
the
LIMITS
OF
critique

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

1. The Stakes of Suspicion 14
 2. Digging Down and Standing Back 52
 3. An Inspector Calls 85
 4. Crrritique 117
 5. “Context Stinks!” 151
- In Short 186

Notes 195 *Index* 219

Introduction

This book is about the role of suspicion in literary criticism: its pervasive presence as mood and method. It is an attempt to figure out what exactly we are doing when we engage in “critique” and what else we might do instead. And here I take my bearings from a phrase coined by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur to capture the spirit of modern thought. What unites the writings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, writes Ricoeur, is their conviction that radicalism is not just a matter of action or argument but also one of interpretation. The task of the social critic is now to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see. The modern era ushers in a new mode of militant reading: what Ricoeur calls a *hermeneutics of suspicion*.

In the following pages, I pore doggedly over Ricoeur’s phrase to clarify its resonance and relevance for the recent history of criticism. While coined to describe an earlier period of intellectual history, it seems all too prescient in capturing the mood of our own. Is it not evident to even the most guileless of graduate students that texts do not willingly yield up their meanings, that apparent content shrouds more elusive or ominous truths? Seizing the upper hand, critics read against the grain and between the lines; their self-appointed task is to draw out what a text fails—or willfully refuses—to see. Of course, not everyone subscribes equally to such a style of reading, but Ricoeur’s

phrase captures a widespread sensibility and an immediately recognizable shape of thought. As a result, it allows us to discern commonalities between methods that are often contrasted or counterposed: ideology critique versus Foucauldian historicism, forceful condemnation versus more suave and tempered modes of “troubling” or calling into question. The sway of such a sensibility, moreover, reaches well beyond the confines of English departments. When anthropologists unmask the imperialist convictions of their predecessors, when art historians choreograph the stealthy tug of power and domination, when legal scholars assail the neutrality of the law in order to lay bare its hidden agendas, they all subscribe to a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment.

What follows, then, is neither a philosophical meditation nor a historical explanation but a close-up scrutiny of a *thought style* that slices across differences of field and discipline. I duly emphasize rhetoric and form, affect and argument. And while my focus is on literary and cultural studies—with occasional forays into other areas—many arguments in this book have a broader purchase.

My aim is not just to describe but to *redescribe* this style of thinking: to offer a fresh slant on a familiar practice in the hope of getting a clearer sense of how and why critics read. While the hermeneutics of suspicion has been amply discussed in religious studies, philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields, Ricoeur’s phrase never took hold among literary critics, who preferred to think of themselves as engaged in something called “critique.” (Now that scholars are casting a more jaundiced eye on their methods, it is gradually entering the critical conversation.) As we will see, the idea of critique contains varying hues and shades of meaning, but its key elements include the following: a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*. In what follows, I seek to reframe, reconsider, and in some cases refute these assumptions.

The act of renaming—of redescribing critique as a hermeneutics of suspicion—is crucial to this reappraisal. Ricoeur’s phrase throws fresh light on a diverse range of practices that are often grouped under

the rubric of critique: symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance. These practices combine, in differing ways, an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*) with identifiable conventions of commentary (*hermeneutics*)—allowing us to see that critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics. We mistake our object if we think of critique as consisting simply of a series of propositions or intellectual arguments. Moreover, redescribing critique in this way downgrades its specialness by linking it to a larger history of suspicious interpretation. In what follows, for example, we will encounter the eagle-eyed detective tracking down his criminal quarry as well as the climate-change skeptic who pooh-poohs scientific data by pointing to hidden and questionable motives. In such cases, we can conclude, suspicion is not being harnessed to oppositional or transformative ends. In short, the aim is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument.

At the same time, this book does not claim to offer a general history of suspicious interpretation (perhaps an impossible task!) but focuses on the rhetoric of literary and cultural studies over the last four decades, with an emphasis on developments in the United States. Nor, I should explain up front, is its method the close reading of a few canonical works. We already have many publications that meticulously assess the pros and cons of critique in Marx or Foucault or Butler, while remaining squarely within the horizon of “critical thinking.” The questions that interest me are of a rather different order: Why is critique such a charismatic mode of thought? Why is it so hard to get outside its orbit? To what extent does it rely on an implicit story line? How does it orient the reader in spatial terms? In what ways does it constitute an overall intellectual mood or disposition? Such questions call for an approach that reads across texts as well as into texts, where phrases from an introductory textbook or primer can prove as revelatory as touchstone essays. Rather than summarize the works of individual thinkers, I trace the coils of collective modes of argument as they loop and wind across diverse fields. The emphasis is on

critique as a genre and an ethos—as a transpersonal and widespread phenomenon rather than the brainchild of a few eminent thinkers.

What, then, are the salient differences between “critique” and “the hermeneutics of suspicion”? What intellectual worlds do these specific terms conjure up, and how do these worlds converge or diverge? “The hermeneutics of suspicion” is by no means a pejorative term—Ricoeur’s stance toward the writings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche is respectful, even admiring. Yet “suspicion” is not a term around which scholars have been eager to rally, worrying, no doubt, that any reference to motive or mind-set will undercut their authority. There is an understandable wariness of being tarred with the brush of subjective or emotional response. To gauge the affective tone of scholarship, however, is not to spurn its substance but to face up to the obvious: modes of thought are also orientations toward the world that are infused with a certain attitude or disposition; arguments are a matter not only of content but also of style and tone. In sticking to the performance of such arguments, moreover, I intentionally refrain from peering into or diagnosing anyone’s state of mind. My focus is on the ethos of argument rather than the hidden workings of consciousness, on rhetorical personae rather than historical persons.

Of course, one risk of focusing on suspicion is that of unduly exaggerating its presence. As I note in chapter 1, critique is a dominant approach, but it is far from being the only one. Helen Small observes that “the work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative, more than it is critical.”¹ This seems exactly right; everyday practices of teaching and writing and thinking span disparate activities and fluctuations of affect and tone. The point is obvious to anyone who has spent half an hour in the undergraduate classroom, where moods shift and slide as students and teacher commune around a chosen text: critical caveats are interspersed with flashes of affinity or sympathy; bursts of romantic hope coexist with the deciphering of ideological subtexts. And yet our language for describing and justifying these various activities remains remarkably underdeveloped. It somehow seems easier—for reasons we shall explore—to defend the value of literary study by asserting that it promotes critical reading or critical thinking. Think, in this context, of the ubiquitous theory course that often provides a con-

ceptual toolkit for the English major, where “introduction to theory” effectively means “introduction to critical theory.” In short, while critique is not the only language of literary studies, it remains the dominant metalanguage.

Let me specify at the start that this book is not conceived as a polemic against critique, a shouting from the rooftops about the obduracy or obtuseness of my fellow critics. My previous writing (in feminist theory and cultural studies, among other topics) owes an extended debt to traditions of critical thinking. I was weaned on the Frankfurt School and still get a kick out of teaching Foucault. I have no desire to reverse the clock and be teleported back to the good old days of New Critical chitchat about irony, paradox, and ambiguity. But it seems increasingly evident that literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought, and that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities. There is, after all, something perplexing about the ease with which a certain style of reading has settled into the default option. Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage? What sustains their assurance that a text is withholding something of vital importance, that their task is to ferret out what lies concealed in its recesses and margins? Why is critique so frequently feted as the most serious and scrupulous form of thought? What intellectual and imaginative alternatives does it overshadow, obscure, or overrule? And what are the costs of such ubiquitous criticality?

As I argue in chapter 1, such questions have implications that extend well beyond in-house disputes among literary scholars. Literary studies is currently facing a legitimation crisis, thanks to a sadly depleted language of value that leaves us struggling to find reasons why students should care about Beowulf or Baudelaire. Why is literature worth bothering with? In recent decades, such questions have often been waved away as idealistic or ideological, thanks to the sway of an endemically skeptical mind-set. In the best-case scenario, novels and plays and poems get some respect, but on purely tautological grounds: as critical thinkers, we value literature because it engages in critique! Looking closely at this line of thinking and situating it within a broader history of interpretation, my first chapter develops a line of

argument against the assumption that suspicion is an intrinsic good or a guarantee of rigorous or radical thought.

One of the great merits of Ricoeur's phrase lies in drawing attention to fundamentals of mood and method. Scholars like to think that their claims stand or fall on the merits of their reasoning and the irresistible weight of their evidence, yet they also adopt a low-key affective tone that can bolster or drastically diminish their allure. Critical detachment, in this light, is not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it—a certain orientation toward one's subject, a way of making one's argument matter. It is tied to the cultivation of an intellectual persona that is highly prized in literary studies and beyond: suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly vigilant. I join Amanda Anderson in contending that "characterological" components—the attribution of character traits such as nonchalance, arrogance, or sentimentality to styles of thought—play a decisive part in intellectual debate, even though these components are rarely given their due.² Critique is not only a matter of method but of a certain sensibility—or what I will call "critical mood."

Ricoeur's second word, "hermeneutics," invites us to think about how we read and to what end. The following pages treat suspicious reading as a distinctive and describable habit of thought. While critique is often hailed for puncturing or deflating schemes, it is also an identifiable scheme in its own right. This attention to the rhetoric of critique has two consequences. First, it primes us to look closely *at* current ways of reading rather than through them, taking them seriously in their own terms rather than seeing them as symptoms of more fundamental realities (hidden anxieties, institutional forces). I strive to remain on the same plane as my object of study rather than casting around for a hidden puppeteer who is pulling the strings. At the same time, however, it also levels the playing field. Once we face up to the rhetorical and conventional dimension of critique, it becomes harder to sustain what I will call critique's exceptionalism—its sense of intrinsic advantage vis-à-vis other forms of thinking and writing.

Take, for example, statements such as the following: "Critique's task is to refuse easy answers, to withdraw the dependability and familiarity of the categories with which thought presents itself, so as to give thinking a chance to happen."³ Variations on this theme, as we

will see, saturate the recent history of criticism. Critique, it is claimed, just is the adventure of serious or proper “thinking,” in contrast to the ossified categories of the already thought. It is at odds with the easy answer, the pat conclusion, the phrasing that lies ready to hand. In looking closely at the gambits of critique—its all too familiar rhetoric of defamiliarization—I question this picture of critique as outside codification. The point is not to deny that new forms of critique may emerge in the future—any form or genre is open to being remade in unexpected ways—but to question its claim to exceptional status, as opposed to or beyond convention.

Chapter 2, for example, details the spatial metaphors that undergird the practice of suspicious reading. It looks closely at the language of the critic-as-archaeologist who “digs deep” into a text in order to retrieve a concealed or camouflaged truth; it then turns to the rhetoric and posture of the critic-as-ironist who “stands back” from a text in order to defamiliarize it via the knowing equanimity of her gaze. These well-entrenched methods are associated with contrasting perspectives and philosophies, yet they partake with equal fervor of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion. Chapter 3 then proposes that suspicion and storytelling are closely aligned; critique weaves dramatic or melodramatic narratives in which everything is connected. The scholar-turned-sleuth broods over matters of fault and complicity; she pieces together a causal sequence that allows her to identify a crime, impute a motive, interpret clues, and track down a guilty party. (Even the deconstructive critic who clears the literary text of wrongdoing seeks, as we will see, to expose the shameful culpability of criticism.) Rather than being a weightless, disembodied, freewheeling dance of the intellect, critique turns out to be a quite stable repertoire of stories, similes, tropes, verbal gambits, and rhetorical ploys.

