Aesthetic Specialists and Public Intellectuals: Ruskin, Emerson, and Contemporary Professionalism

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In his discussion of Robert Southey's *Sir Thomas More* in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1830, Thomas Babington Macaulay takes issue with what he considers an unfounded criticism of England's economic progress. What Macaulay deems most deplorable is the poet laureate's crossing over from "those departments of literature in which he might excel" into the domain of social criticism, where "he has still the very alphabet to learn."[1] Southey's judgment of modern society proceeds as if "politics" were not "a matter of science" but "of taste and feeling" (533). His rejection of industrial progress is derived not from such relevant data as "bills of mortality and statistical tables," which he "cannot stoop to study" (539), but from a mere aversion to the aesthetics of the changing face of modern England. When Southey implies that the country's cultural illness can be deduced from the ugliness of industrial towns, Macaulay responds with withering sarcasm:

> Here is wisdom. Here are the principles on which nations are to be governed. . . . We are told, that our age has invented atrocities beyond

the imagination of our fathers . . . because the dwellings of cotton-spinners are naked and rectangular. Mr Southey has found out a way, he tells us, in which the effects of manufactures and agriculture may be compared. And what is this way? To stand on a hill, to look at a cottage and a manufactory, and to see which is the prettier. (540)

Beyond the evident dislike of Southey's conservatism, Macaulay caricatures a new claim that the well-being of the social organism is better understood by the connoisseur's intuitive recognition of its aesthetic expressions than by the historian's scrutiny of sociopolitical and economic data. The purpose of this essay is to sketch how today's public intellectual emerges from the presumption that literary-aesthetic knowledge conveys privileged access to the social domain.

The Privileged Sensibility of Literary Intellectuals

Among Macaulay's younger British contemporaries, a talented representative of the connoisseur as social critic was John Ruskin, whose first major publication, the essay "The Poetry of Architecture" in the 1837 issue of the *Architectural Magazine*, uses the same approach as Southey's. It aims to demonstrate that the appearance of lowland cottages reflects national character and regional landscape: trimmed thatch and luxuriant rosebushes express Englishness, in contrast to the "massive windows" and "broken ornaments" characteristic of French cottages.[2] But the claims advanced in this essay seem modest in comparison to those of Ruskin's later work, written after he has become an established Victorian sage. In an address before the Royal Institution in 1869, Ruskin argues that the "higher arts . . . tell the story of the entire national character" and that therefore Titian's 1544 portrait of Andrea Gritti "tells you everything essential to be known about the power of Venice in his day." This claim is fleshed out in a passage that could be read as a rejoinder to Macaulay: "So,—if you go to the Kensington Museum,—everything that needs to be known, nay, the deepest things that can ever be known, of England a hundred years ago, are written in two pictures of Reynolds': the Age of Innocence, and the young Colonel

[2] John Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: Allen, 1903–12), 1:15.

mounting his horse. Carlyle and Froude and Macaulay all together cannot tell you as much as those two bits of canvas will when you have once learned to read them" (*Works,* 19:250). Ruskin's insistence on the public relevance of aesthetic expert knowledge seems a great deal more ambitious than Southey's meditations: the Romantic gentleman poet and amateur critic of the 1820s has given way to a quasi-scientific aesthetic specialist trained to "read" the stylistic intricacies of cultural artifacts.

Ruskin's approach has been related to the Victorian "moral aesthetic," which seeks to mediate between the social and aesthetic responsibilities of the literary sphere, complicating apparently simple oppositions between art and life.[3] The emergence of this critical attitude has been well explained as a response to the nineteenth-century social changes that encouraged the idea of Arnoldian culture as a remedy to modern alienation.[4] But we can further elucidate the nineteenth-century discourse of the aesthetic specialist if we view it as a rhetorical engagement with changing rules of intellectual legitimation.

The posture of Southey and Ruskin strongly resembles that of French intellectuals since the Second Republic as analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu.[5] Bourdieu relates the emergence of the "intellectual field"

[3] In his landmark study *The Victorian Temper* (1951) Jerome H. Buckley reevaluates the modernist stereotype about the moralist didacticism attributed to "Victorianism" by showing how midcentury critics such as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Tennyson fashion a moral aesthetic that seeks to resolve the tension between the public and private aspects of art in a way that not only resembles Romantic discourse (in Wordsworth and Shelley) but also remains important for supposed "aesthete" critics such as Walter Pater (*The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969], 143–60, 178–84). On the contemporary significance of this debate and the paradigm-building role of twentieth-century readings of Arnold (beginning with Lionel Trilling's revaluation in 1939) see Jonathan Arac, "Matthew Arnold and English Studies," in *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 117–38; and Arac, "Why Does No One Care about the Aesthetic Value of *Huckleberry Finn?*" *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 774–75.

