Blackmur’s words, to “remove their values from the market”; and as moral actors, disposed to view the furtherance of poetic and literary culture as a common good, they were extremely convincing in their generation of those values. The institutional support for literary modernism would be much weaker if it were based on any one justification. By involving poet-critics and subjecting their essentially social proposal to a series of artistic critiques, Blackmur, Trilling, and Cowley cannily attempt to build their edifice as strongly as possible.

86 Stevens wrote to Blackmur: “why not try to [enlist] support for the contributors instead of the magazines. . . . You would be getting more of what you want for your money and you would still be leaving it necessary for the magazines themselves to show their good faith, not to speak of many things just as fundamental, in their struggle for existence” (“SL”). From this proposal, it should be clear that what bothers Stevens is not remuneration for writers per se— he would have been fine with the patronage system of an earlier era, for instance— but economic self-interest as a motive for producing literature. Funding writers directly, rather than little magazines, would eliminate the need for calculation and allow them to produce as they pleased—although in practice, the choice of which writers to support would still be a matter of rationalization and justification.
If, as I suggest in my introduction, the postwar period saw the expansion of a “grants economy” — in which, according to Kenneth Boulding, one-way — then the emphasis on criticism begins to make more sense. All the institutions of capitalism, of course, need their critics; the process of rational means-end calculation that Max Weber identified as a necessary prerequisite for capitalism assumes the existence of those who can define and redefine both the ends in view and the means that can best be pursued to achieve them. But if this is true for firms, it is even more true for foundations, which, unlike corporations or most of the other of the major institutions of capitalism, cannot rely on profit-seeking as their sole raison d’être and thus are perpetually in need of reasons and justifications for their activities. In his 1962 paper “A Theory of Philanthropy,” Kenneth Boulding wondered whether there is anything that might be called “rational” philanthropic behavior.

What are the standards, in other words, by which we can judge whether a man, or a foundation, or even a government is giving away its money wisely. It is clear that in practice we do have some standards and it therefore must make some kind of sense to talk about rational philanthropy. Philanthropic donations, that is to say, are not wholly random or arbitrary. They are capable of criticism according to some welfare function even though the function may be very difficult to specify. (2:238)

Philanthropic organizations posed a problem for economic theory, Boulding realized, because their actions could not be rationalized according to the purely capitalist logic of profit maximization. The foundation, in other words, was a big financial actor
whose economic behavior could not be calculated in the same way as the firm’s or even the state’s (if we view the state’s activity as oriented toward the protection of its military and economic interests, at least). Philanthropic donations still had to be “capable of criticism” — indeed, their grants were on such a tremendous scale that they demanded it more than ever — but they weren’t subject to the kinds of purely rational criticisms economists and politicians were used to making of purely capitalist, exchange-oriented institutions. “A foundation,” Boulding points out, “must make choices much as a firm does. It has to decide that A is worthy and B is not. It must develop a policy according to which it makes and, perhaps even more important, justifies its decisions. Even though its purpose is to do good rather than to make profits and even though profits have a certain objectivity of measurement which the good has not, nevertheless, it is presumably in the interest of a foundation to do more good in its own estimation rather than less” (2:241). Therefore, since philanthropic foundations are aiming at a “maximization of good” rather than a maximization of profit, they are in need of rationales, of justification.

And justification, as we have seen, is a service that critics have always been able to supply. The function of criticism, typically viewed as supplemental to art and literature, is not merely to judge and evaluate but also to justify and rationalize what otherwise risks appearing as a totally autonomous realm of values, responsible to no authority but itself. And poet-critics, as mediators between that mysterious, autonomous realm of values and the rationalized world of calculating, getting, and spending, were perfectly placed to guide that effort. Since criticism had long been in the justification business, it was a natural fit for the grants economy perpetuated by big bureaucratic institutions like philanthropic foundations, universities, and (to a lesser extent) the
government, which were subject to public scrutiny and needed clearly articulated rationales. Whereas in a purely market-driven expansion of the literary field, the big winners might simply be the “best” writers — that is, the most popular and commercially successful, those whose work was in highest demand, either with the general public or with the tastemakers and gatekeepers who happen to be in control of prestige magazines — this philanthropic form of growth privileged the rationalizers, the explainers: in a word, the critics.