Paying close attention to these details of style and sensibility offers a fresh slant on the political and philosophical claims of critique—the subject of chapter 4. Critique is a remarkably contagious and charismatic idea, drawing everything into its field of force, patrolling the boundaries of what counts as serious thought. It is virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo. Drawing a sense of philosophical weightiness from its proximity to the tradition of Kant and Marx, it

also retains a cutting-edge sensibility, retooling itself to fit the needs and demands of new fields. For many scholars in the humanities, it is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing. Critique, as I've noted, just is the exercise of thoughtful intelligence and independence of mind. To refuse critique, by the same token, is to sink into the mire of complacency, credulity, and conservatism. Who would want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical? The negativity of critique is thus transmuted into a halo effect—an aura of rigor and probity that burnishes its dissident stance with a normative glow.

In querying the entrenchment of this ethos, I join a growing groundswell of voices, including scholars in feminist and queer studies as well as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and influential strands of political theory.⁴ It is becoming ever more risible to conclude that any questioning of critique can only be a reactionary gesture or a conservative conspiracy. Yet it may also be helpful to draw a preliminary distinction between those who harbor reservations about critique *tout court* and those who would condemn critique for not being critical or oppositional enough. The latter stance does not move away from critique but ramps and ratchets it up, lamenting its failure to live up to its radical promise. Its responses thus tend to run along the following lines: “To be sure, critique has its problems, but only because it has strayed from its true path as I define it,” or “The hypercritical has turned hypocritical—let us interrogate its complicity with the status quo!” We are told that critique needs to become more negative (to avoid all risk of co-option) or more positive (so it can be truly dialectical). We are given the blueprint for a future critique that will transcend its current flaws and failings. In short, the disease also turns out to be the only conceivable cure; the insufficiencies of critique demand that it be magnified and multiplied, cranked up a hundredfold, applied with renewed vigor and unflagging zeal. Critique turns out to be, as scholars announce with a hint of satisfaction, an infinite task.

But what if critique were limited, not limitless; if it were finite and fallible; if we conceded that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all? Rather than rushing to patch up every hole and frantically plug each sprouting leak, we might admit that critique is not always the best tool for the job. As such wording suggests, my own

orientation is pragmatic—different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism, and there is no one-size-fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all these aims simultaneously. And here the choice of terminology becomes crucial. In contrast to the powerfully normative concept of critique (for who, after all, wants to be thought of as uncritical?), the hermeneutics of suspicion does not exclude other possibilities (for Ricoeur, these include a hermeneutics of trust, of restoration, of recollection). Leaving room for differing approaches, it allows us to see critical reading as one possible path rather than the manifest destiny of literary studies.

My objection is not to the existence of norms as such—without which thinking could not take place—but to the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma. There is a growing sense that our intellectual life is out of kilter, that scholars in the humanities are far more fluent in nay-saying than in yay-saying, and that eternal vigilance, unchecked by alternatives, can easily lapse into the complacent cadences of autopilot argument. It is a matter, in short, of diminishing returns, of ways of thinking that no longer surprise us, while closing off other paths as “insufficiently critical.” At a certain point, critique does not get us any further. To ask what comes after the hermeneutics of suspicion is not to demolish but to decenter it, to decline to see it as the be-all and end-all of interpretation, to wonder, with Bruno Latour, whether critique has run out of steam.⁵ That any attempt to rein in the ambitions of critique is often misheard as a murderous assault on critique, triggering dire predictions about the imminent demise of serious thought (the sky is falling! the sky is falling!), is a matter to which we will return.

I write this book, moreover, with at least one foot inside the intellectual formation of critique, as someone who has over the years deployed quite a few of its gambits. My hope is to steer clear of the hectoring tone of the convert, the sermonizing of the redeemed sinner with a zealous glint in her eye. The critique of critique only draws us further into a suspicious mind-set, as we find ourselves caught in an endless regress of skeptical questioning. Perhaps we can get the fly out of the fly bottle by choosing to redescribe rather than refute the hermeneutics of suspicion, to gaze at it from several different angles, to capture something of the seductive shimmer and feel of a certain

sensibility. (Critique would not be so successful, after all, if it did not gratify and reward its practitioners.) Rather than an ascetic exercise in demystification, suspicious reading turns out to be a style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intense engagements and eager commitments. It is a strange and multifaceted creature: mistrust of others, but also merciless excoriation of self; critique of the text, but also fascination with the text as a source of critique, or at least of contradiction. It is negative, but not only or unambiguously negative. In what follows, I seek to be generous as well as censorious, phenomenological as well as historical, seeking to do justice to the allures of a critical style as well as pondering its limits.

This book had the working title “The Demon of Interpretation” — a phrase plucked from Steven Marcus’s dazzling essay on Freud’s method—but it eventually became clear that such a title was sending the wrong message.⁶ Interpretation is not always demonic—only sometimes! We should avoid conflating suspicious interpretation with the whole of interpretation, with all the sins of the former being loaded onto the shoulders of the latter. This is to seriously shortchange a rich and many-sided history of engagement with texts of all kinds, sacred as well as secular. What afflicts literary studies is not interpretation as such but the kudzu-like proliferation of a hypercritical style of analysis that has crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life. Interpretation does not have to be a matter of riding roughshod over a text, doing symbolic violence to a text, chastising and castigating a text, stamping a single “metaphysical” truth upon a text. In short, it is a less muscular and macho affair than it is often made out to be. I will not be signing up for the campaign against what Deleuze and Guattari dub “interpretosis”—as if the desire to interpret were akin to an embarrassing disease or a mental pathology.⁷ Interpreting just refers to the many possible ways of trying to figure out what something means and why it matters—an activity that is unlikely to come to an end any time soon. We do not need to throw out interpretation but to revitalize and reimagine it.

What form might such a reimagining take? As this book joins an animated conversation about the future of literary studies, it may be helpful to sketch out a few of its guiding premises at the start. Even at the high point of suspicious reading, there has always been a counter-

trend of critics working within a more belletristic tradition, combining detailed, sometimes dazzling, literary commentary and appreciation with a declared animus toward sociological, theoretical, or philosophical argument. My own line of approach is rather different. This book, for example, does not take up arms against social meanings under the stirring banner of a “new formalism,” a “new aestheticism,” or a “new ethics,” commonly heard phrases in the recent reappraisal of critique. I do not champion aesthetics over politics, talk up the wonders of literature’s radical or intransigent otherness, or seek to tear it out of the sticky embrace of naïve or credulous readers. Rather, I propose, it is the false picture created by such dichotomies that is at issue: the belief that the “social” aspects of literature (for virtually everyone concedes it has *some* social aspects) can be peeled away from its “purely literary” ones. No more separate spheres! As the final chapter points out, works of art cannot help being social, sociable, connected, worldly, immanent—and yet they can also be felt, without contradiction, to be incandescent, extraordinary, sublime, utterly special. Their singularity and their sociability are interconnected, not opposed.⁸

It follows that there is no reason to lament the “intrusion” of the social world into art (when was this world ever absent?). Works of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded. We will, however, look quizzically at the intellectual shortcuts and rabbit-out-of-a-hat analogies that can sustain the logic of critique—such as when a critic brandishes a close reading of a literary work as proof of its boldly subverting or cravenly sustaining the status quo. A text is deciphered as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure—as if there were an essential system of correspondences knotting a text into an overarching canopy of domination, akin to those medieval cosmologies in which everything is connected to everything else. And yet political linkages and effects are not immanent, hidden in the convoluted folds of texts, but derive from connections and mediations that must be tracked down and described. Scratching our heads, we look around for detailed accounts of the actors, groupings, assemblies, and networks that would justify such claims. Where is the evidence for causal connections? Where is the

patient piecing together of lines of translation, negotiation, and influence? Politics is a matter of many actors coming together, not just one.

What about the question of mood? Lamenting the disheartening effects of a pervasive cynicism and negativity, some scholars are urging that we make more room for hope, optimism, and positive affect in intellectual life. While I have a qualified sympathy for such arguments, what follows is not a pep talk for the power of positive thinking. There will be no stirring exhortations to put on a happy face and always look on the bright side of life. Academia has often been a haven for the disgruntled and disenchanted, for oddballs and misfits. Let us defend, without hesitation, the rights of the curmudgeonly and cantankerous! Reining in critique is not a matter of trying to impose a single mood upon the critic but of striving for a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts. “Receptivity,” in Nikolas Kompridis’s words, refers to our willingness to become “unclosed” to a text, to allow ourselves to be marked, struck, impressed by what we read.⁹ And here the barbed wire of suspicion holds us back and hems us in, as we guard against the risk of being contaminated and animated by the words we encounter. The critic advances holding a shield, scanning the horizon for possible assailants, fearful of being tricked or taken in. Locked into a cycle of punitive scrutiny and self-scrutiny, she cuts herself off from a swathe of intellectual and experiential possibility.

In the final chapter, I sketch out an alternative model of what I call “postcritical reading.” (I too am a little weary of “post” words—but no fitter or more suitable phrase comes to mind for the orientation I propose.) Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen. Along with the indispensable and invigorating work of Bruno Latour, the new criticism emerging from France (Marielle Macé, Yves Citton) offers a fruitful resource in thinking of reading as a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking. And once we take on board the dis-

tinctive agency of art works—rather than their imagined role as minions of opaque social forces or heroes of the resistance—we cannot help orienting ourselves differently to the task of criticism. Such a shift is desperately needed if we are to do better justice to what literature does and why such doing matters. The wager, ultimately, is that we can expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods. Why—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?

Crrritique

By now my more patient readers may be getting restive. (The rest will have long since tossed this book aside in a fit of exasperation.) “Yes, yes,” they mutter testily, “it’s all very well to say that critical reading is a matter of a certain orientation or stance—one that takes the form of a metaphorical act of ‘digging down’ or ‘standing back.’ And we are willing to grant you the point, more or less, that critics sometimes act like cops hell-bent on nailing down a suspect and solving a crime. But aren’t you overlooking something? These rhetorical devices and figures of speech are there for a reason; scholars are using them to make important arguments. Isn’t it time you stopped beating about the bush and tackled the substance of these arguments? Let’s not forget that critique is a philosophical and political idea—one that enjoys wide respect and boasts an impressive intellectual lineage!”

Now that we are armed with a better grasp of the rhetoric of critique, we can roll up our sleeves and set about scrutinizing its key tenets. The preceding chapters have, I hope, captured something of the texture and taste, the tone and timbre, of certain styles of reading and reasoning. Critique is often feted in the humanities as a cure-all for dogma and orthodoxy, but it is less frequently pondered in all its mundane particulars—as a hotchpotch of figures of speech, turns of phrase, moral dramas, affective nuances, stylistic tics and tricks. It is invoked rather than examined, brandished to ward off enemies and cast a protective shield over one’s endeavors. It is synonymous with

intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and noncompliance with the status quo. For many scholars in the humanities, it is not just one good thing but the only conceivable thing.