[4] The classic starting point is Raymond Williams's discussion of Ruskin and Arnold, notably in his groundbreaking *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

[5] See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). For a discussion of Bourdieu's key concepts and their aesthetic and philosophical trouble areas see Richard Shusterman,

to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century acceleration and diversification of cultural production. His account of the "invention" of the modern public intellectual revolves around the Third Republic moment of semiautonomy, when the recognition of literary professionals began to depend more on the opinions of their peers than on the economic and political vicissitudes of society. Men of letters were then able to enter the political domain "in the name of norms belonging to the literary field" (*Rules*, 129). Whereas Macaulay and exemplary French "literary politicians and political littérateurs" (*Rules*, 130) like François Guizot (1787–1874), Jules Michelet (1798–1874), and Victor Cousin (1792–1867) had credentials in politics and economics, Zola and the writers, artists, and scholars protesting the Dreyfus affair intervened "in political life *as intellectuals*, meaning with a specific authority founded on their belonging to the relatively autonomous world of art, science and literature" (*Rules*, 340).

Bourdieu's analysis translates well to the culture of Victorian England. Despite their differences, Southey and Ruskin both claim their ground as arbiters of taste within what I would call, following Bourdieu, the "field" of Victorian intellectuals. Yet extending Bourdieu to Britain requires translation in time as well as in space. Bourdieu demonstrates well how intellectual autonomy was furthered by the evolution of the field during the late nineteenth century, when intellectuals legitimated themselves via peer recognition that ran in "almost exactly the inverse" relationship to social status, whereas earlier the "most consecrated among people of letters, especially poets and scientists" had been—in France—clients of the state, indeed among "the best provided with pensions and profits" (*Rules*, 114). But while Zola may have justified his claim to political neutrality by the increase in field autonomy since the days of politically tenured poets, he is anticipated by Southey's and Ruskin's claims about the public relevance of their aesthetic perceptions.[6] Zola's rhetoric of legitimation, indeed, is not specific to the near autonomy

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ed., *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); and Marshall Brown, ed., "Pierre Bourdieu and Literary History," special issue, *MLQ* 58, no. 4 (1997). For the similarities between Bourdieu and Williams see Craig Calhoun, "Putting the Sociologist in the Sociology of Culture: The Self-Reflexive Scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams," *Contemporary Sociology* 19 (1990): 500–505.

[6] Zola's double process of legitimation, as William Paulson aptly describes it, was "a virtuous circle in which the novelist shored up his literary authority by acting as a

finally realized (in Bourdieu's account) by 1890s intellectuals. Rather, the modern intellectual's "presumption of a privileged sensibility"[7] arose during an earlier dilemma of legitimacy: it preceded and in fact presaged subsequent claims of field autonomy. Since freedom from the influence of the social domain always threatens to turn into social marginality, autonomy is beset by insecurities about legitimation almost by definition. From early in the century—not just at its end—British intellectuals compensated with rhetorical claims to privileged sensibility.

As a rhetorical treatment of intellectual anxieties of marginality, nineteenth-century claims about the public relevance of the aesthetic specialist draw on the foundations of artistic autonomy laid in Kantian aesthetics and revised by Romantic transcendentalists.[8] The contested reception of Kant's third *Critique* indicates how the Enlightenment emergence of a disinterested sphere of aesthetics was perceived as a mixed blessing. It liberates artistic practice from ideological constraints, allowing for a definition of beauty based on internal criteria of excellence. But it also implies that professional artists and critics "merely" deal in aesthetics, while others (moral philosophers, political scientists, etc.) do more "serious," socially significant work. The autonomy of literary beauty heralded by Kantian aesthetics recognizes the legitimacy of intellectuals as aesthetic specialists at the risk of their privatization.[9] Bourdieu therefore stresses that early Romantic writers

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disinterested intellectual while deriving intellectual authority from his standing as a disinterested man of letters" ("The Market of Printed Goods: On Bourdieu's Rules," *MLQ* 58 [1997]: 412).

[7] Ross Posnock, "Assessing the Oppositional: Contemporary Intellectual Strategies," *American Literary History* 1 (1989): 147. See also Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 126–29.

[8] Critics argue over whether section 59 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* implies a "symbolic" or an "analogous" relation between the beautiful and the good. The symbolic view would implicate the artist more directly and personally in pragmatic moral issues. What matters historically (and to this essay), however, is the widespread understanding that Kant suggests the autonomy of the aesthetic from moral or cognitive demands, whether or not this view can be securely attributed to him.

[9] The consequent sense of social irrelevance (and questioned masculinity) is implied in Emerson's 1837 complaint that American intellectuals are "addressed as women" and thus "virtually disenfranchised" by society's "practical men" (*Works*, 12 vols. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903], 1:94). Emerson's fears accord well with

fulfilled a "subordinated function, strictly enclosed within the realm of diversion and thus removed from the burning questions of politics and theology" (*Rules*, 129–30). But notwithstanding the low internal force of their relatively undifferentiated field, Romantic intellectuals anticipated Zola's gestures of legitimation by roughly a century. They sought to cope with their anxieties of marginality, not by disavowing artistic autonomy—which would have been difficult, in light of the persistently differentiating intellectual fields—but by redescribing the aesthetic as "a vehicle of ontological vision."[10] The revision of Kant's aesthetics by the Romantic generation of transcendental idealists can therefore be broken down into two steps. They agree with Kant that beauty depends on purely formal criteria; hence they locate the poetic squarely within stylistic parameters distinct from sociopolitical realities. But then they reconceptualize autonomous style as an "organic" externalization of an interior identity, turning it effectively into a cultural symptom. Pure beauty thus becomes a socially relevant numinous presence when it is seen, for instance, as a reflection of unalienated existence (in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*), a symbolic representation of the infinite (in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800 and A. W. Schlegel's Berlin lectures of 1801–3), or a sensible manifestation of the "idea" (in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s).[11]