At the same time, the substantial critiques offered by Williams, Jarrell, and Stevens reflect a concern for the quality of poetic culture that could only come from poets, from those who not only understood the values of the literary world but *lived* them. They don’t simply will the continued existence of poetry under any circumstances; they want to preserve its autonomous character, which includes not just the character of the texts or their mode of distribution but, importantly, the motivations of the writers who produce it. (Think of Stevens’ aristocratic “horror of those things that are done for money.”) The problem is obvious: if exposure to administration is harmful to poetry’s autonomous, inspirational character, then how can provision be made for its continued existence? To put it another way: What could foundations and universities possibly have to offer poets *but* administration? This produces a paradox, since there was a very real feeling that, without support from foundations and universities, poetry would cease to exist; and note that none of the conscientious objections of the poet-critics who responded to Blackmur’s survey involve turning down the foundation funding completely. The stakes were too high for that, and beggars — even sacred beggars — can’t be choosers.

The solution was to let the choosers be the beggars. The wide agreement among the
respondents on the positive social value of criticism — its value as a public good, but also its evaluability according to rational norms — makes it easier to make a case for funding it, for justifying its existence. Even if none of the respondents to Blackmur’s survey would claim that literary criticism was more valuable or important — and thus more deserving of funding — than poetry or fiction, there does seem to be a broad consensus that criticism, good and bad, is easier to come to consensus about, more inherently justifiable, than literature. The thinking may have been, if you have to institutionalize something, go ahead and institutionalize criticism — because it is in greater danger than imaginative literature, and because the establishment and promulgation of sound “standards” will in turn inevitably produce better literature. Criticism thus operates according to a logic very similar to that of the foundation itself: it would be a responsible, ameliorative institution of capitalism that allows for the perpetuation of activities incommensurate with, or even hostile to, the logic of capitalist accumulation.

The real legacy of the Rockefeller project is not where the money ultimately went — to the Kenyon Review, rather than the critically favored Partisan, whose residual connections with the Trotskyist Left may have worked against it — but its institutional interpellation of critics, and especially poet-critics, as managers, and acknowledgment that the artistic critique, in its various modalities, would be essential to the institutionalization of modernism in the postwar period. For the first time, modernist critics were perceived not as so many squabbling agonists but as a cadre of administrators of literary culture, with a properly pluralistic, philanthropic interest in compromising with the capitalist institutions that otherwise threatened to obliterate them.
We are beginning to see why criticism, which would seem to be a relic of an older belletristic tradition unsuited to the brave new postwar world, benefited so handsomely from the long literary boom. Our current culture of “Big Criticism” was born out of a collective realization that American literary culture would need to grow but also a collective fear that that growth would be wild, unrestricted, and personally damaging to the literary intelligentsia of the prewar period and the norms they had developed. As Williams put it, invoking another postwar discourse by a poet-critic (Walt Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas”): “The vistas are limitless. But had damn well better be limited if any good is to be done.”
Envoi: To the University

“Is prose justified? Or aren’t you the kind that tells?”
— Charles Bernstein, “What’s Art Got to Do with It?”

Plainly, Blackmur’s dream of a public culture of modernist critical discourse supported by the largesse of philanthropic foundations didn’t come to pass. Instead, the work of poet-critics would continue to be supported by the already existing institutional structures of the universities, with philanthropic organizations lending the occasional infusion of capital but not advancing initiatives of their own. Two years after the Rockefeller survey, Ransom received a three-year grant from the foundation to fund the Kenyon School of English, a summer program dedicated to training undergraduate teachers in criticism and critical theory; the same year, Blackmur received similar support to establish the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton. It would be projects like these, rather than the work of little magazines, that would provide the way forward for the kind of discourse that modernist poet-critics had inaugurated.87

It is thus possible to see the immediate postwar period as a contest between two rival visions of modernism’s institutionalization, one stressing philanthropy (Blackmur), the other higher education (Ransom). If this admittedly schematic perspective is adopted,