The role of critique, declare Janet Halley and Wendy Brown, is to “dissect our most established maxims and shibboleths.” According to Robert Davis and Ronald Schleifer, critique “terrorizes received ideas” and is “*always* questioning culture.”¹ Who would not want to be seen as dissecting shibboleths? Is it not the fundamental job of intellectuals to question culture? And why would anyone want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical? Critique, it must be said, is gifted with an exceptionally talented press agent and an unparalleled mastery of public relations. Occupying the political and moral high ground in the humanities, it seems impervious to direct attack, its bulletproof vest deflecting all bursts of enemy fire. Indeed, as we’ll see, even those most eager to throw a spanner into the machinery of critique—those gritting their teeth at its sheer predictability—seem powerless to bring it to a halt. The panacea they commonly prescribe, a critique of critique, might give us pause. How exactly do we quash critique by redoubling it? Shouldn’t we be trying to exercise our critique-muscle less rather than more?

The phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” has thrown a different light on our object by alerting us to two key elements: an ambient attitude or sensibility and ways of reading that flip between what I have called “strong” and “second-level” hermeneutics. Critique, I have argued, is not especially well attuned to the specifics of its own makeup, presenting itself as an austere, even ascetic, intellectual exercise. And yet it turns out to be a motley creature, a mash-up of conflicting parts: not only analytical but affective, not just a critique of narrative but also a type of narrative (even, on occasion, a stirring melodrama), not just a stance of stern and uncompromising vigilance but an activity equipped with its own pleasures and satisfactions.

We have also considered critical or suspicious reading as a genre—that is to say, a constellation of rhetorical patterns and templates of thought that are frequently repeated and easily identified. As David Bordwell points out, “Pay less attention to what critics say they do and more attention to their actual procedures of thinking and writing—do all this, and you will be led to nothing but a body of conventions

no less powerful than the premises of an academic style in painting or music.”² This fact is not, in itself, intrinsically alarming or a cause for embarrassment—not, at least, if you hold to the view that all communication relies on conventions, frames, and forms of taken-for-granted knowledge. It is, however, a potential blow to the self-image of critique, which tends the flame of its estrangement from the commonplace. To be critical is to be at odds with or opposed to reigning structures of thought and language. Yet, for younger scholars at least, critique is the main paradigm in which they have been trained; while buffing and polishing its role as agent provocateur to the intellectual mainstream, it *is* the mainstream. What happens to critique once it is entrenched as a professional protocol and a disciplinary norm in its own right?

Here we may be reminded of the once-vociferous debates in the art world about the death of the avant-garde. In both cases, the rallying power of a concept hinges on its antagonism to a larger social field that is pictured in spatial as well as temporal terms. Thus the imagined location of critique/the avant-garde is *elsewhere*: outside, below, in the margins, or at the borders. If it were to occupy the center, it would be something other than itself, estranged from its essence. And critique, like the avant-garde, is conjured in the future tense; spurning tradition, rupturing continuity, it strains forward rather than backward. The tradition of critique, as Gianni Vattimo points out, has close ties to a progressive philosophy of history that envisions humanity moving toward ever-greater emancipation.³ While such sweeping stories of historical betterment have been undermined in recent decades, critique retains a strong affinity with the “not yet” of the future and strains impatiently against the drudgeries of the already known.

In short, critique, like the avant-garde, imagines itself taking a crowbar to the walls of the institution rather than being housed within them, barreling toward the future rather than being tugged back toward the past. What happens once this self-image flickers and fades and the euphoria of its iconoclastic ambitions begins to wane? For some scholars, the consequences look impossibly bleak; convinced that the last loophole for action has been closed, the only sound they hear is that of the prison door slamming shut. Yet the malaise of critique could also free us up to reassess our current ways of reading and

reasoning: to experiment with modes of argument less tightly bound to exposure, demystification, and the lure of the negative.

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Crrritique! The word flies off the tongue like a weapon, emitting a rapid guttural burst of machine-gun-fire. There is the ominous cawing staccato of the first and final consonants, the terse thud of the short repeated vowel, the throaty underground rumble of the accompanying *r*. “Critique” sounds unmistakably foreign, in a sexy, mysterious, pan-European kind of way, conjuring up tableaux of intellectuals gesturing wildly in smoke-wreathed Parisian cafés and solemn-faced discussions in seminar rooms in Frankfurt. Its now ubiquitous presence in close readings of Conrad and Coetzee testifies to the mingling of intellectual bloodlines associated with the rise of “theory”; a word once closely associated with the recondite realm of European philosophy is now part of the lingua franca of anyone teaching freshman English. And yet its appearance also reminds us that we remain within the boundaries of a certain intellectual milieu. We are all capable of criticizing what we don’t like, but it is only under certain conditions that we think of ourselves as engaged in something called “critique.”

Why has this two-syllable word achieved such a commanding position? On what grounds has it proved so seductive and self-sustaining? What is the mystique of critique? Like any complex sign, the word contains multitudes—long histories of use, sediments and layers of association, densely compacted meanings. In what follows, I draw out the most salient of these associations by making a stab at a definition. The aim is not to deliver an intellectual history of critique or to dwell on the lengthy disputes about norms and foundations that have occupied political theorists and philosophers.⁴ In keeping with the ambitions of the book as a whole, I retain a focus on how the concept of critique has been deployed in the recent history of literary studies and related fields.

Let us shuffle forward slowly, then, keeping our eyes peeled and our noses close to the ground, attending to the obvious as well as the overlooked, considering how sentences are formed, evidence is provided, and paragraphs are assembled. The goal, once again, is not to

unmask critique by exposing the hidden structures that determine it. Rather than look through critique, let us look squarely at it, viewing it as a reality rather than a symptom, a many-sided object rather than a beguiling façade. Let us treat it, in short, as a major rhetorical-cultural actor in its own right.

There are, I propose, five qualities that come into play in the current rhetoric of critique:

1. *Critique is secondary.* A critique is always a critique of something, a commentary on another argument, idea, or object. Critique does not vaunt its self-sufficiency; it makes no pretense of standing alone. It owes its existence to a prior presence. It could not exist without something to respond to, without another entity to which it reacts. Critique is symbiotic; it does its thinking by responding to the thinking of others.

All words, to be sure, connect up to other words. No text is an island; no phrase can fend off the countless other phrases that crowd in from all sides. Yet in the case of critique, this state of dependency is its *raison d'être*; it is unabashedly oriented toward words that come from elsewhere. In literary studies, this secondary state often shows itself in the practice of extended quotation. Paraphrase, long considered heretical, still remains risky; critics are expected to make their case via judicious citation and scrupulous attention to the words on the page. Here, critique links up, etymologically and historically, to criticism and a long history of textual exegesis and commentary. These connections help clarify why critique is so easily absorbed into the everyday routines of literary studies; the crafting of words about other words, after all, is built into the DNA of the discipline.

Yet critique also emphasizes its difference from criticism, defined, in René Wellek's words, as the study of concrete works of literature with an emphasis on their aesthetic evaluation. Critique is not literary criticism, in the traditional sense; indeed, it is often emphatically defined as its adversary and opposite. One function of critique, declares the Marxist critic Drew Milne, "is to criticize the functions that criticism is made to serve."⁵ It is not that critique avoids judgment—as we will see, it is tangled up in it—but that it draws its criteria from other domains. Philosophy, politics, history, psychoanalysis—the perceived rigor of such fields is counterposed to wishy-washy forms of

aesthetic judgment. Raymond Williams puts the case forcefully in his *Keywords*: “Criticism becomes ideological not only when it assumes the position of the *consumer*, but also when it masks this position by a succession of abstractions of its real terms of response (as *judgment, taste, cultivation, discrimination, sensibility; disinterested, qualified, rigorous*, and so on).”⁶ Criticism, it is argued, teems with hidden interests and rationalizations, concealing its motives behind a curtain of pure aesthetic criteria. Practitioners of critique, by contrast, spurn this language of duplicity and scorn the traditional role of the literary critic as arbiter of taste. They reserve a special ire for any type of aestheticism or formalism that strives to liberate literature from the chains of context—though critique, as we will see, is by no means bereft of ambitions toward transcendence.

While secondary, critique is far from subservient. Rather, it seeks to wrest from a text a different account than it gives of itself. In doing so, it assumes that it will meet with, and overcome, a resistance. If there were no resistance, if the truth were self-evident and available for all to see, the act of critique would be superfluous. The goal is not the reconstruction of an original or intended meaning but a willful or perverse counterreading that brings previously unfathomed insights to light. Nevertheless, critique cannot stray too far from its object without endangering the plausibility of its claims. It must show that the meanings it imputes were there all along, discernible to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. With a conjuror’s flourish, the critic yanks the rabbit out of the hat and shows that the work of art harbors the seeds of its own self-criticism. By “interrogating” a text, he causes it to stutter out its errors, missteps, derelictions, oversights, lapses, and miscalculations. This, I think, is what Robert Koch means when he writes that critical discourse “preserves its object, leaves it intact, but hollows it out from inside so that the object speaks with a voice that is not its own. . . . The object betrays itself.”⁷ Critique ventriloquizes those concealed or counterintuitive meanings that the text is reluctant to own up to. It thereby establishes its sovereignty over the words it deciphers, allowing it to turn a text inside out and to know that text better than it knows itself.

The secondariness of critique is not just a conceptual issue—critique presumes the existence of an object to be critiqued—but also

a temporal one. Critique comes *after* another text; it follows or succeeds another piece of writing: a time lag that can span decades, centuries, even millennia. Critique, then, looks backward, and in doing so it often presumes to understand the past better than it understood itself. Hindsight is translated into insight; from our later vantage point, we feel ourselves primed to see better, deeper, further. “We don’t read such criticism to attach ourselves to the past,” observes the film scholar Tom O’Regan. “”The past shows us what not to do, what not to be, where not to go.”⁸ The belatedness of critique is also a source of its iconoclastic strength. Scholars of Greek tragedy or Romantic poetry may mourn their failure to fully inhabit a vanished world, yet this historical distance is also a productive estrangement that allows insight to unfold. The tomes gathering dust in the libraries must yield to our analytical judgments—even if we occasionally stumble across embryonic versions of our own ideas lurking in their margins and corners. Whatever the limitations of our perspective, how can we not know more than those who have come before? We moderns leave behind us a trail of errors, finally corrected, like a cloud of ink from a squid, remarks Michel Serres.⁹ Critique likes to have the last word.

The last word in relation to what? Works of literature can be found wanting for reasons that crop up with ceremonial regularity: the tyranny of dualisms and dichotomies, speciously unified and coherent models of character, teleological narratives that turn identity into destiny, the euphemistic or evasive treatment of social injustice. The practice of critique is, in this sense, often synonymous with a strong contextualization; texts are scanned for signs of sociohistorical fractures and traumas that they studiously suppress. Contained within a historical moment, they are held to account for the structures of domination that define that moment. Dickens is reproached for his complicity with the visual regimes of commodity culture; Milton is scrutinized for signs of his implication in the history of colonialism.¹⁰ Critique cuts into a work at a judicious angle in order to expose its hidden interests and agendas, wielding the scalpel of “context” to reprimand “text.”

Moreover, distrust is often directed with equal force at the history of criticism—at scholarship that masquerades as a purely aesthetic or literary affair and thus fails to be properly critical. The hermeneutics

of suspicion is a triangular structure, involving not just a critic and a text but also the past history of a scholarly field, including its luminaries, sages, academic stars, and *éminences grises*. Defined by its distrust of authority (see point 4 below), critique is obligated to take up arms against ideas as soon as they are grist for the academic mill of Routledge primers and Norton anthologies. In the current intellectual landscape, however, the goalposts can shift with disconcerting speed, and it is often a matter of dispute which positions are “hegemonic” and which others “marginal”—leaving plenty of room for a host of differing parties to feel aggrieved. The stakes are especially high in such arenas as feminism, postcolonial studies, or queer theory, where the devastating charge of “being insufficiently critical” can lead to a sense of being excommunicated from the field.