It is important to note the protoprofessionalism underlying the post-Kantian revision. In Shaftesbury's Neoplatonism, "polite" amateurs perceive the structural correspondences between the true, good, and the beautiful simply with their healthy senses, whereas Romantic Kantians emphasize trained aesthetic perception. For all their primitiv-

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Macaulay's presentation of Southey as an artist of the beautiful who had better stay within the limits of his effeminate, socially irrelevant field. On the fear of feminization see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); and David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

    [10] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 470.

    [11] Later idealists and postidealists conceived the core of cultural interiority in more concrete sociopolitical terms: their poetic manifestos begin to speak of style as the "physiognomy" of the "spirit of the age," the "race," the "nation," or politicoeconomic systems (as Whitman's "poetry of democracy" or Marx's culture of capitalism). This concretization starts with the Hegelian notion that there is no spirit outside social practice.

ist fascination with the artlessness of common experience, Romantic philosophies of art retain the Kantian view that the aesthetic has essentially to do with issues of style or form. This can be seen in the post-1800 shift to aural definitions of the literary.[12] If poetry was a sort of music instead of a picture of life, it needed cultural workers with musical abilities that (especially in light of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with classical art music) were more refined than those of eighteenth-century amateur connoisseurs. The post-Kantian turn, then, was motivated by the urge to demonstrate the social relevance of formal beauty without giving up its privilege as a self-contained "music." Though in this view Beethoven's compositions are irreducible to conceptual interpretation, they are not ornamental arabesques without content (as Eduard Hanslick's radical Kantianism implies) but symbolize larger values, from the numinous to the sociopolitical: the "language of religion" (Wilhelm Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck), the "Infinite" (E. T. A. Hoffmann), the "Will" (Arthur Schopenhauer), the "Dionysian" (Friedrich Nietzsche), Democracy (Franz Brendel), or millenarian social utopia (Margaret Fuller, John Sullivan Dwight).[13]

Ruskin and Midcentury Professionalism

No English-speaking nineteenth-century cultural critic realized the potential of the post-Kantian rhetoric of legitimation more clearly than Ruskin.[14] His famous defense of Gothic architecture in *The Stones of*

[12] See M. H. Abrams's classic account, "Ut Musica Poesis," in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1953), 88–94; and Herbert Lindenberger, "Literature and the Other Arts," in *Romanticism*, ed. Marshall Brown, vol. 5 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. George A. Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 373–74.

[13] On the nineteenth-century interdependence of musical metaphors and literary poetics see Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For the Victorian field, Carlyle's lecture on Shakespeare as a hero is a good reference point. Carlyle speaks of poetry as "*musical thought*" that "leads us to the edge of the Infinite," spoken by "a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing" (*A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G. B. Tennyson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 392).

[14] Ruskin claimed never to have read German philosophical idealism (see his appendix to the third volume of *Modern Painters* [*Works*, 5:424]), although it is likely that he encountered it filtered through Coleridge and Carlyle. Ruskin's American

Venice (1851 – 53) illustrates the professional aspirations of late Roman-
tic cultural criticism. In attributing social relevance to painterly and
architectural form, Ruskin certainly draws on Romantic attempts to
explain social phenomena as externalizations of an interior cultural
core. But he makes more systematic use of a rhetoric of cultural paral-
lelism: he insistently stages resemblances or correspondences between
disparate levels of experience, between artistic forms and the struc-
tures of social relations or identities. The style of Gothic facades comes
to be an organic expression of the love of liberty and independence
inherent in northern European mentalities and the culture of medi-
eval Christianity; Greek, Egyptian, and Italian Renaissance ornaments
reflect the more indolent mentalities of southern European cultures
and the hierarchical structures of pre-Christian societies (or their deca-
dent heirs in Renaissance Venice or industrial England). The northern
European mind, with its "strength of will, independence of character,
resoluteness of purpose, impatience of undue control, and that general
tendency to set the individual reason against authority," is "traceable in
the rigid lines, vigorous and various masses, and daringly projecting
and independent structure of the Northern Gothic ornament." The
cultural traits of southern European peoples, their lack of vital energy,
and their indifference to liberty and independence "are in like manner
legible in the graceful and softly guided waves and wreathed bands,
in which Southern decoration is constantly disposed; in its tendency
to lose its independence, and fuse itself into the surface of the masses
upon which it is traced" (*Works*, 10:241 – 42). Ruskin claims that the core
values of a culture are "legible" to him in the gestalts of architectural