87 Foundation support for little magazines in the postwar period was often in fact a cover for funding by the state, in particular the CIA; this was the case, most famously, for Partisan Review and Encounter. See Frances Stonor Saunders, The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters.
then Ransom is the clear victor. “If there was a single critical career whose personal trajectory perfectly coincided with the institutional fortunes of criticism,” Gerald Graff writes in *Professing Literature*, “it was that of John Crowe Ransom” (155). Of all the poet-critics of the modernist era, it was Ransom who invested most deeply in the institution of the university, an investment motivated not only by humanist piety but also by his awareness of a looming crisis within the professoriate. “I have an idea,” he wrote to Allen Tate in 1937, à propos his move from Vanderbilt to Kenyon and the creation of the *Kenyon Review*, “that we could really found criticism if we could get together on it … [T]he professors are in an awful dither trying to reform themselves and there’s a big stroke possible for a small group that knows what it wants in giving them ideas and definitions and showing the way.” Ransom, like Blackmur, sought to “found” criticism, to give it a solid foundation in the practical and financial as well as the theoretical and intellectual sense. By the mid-1940s, the high-minded ethical talk of “principles” that Eliot had inaugurated with “The Function of Criticism,” and that I.A. Richards had subsequently developed in *The Principles of Literary Criticism* and other theoretical texts, had now given way to the archaeological discourse of “foundation”: the concern is not so much for an ethics, or methodology, as it is the establishment of an institutional headquarters or home base.

Nor was Ransom’s call for institutionalization expressed only in private correspondence. “It is strange,” he writes in “Criticism, Inc.,” first published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in Autumn 1937 and reprinted the next year in his collection *The World’s Body*, “but nobody seems to have told us what exactly is the proper business of criticism.” Those currently writing criticism “have not been trained to criticism so
much as they have simply undertaken a job for which no specific qualifications were required. It is far too likely that what they call criticism when they produce it is not the real thing” (93). So far, so Eliotic, especially considered alongside the opinion that “probably the best critics of poetry we can now have are the poets.” But Ransom insists far more strongly than Eliot ever did on the limits of the artist’s pragmatic approach to criticism. “[T]he artist himself … should know good art when he sees it,” Ransom writes, “but his understanding is intuitive rather than dialectical — he cannot very well explain his theory of the thing” (93). The need for theory, as much as the need for institutional financial support, undergirds Ransom’s decisive call for a university-based culture of criticism:

[I]t is from the professors of literature, in this country the professors of English for the most part, that I should hope eventually for the erection of intelligent standards of criticism. It is their business. Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons — which means that its proper seat is in the universities … Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals. Perhaps I use a distasteful figure, but I have the idea that what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd. (93-94)

Ransom was not the first person to call for a professionalized academic criticism, but the fact that he did so as a poet, with the full force of the artistic critique behind him
— making the leap that Eliot, for all of his academic leanings, never quite had — had an immense symbolic significance, and not only for other poets.

It is here, of course, that the story of the modernist poet-critic begins to intersect with “the rise of the creative writing program,” which, according to Mark McGurl, “stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history” (ix). “Creative and critical interests banded together to oppose the philological syndicate,” D.G. Myers writes in *The Elephants Teach*, his history of creative writing; in his view, it was the infusion of energy and intellectual prestige that poet-critics like Ransom, Tate, Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and Yvor Winters brought to the cause of criticism that finally allowed longtime exponents of academic criticism like Norman Foerster, J.E. Springarn, and R.S. Crane to triumph over the objections of the philologists (128-131). Graff endorses a similar theory when he suggests that “many of the first critics to achieve a foothold in the university did so on the strength of their poetry rather than their criticism. It is worth pondering the probability that the critical movement would not have succeeded in the university had it not been tied to creative writing, from which it was soon to part company” (153).

As Graff suggests, the strategic alliance between creative writing and academic criticism was relatively short-lived; once each had gained sufficient prestige from the other to establish themselves as relatively autonomous disciplines, they soon retreated to their separate corners to cultivate a whole new narcissism of small differences. McGurl refers to “the sneering war between creative writers and scholars in the university, who upon the fading of the great poet-critics of the 1940s and 50s from the leading edge of

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literary scholarship came to seem divided by their shared object, literature, even as their offices were still often found side by side in the same hallways” (8-9). This transition would seem to call for a Weberian analysis of the profession, and in particular the rise of theory, in which the institution of academic literary criticism, founded on the charismatic authority of the modernist poet-critic, becomes bureaucratized and rationalized and has trouble legitimating itself in the absence of the original charismatic founders. After 1967, the charisma that had helped to establish criticism as an academic discipline is largely channeled into the creative writing program, where, according to McGurl, “the literary artist [presents] to students in the classroom … a charismatic model of creative being” (36).