In American studies, for example, arguments are commonly made by bestowing or withholding the sobriquet of the critical. In his survey of the field, Liam Kennedy notes that Americanists “commonly approach America with suspicion, fear, even anger; we view it as a powerful duplicitous force to be denounced or mystified.”¹¹ This volatile mix is also directed at the history of American studies itself, as each wave of scholarship reproaches its predecessors for failing to be critical enough of its object. In the last few decades, the “myth and symbol” approach of the 1950s and ’60s has been excoriated for its humanism and conservatism; the subsequent “new Americanism,” centered on the experiences of women and people of color, lambasted for its essentialism and naïve identity politics; and the most recent trend, transnational American studies, reproached for its embrace of globalization and sugarcoating of empire. Whatever the ambitions of individual critics, it is hard to dodge the bullet of the accusation that they are shoring up the very ideology of American exceptionalism they call into question. Critique serves as a ubiquitous device for diagnosing the various missteps that hinder the realization of the field’s radical promise.¹²

And yet the symbiotic status of critique also means that its prose is never pure and unadulterated, that it speaks, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, in more than one voice. It strives to enfold a prior text, to assert its sovereignty over the words of others—but these same words may stubbornly protrude like awkward or ungainly limbs, poking

holes in the fabric of the larger argument. A striking or ambiguous quotation, for example, can overshadow the words that surround it, throwing into doubt the claims that it was summoned to serve. Positioned in close proximity, text and commentary may rub against each other in surprising or unanticipated ways, generating a friction that thwarts the larger argument. Words from the past may spring back to life, acquiring fresh vigor and vitality, buttonholing and beguiling readers and short-circuiting the negative judgment they were drafted to support. And textual examples or quotations may serve as trip wires that interrupt or derail the larger arc of a conceptual argument, creating a multi-voiced rather than single-voiced piece of writing. Critique, in short, cannot entirely protect itself from the possibility of being undone by its own object.¹³

What, in this light, should we make of the distinction between transcendent and immanent critique—a distinction often deployed in order to champion the merits of one form over the other? The practitioner of transcendent critique, according to Adorno, assumes an Archimedean standpoint above the blindness of society; he censures and condemns the object of his attention; he wishes to wipe everything away as with a sponge. Such a critic, in short, seeks to haul himself by his bootstraps out of the miasma of confusion and bad faith in which his fellows are immersed. Brooding over his estrangement from the world, he rules out any possibility of commonality or kinship. Immanent critique, by contrast, operates in a more stealthy and circuitous fashion, immersing itself in those thoughts and ideas that it opposes. It temporarily “takes on” these ideas in order to test them out; it criticizes them in their own terms by adopting their criteria and teasing out their internal contradictions. Rather than seeking an external vantage point of theoretical or political purity, it is happy to get its hands dirty so as to better know its object. The distinction between transcendent and immanent critique is thus the difference between a “knowledge which penetrates from without and that which bores from within.”¹⁴

Adorno no sooner develops this opposition between transcendental and immanent critique than he impatiently brushes it aside, as a too-tidy dichotomy. And here our prior reflections on the secondary status of critique proves all too pertinent. Given this status, how

can critique ever exist above or outside its object? How could it be squeaky clean and scrubbed free of foreign contaminants? The genre of critique, as we have seen, is symbiotic, relational, and thus intrinsically impure; it feeds off the ideas of its adversaries, is parasitic on the words that it calls into question, could not survive without the very object that it condemns. While definitions of “critique” often cite its origins in the Greek word *krinein*—meaning to separate, to distinguish, to judge—the subject and object of critique are more closely intertwined than such definitions admit. However high we lift up our feet, that pesky wad of chewing gum remains stuck to the bottom of our shoe.

Yet, at the same time, critique opens up a gap between itself and its object; it affirms its difference from what it describes and asserts its distance from the voices that it ventriloquizes. In this sense, it harbors an impulse toward transcendence, reaching beyond the limits it perceives in the words of others. There is much wrangling in political theory about whether the idea of critique needs a normative foundation or universal ground. Perhaps we should imagine the transcendent or quasi-transcendent impulse of critique differently: not as a grounding but as an opening. In contrast to the image of a stable foundation resting firmly beneath one’s feet, the metaphor of an opening—the shaft of light falling through a window-slit; the bright patch of blue sky amidst gathering storm clouds—captures the sense of an alternative that is glimpsed but not yet fully visible. It is less a matter of invoking a solid and unshakable ground than of gesturing toward something that is immanent with, yet also irreducible to, present experience.¹⁵ By describing its object in words this object would not have chosen, critique pushes back against prevailing pressures and opens up a possibility of thinking differently.

In some cases, of course, the clash between the values of a text and the norms of the critic is impossible to miss; the work is interrogated, judged, and sentenced without further ado. Increasingly, however, scholars have become wary of norms-and-values talk and leery of appealing to alternative theories that lend themselves to a further round of interrogation. They take to heart Foucault’s injunction that we should challenge what exists rather than provide alternatives. As

a result, the impulse toward transcendence manifests itself in other ways: in a charismatic image of the critic's dissident, risk-taking persona, or an embrace of self-reflexivity and knowingness as the ultimate good. As we have seen, critique takes on the guise of an ethos or disposition—an attitude of restless skepticism, irony, or estrangement—rather than a systematically grounded theoretical framework. In this way, the critic carves out a distance from the words and worlds of others, espousing a stance irreducible to the tyranny of the given—a stance of what Alan Liu calls “detached immanence.”¹⁶

The status of critique, in short, cannot be resolved by championing a “good” immanent critique against a “bad” transcendent critique—or indeed the other way round.¹⁷ Transcendent and immanent are not names for two mutually exclusive classes or groups of criticism. Rather, they crystallize a tension that lies at the heart of critique as a genre.

2. *Critique is negative.* To use the language of critique is to make a judgment of a less than favorable kind. Critique is, in one way or another, a negative act (even though it is not purely or exclusively negative: there is always, as Adorno points out, an affirmative residue).¹⁸ To engage in critique is to grapple with the oversights, omissions, insufficiencies, or evasions in the object one is analyzing. It is to tabulate a limit, to discern a lack, to heave a sigh of disapproval or disappointment. Raymond Geuss remarks that the idea of critique possesses “unambiguously negative connotations.” Robert Koch writes that “critical discourse, as critical discourse, must never formulate positive statements: it is always ‘negative’ in relation to its object.” And Diana Coole notes that “negativity and critique are thus intimately related.”¹⁹

Negativity, however, can be spun in a variety of ways. Emotional or affective tone can express a writer's state of mind: encountering a certain kind of critical prose, we conjure up a picture of its author as outraged, disillusioned, or out of sorts. But negativity is also a matter of rhetoric, conveyed via acts of deflating or diagnosing that have less to do with individual attitude than with a shared grammar of language, a field of linguistic conventions and constraints. Even the most chipper and cheerful of graduate students, on entering a field in which critique is held to be the most rigorous method, will eventually master

the protocols of professional pessimism. And finally, of course, negativity is also an idea—an enduring theme in the history of philosophy that has preoccupied many thinkers and theorists.

One common strategy of negative argument among literary and cultural critics can be dubbed “deflation via inversion.” This rhetorical trick of the trade follows a two-step rhythm: the critic dangles an enticing or promising prospect before the reader, only to whisk it away and replace it with its opposite. A rise is followed by a fall; an idea is expressed only to be negated; a hopeful “before” gives way to the cold shower of an “after.” Harkening back to the Marxist idea of critique as an “inversion of an inversion” (bourgeois ideology perceives reality upside down, argues Marx, so that it must be flipped right side up to arrive at the truth), this verbal strategy is a staple of current criticism. As a result, we are primed to expect bad news, to assume that any positive state of affairs is either imaginary or evanescent, to steel ourselves for the worst. The positive turns out to be a temporary way station en route to the negative, whose sovereignty is rousingly re-affirmed. The rose-colored glasses are yanked from our eyes as we are apprised, one more time, of the absurdity of any vestigial shred of optimism.

Thus the animal studies scholar Cary Wolfe opens his discussion of a recent novel by Michael Crichton by observing that it seems to “radically question the discourse of speciesism.” Any nascent hopes we might have, however, are quickly dashed, as Wolfe serves up the bad news: in spite of its apparent progressiveness, Crichton’s novel “leaves intact the category of the human and its privileged forms of accomplishment and representation in the novel: technoscience and neo-colonialism.”²⁰ Acknowledging that the television show *Queer as Folk* differs from previous dramas in offering “uncompromisingly realistic images of gay life,” Giovanni Porfido then flips things around to claim that this visibility is less desirable than it might seem; it is linked, we learn, to the “commodification of social identities and neoliberal forms of visual governmentality.”²¹ Along similar lines, we are regularly apprised that what looks like difference is yet another form of sameness, that what appears to be subversion is a more discreet form of containment, that any attempt at inclusion spawn yet more exclusions.

While the terminology fluctuates, what remains constant is a rhetorical sequence that raises hope only to deflate it. “You may think you are beholding X,” declares the critic, “but you are really seeing Y!” Y turns out to be not just different from X but its antithesis; it does not supplement or modify it but cancels it out. The bad news looks even worse in being contrasted to what might have been.

The point is not that the current state of animal rights discourse or the politics of gay and lesbian inclusion are beyond criticism. No doubt self-congratulatory stories of social progress (Look how far we’ve come!) can become exceptionally grating. But we cannot oppose such a “myth” of progress to the critic’s bleak-eyed assessment of how things really are—as if the negativity of critique were somehow beyond rhetoric or misinterpretation or prejudice or narrative, a nose-to-nose encounter with the gritty textures of truth. It is not a matter of fiction versus reality but a matter of weighing up the pros and cons of different dispositions. And here “criticizability” is itself created, to a greater extent than scholars acknowledge, by a practice of reading that is geared to detect flaws and document disappointment. Critique’s fundamental quality is that of “againstness,” vindicating a desire to take a hammer, as Bruno Latour would say, to the beliefs and attachments of others. Faith is to be countered with skepticism; illusion yields to a sobering disenchantment; the fetish must be defetishized, the dream world stripped of its powers. Like an upscale detox facility, critique promises to flush out the noxious substances and cultural toxins that hold us in their thrall. It demonstrates, again and again, that what might look like hopeful signs of social progress harbor more disturbing implications. In this sense, there is a logic of perfectionism or absolutism at work: not just impatience with the slowness of incremental change but a conviction that such change is actively harmful in blinding us to what remains undone. Disguising a failure to root out structural inequality, it only promotes complacency and shores up the forces of liberal optimism. Piecemeal change thus turns out to be worse than no change at all.