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reviewers, at any rate, read the third volume of *Modern Painters* as a variation on Hege-
lian aesthetics ("Ruskin's Writings," *Putnam's*, May 1856, 496; "Ruskin's Last Volume,"
North American Review, April 1857, 379–406). If one cared to pursue the exact trajec-
tories of philosophical influence, one could look at Coleridge's well-known adapta-
tion of Schelling's aesthetic religion and at the crucial role of the *Biographia Literaria*
(1817) and *Aids to Reflection* (1825) in the creative misreading of Kantian transcen-
dentalism as a kind of "inner-lightism" in Hazlitt, Carlyle, Bancroft, Emerson, Whit-
man, and many others. Hegel's version of expressivist aesthetics, which emphasized
philosophical reason, arrived much later in the English-speaking world, although its
basic tenets were popularized in Europe and America through the mediation of Vic-
tor Cousin as early as the 1830s. During the 1850s Hippolyte Taine revised Hegelian
notions within a positivist framework toward a theory of art as a national symptom.

form. The northerner's savage individuality logically causes indepen-
dent lines, while the southerner's warmhearted indolence transforms
itself into soft ornaments, which lose their independence symbolically
by melting into their surroundings.[15]

Ruskin's most complex exegesis of symptomatic style appears in his
proto-Marxist comparison of ornamental types with social modes of
production. He argues in essence that architectural structures reflect
the degree of social hierarchy in the social bodies out of which they
grow. In the societies of antiquity, laborers were tools with easily repro-
ducible and specialized tasks, such as the production "of mere geomet-
rical forms,—balls, ridges, and perfectly symmetrical foliage,—which
could be executed with absolute precision by line and rule" (*Works*,
10:189). Their slave labor produced the perfectly regular "servile orna-
ment" that dominates Greek and Egyptian art. Gothic architecture, by
contrast, reflects Christianity's recognition of "the individual value of
every soul" (*Works*, 10:190): the builders accepted the imperfection of
the individual mind and thus allowed workers to engage in more var-
ied and less regularized tasks. Gothic ornaments are "constitutional"
or "revolutionary," in accord with the greater freedom enjoyed by the
worker.[16] The idea that northern cultures have a natural relationship

[15] In many ways Ruskin's argument draws on early-eighteenth-century Romanti-
cism's revaluation of the Gothic as an expression of the inwardness and melancholic
self-reflexivity of northern European Christianity as it was popularized by A. W.
Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809) and Madame de Staël's *On
Germany* (1810). Another possible influence (even if Ruskin denied it, in the third vol-
ume of *Modern Painters* [*Works*, 5:428–29; cf. George Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical
Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 277]) was the
work of the English architect Augustus Pugin (1812–52), whose *Contrasts* (1836), *True
Principles of Pointed Architecture* (1841), and *Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture
in England* (1843) combined a functionalist with an ethical reading of architectural
form that led him to defend Gothic style as an expression of Roman Catholicism and
to reject neoclassical art as a reflection of pagan beliefs (see J. Mordaunt Crook, *The
Dilemma of Style: Architectural Ideas from the Picturesque to the Post-modern* [London: Mur-
ray, 1987]).

[16] In an 1882 letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Ruskin refers to a " 'Liberty' of line"
that gives rise to the imperfections of Gothic facades (at which one can hardly look
"without being seasick!") and that embodies the freedom of the worker, and he speaks
of "the horror of the restoration which puts it 'to rights' " (*The Correspondence of John
Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. John Lewis Bradley and Ian Ousby [Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1987], 450). Ruskin's assumption that Christianity

with liberty that defines their artistic expressions (whereas southerners are more likely to be subjected to slavery) already informs Romantic manifestos from the Ossian cult to Schlegel's and Staël's notions of the "poetry of the north." Ruskin, however, sees more rigorous, even scientific parallels between architecture and politics when he systematically charts the conceptual content of ornamental forms. In a typical passage from *The Stones of Venice*, for instance, he provides a detailed overview of the social hierarchy reflected in the history of architectural styles:

> The degree in which the workman is degraded may be thus known at a glance, by observing whether the several parts of the building are similar or not; and if, as in Greek work, all the capitals are alike, and all the mouldings unvaried, then the degradation is complete; if, as in Egyptian or Ninevite work, though the manner of executing certain figures is always the same, the order of design is perpetually varied, the degradation is less total; if, as in Gothic work, there is perpetual change both in design and execution, the workman must have been altogether set free. (*Works*, 10:204–5)

Sensitive to the rhetorical potential of cultural parallelism, Ruskin first divides the cultural practice of medieval and ancient cultures into putative cultural centers (i.e., the ethos of Christian liberalism vs. the ethos of despotism) and canonical modes of expression (i.e., Gothic vs. Egyptian, Greek, or Renaissance ornament). Then he reconnects the cultural centers and forms of expressions with tropes of resemblance: the rough Gothic textures are homologous with the vigorous and liberty-loving character of northern Christians; the smooth lines of classical art reflect the indolent slave mentality of southern, pre-Christian, and postindustrial societies. He thus links Gothic art and Christian liberalism in a chiastic relationship in which they mutually reinforce one another. The Gothic ornament is then presented as the sensuous manifestation of the best of all cultures, which in turn is said to shine forth in the most beautiful of ornamentation. Ruskin's expert knowledge of ornament, certified by his complex system of technical terms,

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marks a stage at which humanity (or the spirit of the world) realizes that its essence consists in being free is a Romantic commonplace and a central tenet of Hegel's history lectures of the 1820s (see *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke*, 20 vols. [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], 12:31).

helps him master the symptomatic resemblance between aesthetic and social forms, enabling him to reveal truths crucial to the well-being of contemporary Great Britain.