At the same time, as McGurl also notes, the discipline of literary study continues to address itself to theoretical issues arising out of the practice of modernist poet-critics: “after World War II … the modernist imperative to ‘make it new’ was institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming, science-oriented universities of the Cold War era” (4). Many scholars have pointed out, correctly, that many of our basic disciplinary assumptions — from the practice of close reading to a theoretical concern for aesthetic autonomy to the very shape of the modern (and not only modernist) canon — are the result of this temporary alliance between beleaguered poet-critics and beleaguered humanists against philologists and historians. The story that these scholars

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89 Andrew Goldstone, for instance, suggests that, in the postwar period, “[t]he autonomy of literature could be invoked to justify academic literary criticism as a distinctive discipline with an isolable object of study; at the same time, a specialist mode of interpretation and appreciation served to buttress modernism's claim to autonomy … [M]odernism … set the terms in which literary scholars, and literary readers in general, still debate the fundamental questions about literature in society, aesthetic form, and literary meaning” (2-3). Stephen Schryer writes that “the method of close reading … was supposed to make criticism more scientific — that is, more predictable and rigorous. Close reading became the discipline's specialized techne, its claim to
tell — of how the great modernist poet-critics helped create the institutional conditions that made the New Criticism, and subsequent developments in literary theory, possible — has a canonical status by now in literary studies. The problem with this narrative is not that it’s wrong; it’s that it’s partial, and reduces the manifold institutional commitments of poet-critics like Eliot, Moore, Brown, Blackmur, and Ransom into a “just-so story” to explain the evolution of a single academic discipline (ours). It is not at all surprising that so many literary scholars have wanted to tell (and re-tell) this story, since it concludes with the existence of literary studies as we currently know it: what child isn’t interested in hearing the story of her birth?

But modernist poet-critics, as I hope the foregoing has shown, were trying to do more than found, or reform, an academic discipline, even if they ended up legitimizing two, and we should be careful not to let the immense resonance that the figure of the poet-critic has in academic life — for creative writers or, for that matter, for critics — overdetermine our sense of those actual writers’ own commitments, priorities, and expectations — even when, as in the case of Blackmur, they now seem utopian or unrealistic. As the political scientist Albert O. Hirschman suggests regarding a different historical turning point — the expansion of capitalist civil society in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries — we may limit our understanding by attending to the professional identity, and the New Critics linked this techne to the imagined moral effects of literature in modern society” (31). Taking the genealogical link between modernist criticism and the subsequent postmodernist discourse of theory still further, John Guillory argues that methods of close reading originally developed to justify modernism underlie the subsequent dominance, in the academy, of interpretation and, in particular, ideology critique: “the moment of institutional victory for the New Criticism is marked by a strategic reaffirmation of the traditional canon of major authors, reread according to a pedagogic strategy — ‘close reading’ — that refunds in these authors what is well hidden there, what requires very close reading in order to be discovered at all: the same orthodoxy of opinion Eliot found only in the ‘minor’ tradition … [T]he appearance in Eliot’s criticism of a shadowy, alternative ‘tradition’ of minor poets has a good deal to do with the legitimation of his poetic practice, with the emergence … of a ‘modernist’ poetic” (141; 147).
unexpected effects of what did happen at the expense of what was expected to happen but didn’t:

On the one hand, there is no doubt that human actions and social decisions tend to have consequences that were entirely unintended at the outset. But, on the other hand, these actions and decisions are often taken because they are earnestly and fully expected to have certain effects that then wholly fail to materialize … [T]he expectation of large, if unrealistic, benefits obviously serves to facilitate certain social decisions. Exploration and discovery of such expectations therefore help render social change more intelligible. (130-131, italics Hirschman’s)

I have tried to show that poet-critics like Eliot, Moore, Brown, Blackmur, and Ransom made deliberate “social decisions” about the relation of their work to postwar bureaucratic institutions, and that these decisions — alongside, of course, a multitude of other determining factors — led to “social change” in the Anglo-American literary field. In the light of subsequent literary and institutional history, Ransom’s governing idea — that the “proper seat” of criticism was in the universities — has come to seem self-evident, but it was only one of many possible outcomes. From within the disciplinary matrix of the academic field that poet-critics have helped to initiate, the movement from poet-critics to New Criticism to theory may seem like inevitable and even intentional development, or it may seem like a tragic decline: either way, by installing them as founding fathers and either blaming them for where we ended up or regretting that we lost sight of their mission, we risk projecting our present anxieties about our own
precarious institutions onto our understanding of the critical decisions taken by these “double agents” in their own historical moment. This is why it may help to return to the moment that these decisions were made, not because their effects were, in the long term, significant, but because it can help us to reconstruct some of the other assumptions and expectations other modernist poet-critics had around the idea of institutionalization, and what contribution they felt they might be able to make to it. It’s still an excellent question.


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