Yet the negativity of critique, like Baskin-Robbins ice cream, also comes in various flavors; it is not just a matter of fault-finding, scolding, censuring, and correcting. Indeed, quite a few scholars are eager

to back away from the rhetoric of denunciation, a posture short on stylistic subtlety as well as philosophical nuance. The nay-saying critic all too easily brings to mind the finger-wagging moralist, the thin-lipped schoolmarm, the Victorian patriarch, the glaring policeman. The act of negating is tangled up with a long history of prohibition and interdiction and burdened with a host of unattractive associations. It can all too easily come across as contemptuous, vengeful, heartless, or vitriolic. In recent years, it has often been tied up with stereotypes of killjoy feminists, embittered minorities, and other resentment-filled avatars of “political correctness.”²²

In response, present-day defenders of critique often downplay its associations with negative judgment and what they call a juridico-repressive paradigm of punishment. Critique, they insist, is not a matter of castigation or a categorical thumbs-down; rather, it takes the form of a more judicious and considered assessment. A preferred idiom is that of “troubling” or “problematizing,” of demonstrating the ungroundedness of beliefs rather than diagnosing false consciousness. And the prevailing tone is ironic and deliberative rather than angry and accusatory. The role of critique is no longer to castigate but to complicate, not to engage in ideas’ destruction but to expose their cultural construction. Judith Butler, for example, declares that critique has little to do with negative judgment; it is, rather, an “ongoing effort to fathom, collect, and identify that upon which we depend when we claim to know anything at all.”²³ This is a model of argument cast in the mode of Foucauldian genealogy rather than old-style ideology critique: critique not as a denunciation of error and a hunt for mislaid truths but as an inquiry into the way knowledge is organized that seeks, as far as possible, to suspend judgments. Along similar lines, Barbara Johnson has argued that a critique of a theoretical system

is not an examination of its flaws and imperfections. It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of the system’s possibility. The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, the effects on what follows from them and that the start point is not a (natural) given, but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself.²⁴

Yet it seems a tad disingenuous to describe this version of critique as being untouched by negative judgment and the examination of flaws. Isn't an implicit criticism being transmitted in the claim that a cultural construct is "usually blind to itself"? And the adjectival chain "natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal" strings together, as we saw in chapter 2, some of the most negatively weighted words in contemporary criticism. Detachment, in other words, can easily convey an implicit judgment, especially when it is used to expose the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others. In this respect, the ongoing skirmishes between ideology critique and poststructuralist critique do not override their commitment to a common ethos: a sharply honed suspicion that goes behind the backs of its interlocutors to retrieve counterintuitive and unflattering meanings. "You do not know that you are ideologically driven, historically determined, or culturally constructed," declares the subject of critique to the object of critique, "but I do!"²⁵

How, then, do we parse these differing shades of negativity—vehement acts of disputing or denouncing, on the one hand, and a more measured yet skeptical technique of putting into question, on the other? The political theorist Diana Coole has drafted a helpful survey of various facets of the negative in modern thought. When scholars talk about *negation*, they are often intent on refuting a particular idea, argument, or text; the idea of *negativity*, by contrast, embodies a more general process of undoing or unraveling that is not tied to a single act of judgment. The first of these terms, we might say, often negates an identity, whereas the second gestures toward a nonidentity. This latter idea is associated with such themes as the limits of discourse, the margins of meaning, the experience of the limit, and the status of the unrepresentable—themes that Coole traces through the work of Nietzsche, Derrida, Adorno, and Kristeva. Negativity is associated with the language of "gaps, hiatus, lacunae, discontinuities, undecidables, confusions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, transgression, contradictions, antinomies, unknowables."²⁶ It is, in sum, not a specific defect but a structural limit of language and knowledge.

Contemporary styles of critique are divided between negation and negativity. Negation—the explicit act of rebuttal, refusal, or rejection—displays the bracing qualities of moral clarity and rhetori-

cal force, demanding that we speak out against injustice, condemn prejudice, expose fallacious or meretricious lines of reasoning. Our moral makeup, proposes the philosopher Susan Neiman, includes the need to “express outrage, the need to reject euphemism and cant and to call things by their proper names.”²⁷ Negation, in short, speaks to the expectation that we take a stand and take a side on the issues that matter. What looks like a hard-hitting indictment to some scholars may, however, seem like *plumpes Denken* (crude thinking) to others—those apprehensive that the act of saying no, in its blithe confidence and sense of certainty, may simply be the mirror image of a yes. Is it really the case that reason can so easily be marshaled to correct unreason? Doesn’t the act of denouncing the errors of others risk shoring up the critic’s own smugness and superiority? And isn’t there something intemperate about such a rush to judgment—as if the critic were being propelled by a mind-fogging sense of outrage that precludes judicious reflection?

Negativity, by contrast, correlates to a more nonchalant, if still vigilant, attitude—a wariness of general principles or normative claims. It is, we might say, less a matter of *taking a stand* than of *assuming a stance*: of looking skeptically at the procedures through which truths are established and edging away from the perceived naïveté of positive propositions. The role of the critic is now to hone and sharpen an awareness of the limits of language and thought. “Negativity,” writes Coole, “conveys a restlessness that disturbs the slumbers of the given, that undermines any reified plenitude, presence, power or position.”²⁸ The negative, in other words, is now at war with the normative. It is not about laying down the law through a language of prohibition or punishment but about resisting the law. Negativity is not tied to a particular object but floats free of specific causes and catalysts, as an ethos of perpetual agitation that is commendable for its own sake. The literary critic Stephen Ross speaks admiringly of “critique as a fundamentally negative energy, and process of incessant disruption and challenge” that avoids the mistake of offering concrete alternatives to what is challenged.²⁹ The critic is now the one who dismantles, disassembles, and takes apart, who, like a latter-day Penelope, unravels the threads of explanation, justification, and judgment woven during the previous day.

Critique is associated, in this sense, with what Koch calls the pathos of failure; brooding over the inevitable derailments of thought and disappointments of action, it is driven by a gnawing dissatisfaction that comes within striking distance of a full-blown pessimism. Anticipating the worst, preoccupied with not being conned, it takes its cue from The Who's "We Won't Get Fooled Again." And yet this negativity also acquires a heroic spin; scorning placebos and consoling fictions, critics position themselves against the mentality of the mainstream. "Critique is risky," as one account has it; "it can be a disruptive, disorienting, and at times destructive enterprise of knowledge."³⁰ This embrace of subversion gives rise to a halo effect, an aura of ethical and political virtue that burnishes its negative stance with what Coole calls a "normative glow."³¹

Talk of halos may call to mind Baudelaire's well-known prose poem "The Lost Halo." On being spotted by a startled friend in a den of ill repute, a poet explains that his halo fell from his head while he was dashing across the Paris boulevards. Rather than mourning its loss, however, he experiences a sense of great relief at being deprived of his sanctity. Now, he declares, he can finally move through the world as one flawed, imperfect, and ordinary creature among others. Marshall Berman seizes on this poem as an exemplary depiction of the "primal scene of modernity." What Baudelaire gives us, he argues, is a picture of a transformed world. Thrown into the maelstrom of the city streets, dodging the chaos and confusion of oncoming traffic, the poet finds himself in a milieu that has been pulled up by its roots and thoroughly desanctified. The lost halo testifies to a world in which hierarchies are leveled, where the poet no longer enjoys the status of a prophet and the artwork itself is stripped of its numinous and God-given powers. It symbolizes, in short, the irreversible loss of the sacred.³²

This view of modernity as a one-way slide into disenchantment is one that we have had some occasion to query. In fact, the concluding words of Baudelaire's poem suggest that the halo is not lost for good but will probably be picked up and reused—even if only, the speaker declares, by a "bad poet." This lapidary judgment is endorsed by Berman: if haloes are not yet obsolete, this is simply a sign of the persistence of antimodern impulses, the regressive-nostalgic longings of those unwilling to face up to the ambiguities and ironies of mod-

ern life. But is it quite so self-evident that the halo is destined for the dustbin of history? It is not just that critique has failed to eradicate the desire for the sacred and to root out magical, mystical, and mythological thinking, which flourish in both old and new guises. We might also consider that critical thinking conjures up its own forms of enchantment; the faith in critique is no different, in certain respects, from other forms of faith. It involves an attachment to certain precepts and practices that can be experienced with an almost primordial intensity, that is often impervious to counterarguments, and that is relinquished painfully and with difficulty. Faith, in this sense, is less a matter of conscious assent to a series of propositions than a gradual easing into an overall orientation and way of thinking. When one is truly enchanted by critique, it feels entirely reasonable, logical, even inevitable.³³

That critique has its sacred texts, rites of passage, and articles of faith is not a deplorable lack or shameful failing—something to be corrected by an industrial-strength dose of yet more critique. It is a timely reminder, however, of the blurred lines between the secular and the sacred, the modern and the premodern, and thus of the limits of any vision of critique as disruptive negativity. And here we might look to Ian Hunter's history of critique, which revises the usual account of its Enlightenment origins. Far from being a purely secular phenomenon forged in the fire of Cartesian doubt and political revolution, critique has its roots, according to Hunter, in a religious tradition of pastoral pedagogy and self-examination. It is here that a certain idea of the person comes into being, one whose sense of selfhood and ethical purpose is formed through a state of watchfulness and self-regulation. There are, Hunter suggests, striking parallels between the practice of relentless self-scrutiny that typifies the workings of the Protestant conscience in the seventeenth century and the culture of critical self-reflexivity that reigns in present-day humanities departments. Like Nietzsche, Hunter connects modern suspicion to a history of spiritual self-examination. Critique, he proposes, has become the medium of a secular holiness, the preferred rhetoric of today's "spiritual intelligentsia."³⁴ The halo dropped by the poet—now dented, dirty, a little lopsided, but still emitting a faint steady glow—has been picked up by the critic.

3. *Critique is intellectual.* Everyday practices of assessing and evalu-

ating, such as the experience of debating the merits of a movie with a friend, usually fall under the rubric of “criticism.” What, then, is the difference between “criticism” and “critique”? Is it really the case, as scholars have argued, that criticism is just a matter of fault-finding and putting down, while critique—as an academic practice—justifies its judgment by offering rationales and justifications?³⁵ Surely ordinary acts of criticism also leave room for justifying and explaining. A first response, perhaps, may take the form of an intemperate outburst or peremptory verdict: “That was a god-awful film!” we mutter irritably to our companion while making our way out of the movie theater. If pressed for a further explanation, however, we can usually come up with one: “The different parts of the film didn’t hang together, its portrayal of women was utterly retrograde, and I’ve always hated that director’s work anyway!” When talking to others, we often provide reasons for our judgments, defend our perspectives, and describe our feelings. It seems misleading to claim that critique differs from criticism in being “intellectually serious”—as if the realm of everyday interaction were entirely deprived of such seriousness.

One difference between criticism and critique is, surely, rhetorical or performative—that is to say, the distinction is realized and enforced in the speaker’s choice of words. When we describe ourselves as engaged in critique, we imagine ourselves taking part in a particular kind of conversation. We tacitly link ourselves to a larger history in which figures such as Kant, Marx, and Foucault loom large; we situate our ideas in relation to a distinguished tradition of theoretical reflection and intellectual dissent. In this context, critique is drawn, as we have seen, toward self-reflexive thinking. Its domain is that of second-level observation, in which we reflect on the frameworks that form and inform our understanding. The critical observer is a self-observer; the goal is to objectify one’s own thought by looking at it from outside, so as to puncture the illusion of any spontaneous or immediate understanding. Contemporary critique is irresistibly drawn to the “meta”: metafiction, metahistory, metatheory. Even if objectivity is an illusion and truth is a chimera, how can critical self-consciousness not trump the alternatives? Self-reflexivity is the holy grail of contemporary thinking: widely hailed as an unconditional good. “Critical theory,” states a popular introduction to the field, echoing the senti-

ments of countless other primers, “aims to promote self-reflexive exploration”: its purpose is to “question the legitimacy of common sense or traditional claims made about experience, knowledge, and truth.”³⁶

This questioning of common sense is also a questioning of ordinary language. Contemporary critique is often mistrustful of a prose style that aspires to be clear, simple, and direct—qualities that it holds to be inherently ideological. “Clarity,” declares the critic and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, “is a means of subjection, a quality both of official taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order.”³⁷ Trinh worries that the demand for clarity is detrimental, even dangerous, turning language into a tool for the conveying of the already known. As such, it remains squarely on the side of the conventional and closed-minded, policing what counts as acceptable communication. It cannot hear the sounds of difference or strangeness; it is oblivious to the rhythm of the eccentric and the offbeat; it peremptorily dismisses what cannot be voiced in logical argument and straightforward prose.