The rhetorical seductiveness of Ruskin's argument is generated by the conditions of the mid-nineteenth-century intellectual field. It is worth considering the rhetorical advantages of his narrative over other prominent positions in contemporary criticism. When Victorian formalists (Hanslickian Kantians, Paterian "aesthetic critics") seek to authorize a specific style (such as Gothic art), they are confined to abstract debates about the effects of lines and shapes on the human mind (about whether Gothic style "pleases the eye," intensifies experience, etc.). When they seek to promote social values such as Christian liberalism, they have even less to offer, because they limit aesthetic inquiry to autonomous beauty. Moralist critics like the Carlylean Pugin, who deny the primacy of formalist inquiry and would defend Gothic architecture by reducing it to its moral values, find it easier to stage themselves as public intellectuals because their nontechnical approach translates better into political debate. But their evasion of aesthetic form makes them vulnerable to the charge of philistinism voiced by professionalized critics who insist that the elimination of stylistic aspects from the equation misses what is essential (i.e., aesthetic rather than merely topical) about art.[17] Ruskin's cultural parallelism thus gives him an argumentative advantage over Paterians and moralists. It infuses his formalist inquiry into style with tangible social relevance but is technical and specific enough to be acceptable as professional art criticism.

Emerson and the Aesthetic Specialist as Poet

Ruskin's criticism shows that he knew well how to make use of self-empowering rhetoric, but his post-Kantian gesture was no idiosyncrasy. There are similar motifs in late Romantic conceptions of the literary

[17] On the Victorian demand for aesthetic professionalism based on detachment from political debate see also Arnold's important essay "The Function of Criticism" (1864), which bemoans that English men of letters attach themselves to journals with clear political allegiances, such as the Tory organ *Quarterly Review* favored by Southey or the Whig *Edinburgh Review* preferred by Macaulay (Arnold's ideal is the cosmopolitan French bimonthly *Revue des deux mondes*).

intellectual, especially in Emerson's meditations on the aesthetically sensitive transcendentalist he envisaged as central to the spiritual rejuvenation of America.[18] Emerson's self-conception hinges on his definition of the poet. Literary artist, scholar, philosopher, priest, cultural critic, and man of letters, the poet is above all a "doctor," that is, a leader and a physician who discerns and diagnoses the nation's spiritual and cultural health and devises necessary cures, which he transmits to the people to guide and instruct them (*Works*, 3:8).[19] That does not make him a Carlylean moralist—on the contrary, Emerson dismisses Carlyle for having too little time for the intricacies of aesthetic form (5:274) and too much for messy political debate (7:383–84).[20] Despite his frequent references to the unity of beauty and truth, Emerson distances himself from the antiaesthetic tendencies he sees in Goethe and Wordsworth (poet-philosophers or scholars leaning toward conceptual propositions [5:257, 12:326–27]) and in Coleridge or Swedenborg (poet-theologians inclined to religious dogmatism [5:248–49, 6:219]). Emerson's aesthetic professionalism emerges in his Kantian views about the importance of autonomous literary form. "The poet," he says, explaining Wordsworth's defects, "must not only converse with pure thought" but also "demonstrate it almost to the senses. His words must be pictures, his verses must be spheres and cubes, to be seen and smelled and handled" (12:366). Yet when Emerson uses musical images that suggest Hanslick's radical formalism, they are always negative, as in the description of Tennyson as a "music-box of delicate tunes and rhythms" whose sugary verse lacks "vision" (3:9, 5:257).

[18] In what follows I consider Emerson's work in a transatlantic rather than a specifically American field imaginary. See Lawrence Buell, "Postcolonial Anxiety in Classic U.S. Literature," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 196–99.

[19] Emerson rarely uses the label *poet* to distinguish between the poetic in a strictly literary sense and other intellectual pursuits. Instead, he prefers to apply it as an evaluative term that signals not only the formalist skills of poetic composition but depth and universality of vision as well as heightened powers of perception. See Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 40–43.

[20] Emerson's description of Carlyle as a moralist is strategic, of course, and does not accord with views of the complexities of "sage discourse" prompted by John Holloway's revaluation of Carlyle in *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1953).

For Emerson, both Wordsworth's lack of aesthetic refinement and Tennyson's liquid musicality reflect an absence of professional focus. He finds this defect even more pronounced in the British contemporary literary elite. Turning the tables on Macaulay, who argues against intellectual border crossing, Emerson includes him in a list of men of letters dabbling in too many fields while specializing in none: "Hundreds of clever Praeds and Freres and Froudes and Hoods and Hooks and Maginns and Mills and Macaulays, make poems, or short essays for a journal, as they make speeches in Parliament and on the hustings, or as they shoot and ride. It is a quite accidental and arbitrary direction of their general ability" (*Works*, 5:262). Such passages demonstrate that if Emerson can be described as an early public intellectual, he represents a post-Kantian variety, claiming public relevance not through a commitment to the "vernacular," as in Russell Jacoby's definition, but through the specialist discourse of the expert interested in recognition from peers in the aesthetic field.[21] "The Progress of Culture" (1867), for instance, describes intellectual activity as a dialogue between equals whose works are written "with a constant secret reference to the few intelligent persons whom the writer believes to exist in the million"—to the "master," in other words, whom the poet-intellectual has always "in his eye, though he affect to flout them."[22]

In Emerson's major essays, his self-fashioning as an aesthetically minded poet-intellectual is rather subtle, which may be one reason that Emerson scholarship remains divided on the issue of his social commitment.[23] His family resemblance with Ruskin is clearer in his cultural

[21] Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic, 1987), 235. See also Buell, *Emerson*, 40.