This suspicion of clarity leads to a preference for intricate syntax and specialized idioms that call attention to the snares of language. Self-reflexivity, in short, becomes a matter of the form as well as the content of academic prose. This phenomenon of so-called difficult writing has triggered volleys of accusations and counteraccusations that sometimes shed more heat than light. Lamenting the ascendancy of an “awkward, jargon-logged, academic prose,” the philosopher Denis Dutton declares that its torturous neologisms and convoluted syntax mask a lack of substance. “The pretentiousness of the worst academic writing,” he writes, “betrays it as a kind of intellectual kitsch” that promises but never delivers genuine insight.³⁸ For Dutton, the difficulty of this writing is a surface effect. Bullying the reader into submission, it announces its importance through the obfuscatory weight of its words rather than the genuine complexity of its thought.

Dutton’s salvo has triggered sharp responses from poststructuralist critics who query the self-evident merits of accessibility and chafe at the very notion of a “common language.” If the goal of critique is to challenge the taken-for-granted, they declare, it must put pressure on the form as well as the content of expression. Jonathan Culler and

Kevin Lamb invoke the history of literary modernism and its use of language to estrange perception. Like modernism, they suggest, “critical prose must draw attention to itself as an act that cannot be seen through”; it must resist being consumed, digested, swallowed up. In doing so, it can undermine or unwrite the prevailing discourses that make up our world.³⁹ Paul Bové adopts a similar line of argument, testifying to a “tradition that insists upon difficulty, slowness, complex, often dialectical and highly ironic styles,” as an essential antidote to the “prejudices of the current regime of truth: speed, slogans, transparency, and reproducibility.”⁴⁰ Critique, in short, demands an arduous working over of language, a refusal of the facile phrase and ready-made formula.

Intervening in these debates, Judith Butler invokes the precedent of Adorno. His worry, she notes, was that to “speak in ways that are already accepted as intelligible is precisely to speak in ways that do not make people think critically, that accept the status quo, and that do not make use of the resource of language to rethink the world radically.” The communication of truth pivots on the structures through which it is conveyed. If these structures are already known, they will only protect the reader’s ignorance, shoring up complacency and parochialism. What does it say about me, Butler wonders, when the only knowledge I value is one that answers my need for the familiar, that does not make me pass through what is isolating, estranging, difficult, and demanding?⁴¹ New thought, in short, demands a language that spurns convention and the pabulum of the already known, even at the risk of a certain isolation from collective life. Here Butler flips Dutton’s account of the link between style and sensibility on its head. Difficult language is no longer a sign of entitlement or obfuscation but conveys a certain humility—in contrast to the danger of dogmatism that haunts the champion of lucid and legible prose.

We must also keep in mind, however, that the quality of being either pedestrian or perplexing is embedded not in words themselves but in how readers receive and respond to these words. A style of writing cannot be difficult in itself, only in relation to the expectations of a given audience. And academics are, for the most part, primed to expect abstruse or opaque formulations and to appreciate lengthy cascades of qualifications. As Ien Ang points out, in spite of the political

weight given to practices of defamiliarization, they take place within the confines of academic communities to whom such practices are already very familiar.⁴² A way of writing that seems opaque or recondite to outsiders also promotes in-group belonging and socialization into a scholarly milieu. There is no reason why scholars should not use specialized terminology or an exacting style to communicate with their peers; some ideas, after all, can be challenging and complicated, and not all scholarship needs to be accessible to the person on the street. But its close ties to modes of professionalization and scholarly gatekeeping make it hard to sustain the claim that there is something intrinsically radical or resistant about difficult writing.

In short, defamiliarization, as Michael Warner observes, does not work all by itself, and we need to think in more specific terms about how what we say is heard, misheard, or ignored in public life.⁴³ Moreover, if we accept Latour's idea that the impact of ideas is directly correlated to the strength and the length of their networks, disdain for accessibility may be misplaced—even while our arguments will be transported, transformed, and often misunderstood as they move through public space. The charge, moreover, that everyday language is “commodified” fails to acknowledge that critical theory is also a form of cultural capital and a prestige-driven commodity—though in neither case does this commodity status tell us very much about how words are being used in different situations, and to what end. Meanwhile, the creation of a great divide between critique and common sense condemns everyday language to a state of slow-wittedness and servitude while condescending to those unschooled in the patois of literary and critical theory. That individuals do not engage in “critique” does not mean that they must be uncritical.

All too often, remarks Bruno Latour, intellectuals—he is speaking of sociologists, but the point holds more generally—“behave as if they were ‘critical,’ ‘reflexive,’ and ‘distanced’ enquirers meeting a ‘naïve,’ ‘uncritical,’ and ‘unreflexive’ actor.”⁴⁴ Critical thinking is restricted to one side of the intellectual encounter, and everyday thought is pictured as a zone of undifferentiated doxa. Against this trend, the pragmatic sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have sought to redefine critique as routine rather than rarefied. In their influential work *On Justification*, they analyze a variety of what they call *cités*:

spheres of value that structure the realm of everyday experience.⁴⁵ Society, far from being a homogeneous whole, consists of ongoing conflict between these differing spheres and their languages of justification. (The characteristic values of family life, for example—personal attachments, cross-generational obligations, work that is hard to measure and quantify—collide with those of the office or the factory floor.) As people move between these differing worlds and adjudicate their claims, they must engage in acts of assessment, justification, and disputation. Critical thinking, in this light, is rooted in the everyday lives of individuals negotiating their relationship to competing spheres of value. There is no presumption here that the nature of ordinary language gets in the way of such thinking. “The social world,” declares Boltanski, “does not appear to be the site of domination endured passively and unconsciously, but instead a space shot through by a multiplicity of disputes, critiques, disagreements.”⁴⁶ In a spin on Raymond Williams’s comment that “culture is ordinary,” we can say that for Boltanski and Thévenot “critique is ordinary.”

We might wonder why these practices of arguing and questioning need to be dubbed critique—as if the only way for scholars to take such practices seriously is to slap an honorific academic label on them. Why redescribe everyday language as a form of critique when “critique” is not a term of everyday language? Here, however, we must give the vagaries of translation their due; *critiquer* includes both critique *and* criticism, even though the English translation must resolve this ambiguity in a specific direction. What is attractive about this line of thought, in any event, is its more capacious and democratic vision of what counts as thoughtful reflection. This is not to lapse into the populist mind-set that sometimes afflicts cultural studies: the contention that “ordinary people” are inherently savvier, sharper, more intuitive, more authentic, or more radical than the academics who write about them. (A weirdly self-hating and self-canceling form of argument!) It is rather to think of theory not as a fundamental estrangement from ordinary language but as being in dialogue with ordinary language: to reject the premise of a radical asymmetry between academic and everyday thought. Is it not time to ditch the dog-in-the-manger logic of a certain style of argument—where scholars assign to themselves the vantage point of the tireless and vigilant thinker while

refusing to extend this same capacity to those unreflecting souls of whom they speak?

4. *Critique comes from below.* Negative judgments can come from many different sources, but not all these sources seem equally salient to our topic. Take the examples of a father reproofing his misbehaving child, the politician lamenting the shortsighted interests of her constituents, the teacher taking a red pen to the errors of his students. Why does the term “critique” not seem quite right here? No doubt because we think of critique as emanating from below, as a blow against authority rather than the exercise of authority. In his essay “What Is Critique?” Foucault draws out this association of critique with the struggle against subjugation. The critical attitude, he argues, arises as a response to new forms of regulation that emerge in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while also connecting back to the religious attitudes and spiritual struggles of the Middle Ages. It is an expression of the desire not to be governed, or at least not to be governed quite so much. Critique is iconoclastic in spirit; it rails against authority; it seeks to lay bare the injustices of the law. It assumes an emphatically political as well as moral weight. It is the “art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability.”⁴⁷

Politics and critique are often equated in literary studies and elsewhere. As Kimberly Hutchings points out, the idea of critique as an exemplary politics haunts the history of modern thought.⁴⁸ But what kind of politics is being alluded to? And who gets counted as a proponent of critique? The term “conservative critique” is bandied about in the media, yet many scholars in the humanities would balk at such a phrase. The neoconservative pundit who weighs in on the failures of affirmative action is certainly making a political argument, but his discourse, in their eyes, would not qualify as critique. There is, admittedly, a strong strain of conservative cultural thought (*Kulturkritik*) that spurns the degradations of modern capitalism and the tawdriness of the marketplace and turns its face toward the past.⁴⁹ But that this strand of thought is usually translated as “cultural criticism” clinches the point: “critique” is a term commonly associated with a progressively oriented politics—one allied, in some way, with the interests of traditionally subordinate groups: the working class, women, racial or

sexual minorities. (The precise construal of “in some way” is, as we will see, a source of some contention.)

This vision of critique can be traced back to Marx—who sprinkles the word copiously through his book titles—and is cemented in the tradition of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School. In a well-known essay written in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer defines “Critical Theory” in opposition to what he calls “Traditional Theory”—by which he means the narrowly focused, “can’t see the woods for the trees” research of stereotypical academics holed up in their offices or laboratories. Burying their heads in the sand, the specialists collating arcane scraps of knowledge are oblivious to their position in a larger capitalist system. By contrast, Horkheimer contends that critical theory “has society itself as its object.” Rather than striving to better the functioning of elements in the structure, it aims to question the very existence of the structure. Critique is, in short, an openly committed form of scholarship that makes no pretense to neutrality, objectivity, or detachment. Critical theory aims not just at an increase in knowledge but, as Horkheimer declares with a dash of brio, at “man’s emancipation from slavery.”⁵⁰

We see here a vision of critique that will inspire a subsequent history of literary and cultural studies—not just its Marxist variants but a spectrum of political approaches, from feminism to cultural studies, from queer theory to postcolonialism. Cultural studies, for example, often champions the popular music and movies that Horkheimer and Adorno excoriate, but it holds fast to two key tenets of critical theory: a claim to offer a comprehensive view of society and a casting of politics in the register of opposition.⁵¹ Critique, its advocates insist, transcends the narrow purview of the disciplines; it reaches beyond the plodding positivism of the social sciences as well as the belletristic chitchat of traditional criticism. What interests critique is the big picture, a.k.a. the political picture. Scoffing at specializations, disdaining conventional divisions of thought, critique connects the dots by bringing together what has been artificially separated.

There is also a political epistemology built into the idea of critique: a conviction that those at odds with the status quo see better and farther than others. While society’s defenders reel off the reasons

why we live in the best of all possible worlds, practitioners of critique skewer this bad faith and expose its naked self-interest. Their advocacy of resistance springs from a sharpened consciousness of the insufficiencies and injustices of the present. According to David Couzens Hoy, “Critique is what makes it possible to distinguish emancipatory resistance from resistance that has been co-opted by the repressive forces.”⁵² In this sense, critique is not just a tool but a weapon, not just a form of knowledge but a call to action.

But who gets to claim the mantle of opposition? And how is critique’s status as a discourse of intellectuals (point 3) to be reconciled with its claims to emanate “from below” (point 4)? These questions have acquired fresh urgency in recent decades, thanks to the changing demographics of the academy and the explosion of new fields of research. In the US academy especially, fields ranging from African American and women’s studies to postcolonial studies and queer theory have been drawn to critique. It is often a premise of such fields that the subjugated knowledges of the disenfranchised alienate them from the status quo, offering them a unique vantage point of critical insight and skeptical judgment. There is what seems like a natural flow or progression from the experience of marginality to the espousal of certain styles of thinking and reading. Critique is authorized by being rooted in the experiences of those who have been historically deprived of authority: the traditions of vernacular suspicion noted in chapter 1.

To those outside of academia, however, critique may look like a somewhat different creature: one whose claims to speak from below are overshadowed by its debt—in language, rhetoric, and method of argument—to scholarly conventions and academic idioms (a.k.a. “professional suspicion”). Such idioms, with their connotations of expert knowledge and accompanying status, can inspire feelings of resentment and trigger complaints of being inaccessible or irrelevant to larger communities of the oppressed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley observe that

critique is variously charged with being academic, impractical, merely critical, unattuned to the political exigencies at hand, intellectually indulgent, easier than fixing things or saying what is to be done—in short,

either ultraleftist or ultratheoretical, but in either case without purchase on or in something called the Real World.⁵³

These words call to mind a history of often rancorous disputes between feminist theorists and a broader women's movement, as well as the more recent standoffs between activists campaigning for gay marriage and a vanguard of queer theorists opposed to such attempts—as they see it—to normalize dissident sexualities. No doubt complaints about the out-of-touch logic of critique echo especially loudly in the fields of legal and political studies where Halley and Brown are located—fields where academics are more likely to run a gauntlet of impatient activists and campaigners. But the question of the larger political payoff of critique is posed, if anything, even more poignantly in literary studies, where it is often far from evident how a postcolonial reading of Jane Austen published in an undersubscribed academic journal has much bearing on the global struggles to which it alludes.

In a well-known essay, Nancy Fraser remarks that critical theory possesses a “partisan though not uncritical identification” with oppositional social movements.⁵⁴ On the one hand, its commitments are unashamedly political; critical theory, she declares, channeling the well-known words of Marx, “is the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, as underscored by Fraser's insertion of the phrase “not uncritical,” critique also guards its independence and reserves the right to query the actions and attitudes of the oppressed as well as the oppressors. Its ability to say no to the world, to refuse obligations and affiliations, to carve out a space of negative freedom, remains vital to its own sense of mission. Critique, in this sense, is the quintessential form of unhappy consciousness, forever torn between its intellectual and its broader political allegiances.

This sense of being divided or torn plays itself out with special vigor in literary and cultural studies. On the one hand, as we have noted, critique can inspire passionate affinities and call into being groups and collectivities that did not previously exist. Not only did it help pave the way for new fields of study organized around race, gender, and sexuality—where urgent questions could be posed and texts read afresh—but it also drew scholars into intellectual communities where ideas were debated, books recommended, and syllabi shared.

Critique not only “detaches from” but also “connects to.” Pitting oneself against common obstacles is a powerful way of forging connection and friendship; a sense of solidarity arises out of a shared experience of struggling against antagonists and oppressors. The distinction between friend and enemy, as Chantal Mouffe insists, lies at the very heart of the political.

At the same time, these intellectual communities often cast a skeptical or jaundiced gaze at more popular forms of minority expression. Thanks to the models of language current in literary and cultural theory, forms of ordinary self-understanding are often held to be laden with metaphysical residues and essentialist assumptions. In a thoughtful essay, for example, Sue-Im Lee describes the ratcheting up of critique in Asian American studies to question the very success of Asian American fiction—now seen as a sign of its pandering to middlebrow expectations and dominant US values. Popular novels by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and others are reproached for endorsing a “vision of normative progress toward wholeness”; the very deployment of a language of Asian-American identity is seen as a sign of complicity vis-à-vis prevailing regimes of thought. Any affiliation with a broader minority community here collides with the intellectual’s allegiance to the principle of critique, which triggers more passionate and intensely felt attachments.

How, then, can critique reconcile its intellectual commitments with its political claims to speak “from below”? One increasingly favored strategy is to shift from specific others to a general or abstract principle of otherness—as exemplifying whatever is repressed, marginal, and therefore noncomplicit with power. For example, the language of “radical alterity” has come to the fore in poststructuralist thought, as a way of countering the potentially paralyzing effects of negativity and skepticism. Ewa Ziarek defines and defends this notion of alterity as encompassing whatever lies beyond the scope of Enlightenment thought and a subject-centered philosophy. There is, for Ziarek, a vital affinity between this “other” of reason and the works of such writers as Beckett, Kafka, and Gombrowicz.⁵⁶ Alterity turns out to be a concept well suited to the study of literary texts and especially the more enigmatic, opaque, or haunting works of literary modernism—those

defined by a linguistic intricacy and allusiveness that escapes definitive interpretation.

This appeal to a nonspecific otherness can give critique a shot in the arm, infusing it with a powerful dose of energy and ethical substance. Like the leftist tradition of utopian thought to which it bears obvious affinities, it holds open the possibility of a radically different future. One risk of fixating on the “radically other” and vesting one’s hopes in a “future to come,” however, is rendering whatever currently exists as simply more of the same. If we stare for too long at the bright patch of sky, our eyes struggle to readjust to our immediate surroundings; dazzled by the light, we no longer perceive distinct objects but only a vague and confused blur. In like fashion, a rhetoric of radical otherness can blind us to the differences, variations, contradictions, and possibilities in social conditions as we find them. The multiple hues of the present are flattened into a monotone shade of gray.

What, in this light, should we make of the often-heard complaints about the “domestication” of critique? The phrase is striking because it suggests that critique was once wild and untamed—a gaunt, hungry wolf roaming across the tundra, its eyes gleaming in the darkness. Displaced from the wilderness to the feminine space of the domus, it has traded freedom for food and been made docile and biddable by human contact. A domesticated critique is a critique that is defanged. The reproachful ring of the phrase stems from a still-resonant ideal of the critic as a vagabond and outsider, living a life of heroic unpredictability away from the obligations and compromises of the mainstream. It captures the ideal of what Bruce Robbins calls a “roving, unattached criticism” that steers clear of entangling or compromising loyalties.⁵⁷

Robbins takes aim at this myth of the unattached critic, suggesting that a programmatic animus toward institutions, combined with a misguided embarrassment about their status as professionals, has hindered scholars from thinking clearly about the politics of intellectual work—a politics that will, of necessity, take place within structures of higher education rather than outside them. The ethos of critique, I’ve been suggesting, often encourages this conviction that connection is synonymous with co-option and that social and institutional bonds

are signs of bondage—a conviction that often remains in place even while critique is being called into question. In a recent essay, for example, Robyn Wiegman assails the hopes of American studies scholars (including her former self) who see their solidarity with oppressed groups as some kind of challenge to the status quo. The performance of such a critical stance, she points out, has become virtually obligatory for those anxious to appear in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* or *American Quarterly*. In other words, the appeal of progressive scholars to a political principle *outside* their academic field only confirms the extent of their immersion *within* this field and their co-option by its professional norms and values. In the language used by Wiegman, the scholar's performance of a stance of "critical non-complicity" both cements and conceals her actual complicity—not just with the conventions of an academic discipline but also with the larger structures of economic and political injustice that sustain them. Suspicion gives way to metasuspicion, critique to the critique of critique.⁵⁸

At issue here, I would suggest, is the ultimate traction of critique's spatial metaphors and consequent political vision: the categories of outside and inside, center and margin, complicit and noncomplicit. As long as such categories remain in place, the critic is destined to ping-pong between moments of hubristic defiance and crestfallen despair. The defiant proclamations of critique, once they are embraced, reproduced, and disseminated, are automatically downgraded and devalued as a sign of co-option. Whatever looks like success is a sign of failure; that particular ways of thinking are widely adopted and institutionally ratified only confirms that they were not radical enough to begin with. As a result, critique finds itself caught in a logic of constant self-excoriation, reproaching itself for the shame of its own success in attracting disciples and generating attachments. It is permanently tormented by the fear of not being critical enough.

The elaboration of an alternative framework must await the next chapter, but it will take its inspiration from Latour's observation that "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds,' but *well-attached*."⁵⁹ In this line of thought, we are always already entangled, mediated, connected, interdependent, intertwined; the language of "exteriority" and "noncomplicity" expresses not just an unrealized idea but a fun-

damentally unrealizable one. Some of these bonds prove more helpful or enabling than others, and some mediations may empower while others limit or constrain, but the condition of being “linked in” is not an option. Nor can we come to grips with the workings of institutions by portraying them as purely coercive structures, with all attempts at change waved away as reformist illusions—a form of thinking that clings, as Mouffe remarks, to a remarkably essentialist view of institutions.⁶⁰ What is needed, in short, is a politics of relation rather than negation, of mediation rather than co-option, of alliance and assembly rather than alienated critique.

5. *Critique does not tolerate rivals.* Critique often chafes at the presence of other forms of thought, whose deficiencies it spells out in emphatic tones. Unwilling to admit the possibility of peaceful coexistence or even mutual indifference, it concludes that those who do not embrace its tenets must therefore be denying or disavowing them. In this manner, whatever is different from critique is turned into a photographic negative of critique—evidence of a shameful lack or culpable absence. To refuse to be critical is to be uncritical; a judgment whose overtones of naïveté, bad faith, and quietism seem impossible to shrug off. In this line of thinking, critique is not one path but the only conceivable path. Drew Milne pulls no punches in his programmatic riff on Kant: “To be postcritical is to be uncritical: the critical path alone remains open.”⁶¹

Joan Scott also rallies to the defense of critique, which she sees as being threatened by an increasingly conservative academic climate. As evidence of this conservatism she cites a growing eclecticism—that is to say, a tendency among scholars to draw on diverse methodologies, including empirical ones, rather than rally around the flag of poststructuralism. This shift, she ventures, is a defensive strategy adopted by younger scholars to placate their elders rather than a sign of any genuine weariness with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Scott takes pains to emphasize that she is not opposed to change or the cross-pollination of intellectual vocabularies. She contends, nevertheless, that such eclecticism, thanks to its refusal to address theoretical or political conflict, can only be “conservative and restorative.” Urging a return to the practice of rigorous interrogation epitomized by decon-

struction and poststructuralism, Scott concludes that the role of critique is “to unsettle received wisdom and so provide an irritant that leads to unforeseen ideas and new understanding.”⁶²

Scott and Milne are in distinguished company; over the years, many scholars have swooped in to champion critique as the only way of carving out a space of freedom from forces pressing in from all sides. Appealing to Nietzsche and Marx as guiding lights, Paul Bové declares that a criticism that does not engage in rhetorical and institutional critique “is the worst sort of metaphysics.” Those fail to practice this style of critique, he warns, render themselves useful to the dominant social order, though most “liberal educators and critics serve a function of which they are at best only partially aware.”⁶³ They are, not to put too fine a point on it, stooges of the status quo.