[22] Emerson offers the following examples: "Michel Angelo is thinking of Da Vinci, and Raffaelle is thinking of Michel Angelo. Tennyson would give his fame for a verdict in his favor from Wordsworth. Agassiz and Owen and Huxley affect to address the American and English people, but are really writing to each other" (*Works*, 8:219).

[23] One line of research, stressing the awkwardness of Emerson's relationship to social practice, runs from Stephen E. Whicher's foundational *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953) through John Carlos Rowe's *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). This tradition overlaps with one that is skeptical of Emerson's radicalism: see Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Robert Milder, "The Radical Emerson?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph*

criticism. For instance, *English Traits* (1856), Emerson's account of his visits to Britain during the 1830s and 1840s, revolves around an aural image whose function resembles Ruskin's visual parallelisms in *The Stones of Venice* (whose final volume appeared just three years earlier). Implying that the spirit of English society manifests itself in its poetic and artistic expressions, Emerson says that the "voice" of the English "modern muse has a slight hint of the steam-whistle" (*Works*, 5:251). The muse's metallic sound, then, embodies the tendency toward the mechanical that Emerson diagnoses in Britain's aristocratic government, empiricist philosophy, and moral pragmatism.

Emerson's aural image synthesizes a tradition of critiques of modern alienation that begins with Schiller's vision of the mechanical state in his *Aesthetic Letters* of 1793, and it adopts the opposition of the organic to the mechanical that Coleridge imported from A. W. Schlegel's Vienna lectures (1809). Emerson's most direct influence, Carlyle's 1829 *Edinburgh Review* essay on the "mechanical age," already extends this opposition into an expressivist vision of a Hegelian "total style" of a culture, where the mechanical disease interferes with all social domains (intellectual, political, and economic). But Emerson's account differs from Carlyle's in the implication that the mechanistic cultural force is most vividly manifest in the metallic tone of the English muse. Emerson's point is that England's cultural malaise may have been overlooked by the nation's most important political and philosophical pundits (Macaulay and Mill, among others) but is astutely recognized by transcendentalist aesthetic specialists (like Emerson himself), who intuit the mechanical cultural dominant from its most important indicators. The "fine arts fall to the ground. Beauty, except as luxurious commodity, does not exist," and "poetry is degraded and made ornamental" (5:248, 255).[24]

Waldo Emerson, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49–75; and Sacvan Bercovitch, "Emerson, Individualism, and Liberal Dissent," in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–52. A different critical tradition, which argues that Emerson's transcendental thought is not only congenial but foundational to social reform, is represented by Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); and Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

[24] "Pope and his school," Emerson continues, "wrote poetry fit to put round frosted cake. What did Walter Scott write without stint? a rhymed traveller's guide to

Like Ruskin, Emerson uses parallelistic rhetoric to stage cultural artifacts and sociopolitical phenomena as symptoms particularly evident to the trained eye or the fine-tuned ear of the poet-intellectual. Just as Ruskin delivers his criticism of capitalist England through an analysis of classical architectural form, so Emerson sees the evils of a Birmingham-style economy, the fallacies of "feudal institutions," and the aggressive imperialism of British foreign policy through his powers of aesthetic perception. Even Emerson's criticism of utilitarian ethics and empiricist epistemology proceeds with minimal recourse to philosophical or ethical discourses: in his account of the Anglo-Saxon history of ideas, the mechanical sound of British poetry is said to reveal the hollowness of Locke's and Bentham's systems.

Post-Victorian Continuities

Emerson's claim that British culture reveals itself through the sound of its aesthetic expressions is foundational to the emergence of an American aesthetics that views the paratactical free verse of *Leaves of Grass* as an embodiment of U.S. national identity, as a "lawless music" running through America's wilderness and sociopolitical practices.[25] By contrast, Ruskin's sociopolitical readings resurface in the Marxist interest in homologies between aesthetic and economic modes. Both ideological formations have lost their former persuasiveness, but the post-Kantian gesture remains a burning temptation for critics today, even if it is now voiced with epistemological embarrassment.[26]

It seems that twentieth-century levels of professionalism have not alleviated the Victorian anxieties of social recognition. For all the historical and institutional differences, the fields of post-Victorian university-based literary scholarship induce similar rhetorical responses.

Scotland. And the libraries of verses they print have this Birmingham character. How many volumes of well-bred metre we must jingle through, before we can be filled, taught, renewed!" (*Works*, 5:255–56).

[25] Walt Whitman, "To a Locomotive in Winter," in *Leaves of Grass, and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 395.

[26] On the embarrassment of using epistemologically dubious or undertheorized critical approaches as antidotes for scholarly anxieties of marginality see Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism," *ELH* 56 (1989): 721–71; and Charles Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience," *Style* 32 (1998): 272.

In the early- to mid-twentieth-century demand for the establishment of "sciences" of literature distinct from other departments within the humanities, we can recognize the Kantian separation of the aesthetic from cognitive, moral, or ideological concerns.[27] The late Victorian fear of intellectual feminization reappeared in polemical questions about the social use of ivory-tower scientists analyzing self-contained literary objects. Post-Kantian responses to this fear can already be seen in New Critical claims about the social relevance of difficulty and abstraction: as a complex symbolic web that yields special forms of national wisdom, the literary artifact warrants "the sustained attention of serious *men* who otherwise might have turned to more immediate public or commercial concerns."[28]

The public relevance of literary form was a key issue of most theoretical turns (to politics in the 1960s, history in the 1970s, ethics and "culture" in the 1980s, ecology in the 1990s, etc.), although these turns were not necessarily post-Kantian. They were often motivated by an anti-Kantian conviction that the literary is not reducible to form, that therefore the political relevance of a work lies not in the politics embodied in its formal "music" but simply in its politics (as many New Historicist and postcolonial critics have argued). But the post-Kantian gesture persists in post–New Critical schools that present their rejection of formalism as a rediscovery of the sociopolitical value of aesthetic inquiry (as opposed to the value of mere sociopolitical inquiry). The more full-blooded variet-

[27] John Crowe Ransom's "Criticism, Inc." (1937) characteristically called on "aesthetically minded" professors and students of literature to reclaim literary studies from a hostile takeover by literary historians and "moralists" and to reestablish "the artistic object in its own right" (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch [New York: Norton, 2001], 1109, 1111, 1115). In Europe this Kantian moment emerges in the scientist theories of Russian formalists and their preoccupation with literariness. Jakobson's "Modern Russian Poetry" (1921) compares traditional literary historians, who "strayed into related disciplines—the history of philosophy, the history of culture, of psychology, etc."—to intrusive police indiscriminately seizing every bystander they find at the scene of a crime (Leitch, 1166).

[28] Evan Carton and Gerald Graff, "The Nationalizing of the New Criticism," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 314. For a similar argument regarding the critical practice of F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot see Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 4–7.

ies of this critical trend resonate with Victorian images of embodiment: Emerson's and Ruskin's parallelisms reappear in the 1960s, for instance, in Adorno's homologies of political and musical form (Schoenberg's music breaking up the "shackles" of totalitarianism)[29] and in the post-modernist manifestos on the correspondence of quantum theory to the "exploded forms" of postmodernist fiction and poetics.[30]

A more subtle rehearsal of the post-Kantian moment can be seen in the notion (often casually implied) that pure literariness and cultural expressiveness are two sides of the same coin — that Shakespeare's poeticity, for example, contributes to the astuteness with which he illuminates Elizabethan power structures, while his cultural representativeness makes him all the more literary.[31] A similar double process of legitimation underlies the recent interest in the interdependence of literary form and moral value. Martha C. Nussbaum reads Henry James's *Golden Bowl* as an ethicomoral vision that is "finely tuned"

[29] Adorno's aesthetic theory is Kantian in its suggestion that the artwork approximates the "essence of the real" to the degree of its "emancipation from the external world's factual façade" (*Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 6), while it is post-Kantian in its consideration of abstract, nonrepresentational form as a precondition of artistic truth value and thus as indexical of social health. Adorno's heroic narrative views musical progress as a negotiation of democratic authenticity. He views Beethoven as an important pioneer on the frontier of democratization, because in his music "the din of the bourgeois revolution rumbles" (*Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Seabury, 1976], 211). While the early Beethoven, according to Adorno, still tries to reconcile the aporias of bourgeois society, his later compositions (particularly his late string quartets) problematize the subject's alienation by destabilizing the sonata structure with loose phrases and cadences and with disconnected trills. Schoenberg's work, then, appears as a democratic victory over tonality. In 1955 Adorno argued that in Schoenberg "tonal relations" were "stretched to the extreme," until "in the end, every sound became autonomous, all tones enjoyed equal rights, and the reign of the tonic triad was overthrown," so that "something like the musical realm of freedom really opens up" ("Toward an Understanding of Schoenberg," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002], 636).

[30] See James M. Mellard, *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

[31] On the centrality of the link between literariness and cultural expressiveness to American studies (especially with regard to Emerson and Whitman) see Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 353.

because it emerges from "a fine work of art" whose stylistic sophistication defies paraphrase into the "flat" language of moral philosophy.[32] The idea that storytelling offers better insights into moral judgment than abstract theorizing is central to the so-called turn to ethics.[33] But Nussbaum differs from more persuasive proponents of such a turn in that she argues for the primacy of literature over practical moral philosophy with a decidedly post-Kantian spin. Defining moral astuteness as perception of complexity, she contends that society's efforts at ethicomoral melioration are best served by aesthetic specialists trained to discriminate among artistic forms.[34] Such strong claims for the social relevance of stylistic literariness show the extent to which post-Kantian rhetoric continues to resonate with "engaged" intellectuals, who ground their sociopolitically inflected approach to cultural criticism on their expertise as literary critics.[35]

[32] Martha C. Nussbaum, " 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152.