Here again, we see the halo effect of critique, its radiant promise of political as well as intellectual legitimacy. In consequence, even those most disenchanted with critique seem unable, finally, to wriggle free of its grip. The British sociologist Michael Billig, for example, casts a jaundiced eye on the current state of his discipline. He points out that critique thinks of itself as battling orthodoxy yet is now the reigning orthodoxy—no longer oppositional but obligatory, not defamiliarizing but oppressively familiar. “For an increasing number of young academics,” he remarks, “the critical paradigm is the major paradigm in their academic world.”⁶⁴ Unlike their elders, who turned to critique in order to break free of the disciplinary norms they had inherited, these younger scholars have spent their intellectual lives deconstructing, interrogating, and speaking Foucauldian.

How, then, can scholars cast off this mantle of compulsive criticality? What alternatives could we imagine? What new dispositions or methods might we embrace? The solution proposed by Billig is a “critique of the critical.” Critique, in other words, is not to be abandoned but intensified; critique is to be replaced by critique squared. If critique is diagnosed as the problem, how can it also be hailed as the solution? The problem with critique, it turns out, is that *it is not yet critical enough*. That is to say, the guiding values of critique—the merits of interrogating and cross-examining, the single-minded pursuit of the guilty, and the conviction that “no sign is innocent”—remain in place. These tenets, however, are now turned on critique itself in

order to lament its transformation into a shopworn convention and a pedagogical cliché. The objections to critique are still part and parcel of the critique-world; the value of the critical is questioned only to be emphatically reinstated.

Similar issues emerge in a recent debate on the question “Is Critique Secular?” While postcolonial studies has served as a major arena of critique, it has also fielded some important challenges to a rhetoric of demystification that is ill equipped to engage the religious commitment and consciousness of most of the world’s populations. Talal Asad, for example, expounds persuasively on the corrosive and colonialist dimensions of critique, citing its ignorance of faith, its disdain for piety, its inability to enter imaginatively into a lived experience of the sacred. “Like iconoclasm and blasphemy,” he observes, “secular critique also seeks to create spaces for new truth, and, like them, it does so by destroying spaces that were occupied by other signs.”⁶⁵ Critique, he contends, has become doxa, bolstering the West’s sense of its superiority vis-à-vis non-Western cultures mired in dogmatic faith (the occasion of the debate was a response to the furor over the Danish cartoons lampooning the prophet Mohammed). Asad points out that critique is now a quasi-automatic stance for Western intellectuals, promoting a smugness of tone that can be harshly dismissive of the deeply felt beliefs and attachments of others. He writes: “I am puzzled as to why one should want to isolate and privilege ‘critique’ as a way of apprehending truth.”⁶⁶ And yet Asad concludes his compelling argument by calling for a critique of critique — reinvoking the concept that his essay has so painstakingly dismantled.

Why do these various protestations against critique end up re-embracing critique? Why does it seem so excruciatingly difficult to conceive of other ways of arguing, reading, and thinking? We may be reminded of Eve Sedgwick’s comments on the mimetic aspect of suspicious interpretation: its success in encouraging imitation and repetition. It is an efficiently running form of intellectual machinery, modeling a style of thought that is immediately recognizable, widely applicable, and easily teachable. Critique is contagious and charismatic, drawing us into its field of force, marking the boundaries of what counts as serious thought, so that the only conceivable response to the limits of critique seems to be the piling up of yet more critique.

Casting the work of the scholar as a never-ending labor of distancing, deflating, and diagnosing, critique rules out the possibility of a different relationship to one's object. It seems to grow, as Sedgwick puts it, "like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding *or* things to understand."⁶⁷

In consequence, other ways of reading are presumed, without further ado, to be sappy and starry-eyed, compliant and complacent. A substantial tradition of modern thought that has circumvented or challenged the logic of critique—ranging from the work of Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Polanyi to more recent avatars such as Latour and Rancière—drops out of sight. We are led to believe that the only alternative to critique is a full-scale surrender to sentimentality, quietism, Panglossian optimism, or—in literary studies—the intellectual fluff of aesthetic appreciation. In short, critique stacks the cards so that it always wins.

Refusing to participate in this language game would make room for a richer variety of affective as well as intellectual orientations; it would allow us to be surprised by what our colleagues have to say; it would encourage us to pose different questions as well as discover unexpected answers. And here, as Richard Rorty points out, the best way of redirecting an established line of thought is not to take up arms against it (via the technique of "critique") but to come up with inspiring alternatives and new vocabularies. What if we refused to be railroaded into the false choice between the critical and the uncritical? How might argument and interpretation proceed if critique were no longer our ubiquitous watchword and ever-vigilant watchdog? What other shapes of thought could we imagine? And how else might we venture to read, if we were not ordained to read suspiciously?

NOTES

Introduction

1. Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26.
2. Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
3. Kevin Lamb, "Foucault's Aestheticism," *diacritics* 35, no. 2 (2005): 43.
4. Like most scholars working in this area, I am indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Other works I have found especially helpful in the course of this project include Toril Moi's *"What Is a Woman?" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and her current manuscript on literary criticism and ordinary language philosophy; Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); the "Surface Reading" issue of *Representations*, edited by Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, as well as Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Marriage, and Desire in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 371–92; Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). I have

also learned much from the work of Graham Harman and of course am deeply influenced by the work of Bruno Latour.

5. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2005): 225–48.
6. Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," in his *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).
7. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
8. On this point, see also Günter Leypoldt, "Singularity and the Literary Market," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 71–88.
9. Nikolas Kompridis, "Recognition and Receptivity: Forms of Normative Response in the Lives of the Animals We Are," *New Literary History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–24. As Kompridis remarks, receptivity should not be confused with passivity—nor does it presume that readers are blank slates or "ideologically innocent." See also Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pt. 5, chap. 2.

Chapter 1

1. Michael Roth, "Beyond Critical Thinking," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2010. The argument is recapitulated in his *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
2. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).
3. For an expansion of this point, see Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," *Profession* (2009): 28–35.
4. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 96–97.
5. Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3.
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 12.
7. David Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
8. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.

48. Elizabeth Bruss, "The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games," *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 162.
49. Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 151.
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51. Robert M. Fowler, "Who Is 'the Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" *Semeia* 31 (1985): 9.
52. Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 77.
53. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1968), 147.
54. Louis Althusser, *Reading "Capital"* (London: Verso, 1979), 14–15.
55. T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), viii.
56. Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991). That texts are not persons — with human qualities of vulnerability — does not mean that they are not agents or actants, as we will see in the final chapter.
57. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 151.

Chapter 4

1. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, introduction to *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Brown and Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27; Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory* (London: Longman, 1991), 2.
2. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), xi.
3. Gianni Vattimo, "Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique," in *Writing the Future*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990).
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- example, Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
5. René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 35; Drew Milne, "Introduction: Criticism and/or Critique," in *Modern Critical Thought: An Anthology of Theorists Writing on Theorists*, ed. Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 5.
 6. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Flamingo, 1976), 86.
 7. Robert Koch, "The Critical Gesture in Philosophy," in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 531.
 8. Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 339.
 9. Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 48.
 10. Audrey Jaffe, "Spectacular Sympathy: Visuality and Ideology in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*," *PMLA* 109, no. 2 (1994): 254–65; John Martin Evans, *Milton's Imperial Epic: "Paradise Lost" and the Discourse of Colonialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
 11. Liam Kennedy, "American Studies without Tears," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009).
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 13. These remarks have benefited from Alex Woloch's unpublished paper "Critical Thinking."
 14. Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 33.
 15. Keith Robinson, "An Immanent Transcendental: Foucault, Kant and Critical Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 141 (January–February 2007): 21.
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 17. I am thinking here, for example, of Rodolphe Gasché's attempt to distinguish a "bad" critique (based on separating and judging) from a more desirable, because more ambiguous, "hypercritique." This distinction

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 19. Raymond Geuss, "Genealogy as Critique," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 209; Koch, "Critical Gesture in Philosophy," 531; Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Post-structuralism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 55.
 20. Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Cultures, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 182.
 21. Giovanni Porfido, "Queer as Folk and the Spectacularization of Gay Identity," in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 63.
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 23. Judith Butler, "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, CA: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 116.
 24. Barbara Johnson, translator's introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004), xv–xvi.
 25. Marcelo Dascal, for example, points out that the supposedly nonevaluative model of historical or genealogical critique retains a negative or demystifying force in tracing ideas back to causes invisible to the actors themselves. See "Critique without Critics?" *Science in Context* 10, no. 1 (1997): 39–62.
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 28. Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 74. On the distinction between the stand and the stance, see John S. Nelson, "Stands in Politics," *Journal of Politics* 46 (1984): 106–30.
 29. Stephen Ross, "Introduction: The Missing Link," in *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, ed. Stephen Ross (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 10.
 30. Brown and Halley, introduction to *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, 28.
 31. Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 231.

32. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).
33. Pierre Schlag, *The Enchantment of Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
34. Ian Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 167.
35. Hengameh Irandoust, "The Logic of Critique," *Argumentation* 20 (2006): 134. Iain McKenzie also argues that "critique is not criticism: it is precisely that which calls criticism to account as opinion," in *The Idea of Pure Critique* (London: Continuum, 2004), 89.
36. Editors' introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), x.
37. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 16–17.
38. Denis Dutton, "Language Crimes," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 1999.
39. Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb, introduction to *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, ed. Culler and Lamb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 9.
40. Paul Bové, *Mastering Discourse: The Politics of Intellectual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 167.
41. Judith Butler, "Values of Difficulty," in Culler and Lamb, *Just Being Difficult?*, 201, 203.
42. Ien Ang, "From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research: Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century," *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2006): 190.
43. Michael Warner, "Styles of Intellectual Publics," in Culler and Lamb, *Just Being Difficult?*, 117.
44. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling The Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 57.
45. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
46. Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 27. For a very helpful assessment, see Robin Celikates, "From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn," *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006): 21–40.
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48. Kimberly Hutchings, *Kant, Critique and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 190.

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50. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Sociology*, ed. Paul Connerton (Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 224.
51. Rita Felski, "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method," *Modernism and Modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 501–18.
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55. *Ibid.*, 97.
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58. Robyn Wiegman, "The Ends of New Americanism," *New Literary History* 42, no. 3 (2011): 385–407.
59. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 218.
60. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2012), 104.
61. Milne, "Introduction: Criticism and/or Critique," 18.
62. Joan Scott, "Against Eclecticism," *differences* 16, no. 5 (2005): 122.
63. Bové, *Mastering Discourse*, 87.
64. Michael Billig, "Towards a Critique of the Critical," *Discourse and Society* 11, no. 3 (2000): 292.
65. Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, CA: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 33. On the postcolonial challenge to the rhetoric of disenchantment, see, for example, Saurabh Dube, "Introduction: Enchantments of Modernity," special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on "Enduring Enchantments," 101, no. 4 (2002): 729–55; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
66. Asad, "Reply to Judith Butler," 140. Elsewhere, Asad discusses forms of criticism that cannot be assimilated to a Western tradition of critique. See, for example, "The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 1993). I am grateful to Michael Allan for bringing this text to my attention.

67. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 131.

Chapter 5

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2. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 148.
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6. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75.
7. Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 2.