[33] See Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[34] In a characteristic passage Nussbaum argues that since artists like James possess greater "visual or auditory acuity" and "developed their faculties more finely," they "can make discriminations of color and shape (of pitch and timbre) that are unavailable to the rest of us," and consequently they "miss less . . . of what is to be heard or seen in a landscape, a symphony, a painting." This makes them our best allies ("fellow fighter[s]," "guide[s]") in what Nussbaum refers to as "the war against moral obtuseness" (164). In her later work, on the nexus of law and literature, Nussbaum makes even stronger claims, arguing that "literary understanding . . . promotes habits of mind that lead toward social equality" (*Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* [Boston: Beacon, 1995], 92). For a critique of Nussbaum see Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 1–27; Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics"; and Richard Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises," *Telos* 3 (2001): 243–63.

[35] A representative example is Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), which criticizes American society for a destructive puritanism deeply ingrained in a variety of cultural styles (e.g., the "fetish of the body" in popular culture, the "middle-class American obsession" with "dieting," the importance of sexuality in literary and cultural studies, the neopragmatist turn in American philosophy, the "discourse called political correctness," and the "artless language favoured by American creative writing courses" [88–90]). Eagleton's polemic is unquestionably motivated by his disapproval of the economic and political premises of American empire. But rather than offer economic and political arguments, he rests his criticism

It seems, therefore, that Macaulay's criticism of Southey remains useful today, parodying as it does the claim that society's ethicomoral and sociopolitical discourse can be better understood through aesthetic embodiments than, well, through ethicomoral and sociopolitical discourse. And yet, do we then have to agree with Macaulay on the social irrelevance of the literary-aesthetic specialist? Only so long as we define the literary-aesthetic in terms of the formalism prevalent since the late eighteenth century. Formalist musical metaphors invite us to view beauty as autonomous and disembodied form (the "music" of poetry as opposed to its conceptual content), but then they tempt us to reverse beauty's separation from the social world by a post-Kantian sleight of hand that presents a culture's disembodied "music" as its most profound social symptom.[36] We can evade the post-Kantian gesture, I believe, if we view the literary-aesthetic as an imaginary world making that cuts across the form-content distinction and destabilizes the opposition of a work's stylistic artistry and its sociopolitical expressiveness.[37] I take the trope of world making to imply that while form is always political, its political content depends on the propositions with which it is connected in specific social practices: it cannot be abstracted from its readerly and writerly contexts. Any attempt to catalog a "politics of form" is dubious so long as it assumes that an abstract gestalt can be political by virtue of its disinterestedness and hence its removal from social practice.[38]

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on the power of the literary intellectual to discern the political content of America's cultural style. Like Emerson in *English Traits*, Eagleton ties aesthetic and conceptual illnesses so gracefully together that one allegation supports the other: America's puritanism seems worse by association with aesthetic and philosophical decline, while Rortyan pragmatism and Carveresque minimalism seem poorer for expressing a cultural neurosis.

[36] On the continuing significance of musical images for contemporary models of U.S. culture (especially from an African American viewpoint) see the final chapter of John D. Kerkering, *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 200–235.

[37] This approach is exemplified in recent redefinitions of the literary from the viewpoints of literary anthropology (Wolfgang Iser, Winfried Fluck), cognitive theories of metaphor (Mark Turner, Mark Johnson), and neopragmatism (Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, Richard Shusterman, Richard Rorty).

[38] The trope of world making, to be sure, has a cognitive bias whose consequences are controversial (see, e.g., Alan Richardson and Francis F. Steen, eds., "Literature and the Cognitive Revolution," special issue, *Poetics Today* 23, no. 1 [2002]).

To put the point in this way means to counter Macaulay's dismissal of the literary-aesthetic by suggesting that the scientific approach to social discourse (through the "bills of mortality and statistical tables" that Southey "cannot stoop to study") depends no less on imaginary processes of world making than Southey's more strictly poetic pursuits. Hence literary intellectuals do not need the post-Kantian gesture to make a case for their social legitimacy against Macaulayan attempts to restrict the literary-aesthetic to the private. By the same logic, literary intellectuals *may* deal with their marginality by turning their interpretations to the more political (or ethical) aspects of world making, but only if they are prepared to engage with political or ethical vocabularies rather than practice a version of formalist aesthetics that they present as a more privileged version of politics or ethics.

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As it undercuts any definition of the aesthetic in exclusively nonconceptual terms (such as the materiality of the object), it can be viewed as hostile to formalism (in the sense that it makes critical debates on the value of style seem beside the point). At the very least, this trope induces some pragmatists to drop the distinction between artistic and nonartistic discourse and instead distinguish between public and private ways of world making. See, e.g., Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii–xv. For a critique of Rorty see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). On pragmatism's cognitive bias see also Charles Altieri, "Practical Sense—Impractical Objects: Why Neo-pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 15 (1999): 113–25.