The Social Life of Literature: Cultural Studies, Cultural Ethnography and the Future of Literary Studies*

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Summary

This study moves, by way of brief comments on the historical shaping of the discipline of literary studies, to an investigation of the methodological and disciplinary coherence of cultural studies. In turn, this leads to some remarks concerning cultural ethnography and its attendant epistemological constraints. The essay concludes with some thoughts in favour of a repositioning of literary critical activity.

Opsomming

Dié studie beweeg, by wyse van kommentaar oor die historiese vorming van die dissipline literêre studies, na 'n ondersoek van die metodologiese en dissiplinêre koherensie van kulturele studies. Dit lei verder tot 'n paar opmerkings oor kulturele etnografie en die epistemologiese beperkings daaraan verbonde. Die artikel sluit af met gedagtes ten gunste van 'n herposisionering van literêre en kritiese aktiwiteite.

> After all, the subject of anthropology is limited only by man. It is not restricted by time - it goes back into geology as far as man can be traced. It is not restricted by region but is world-wide in scope. It has specialized on the primitives because no other science would deal seriously with them, but it has never renounced its intent to understand the high civilizations also. Anthropology is interested in what is most exotic in mankind but equally in ourselves, here, now, at home.
>
> (Kroeber 1953: xiii)

> Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.
>
> (Geertz 1973: 5)

> If the task of interpretation inherently lacks closure, how much interpretation is enough? How thick need description be?
>
> (Biersack 1989: 79)

The present study is prompted by an examination of literary studies as an academic discipline with a specific historical formation, and by an inves-

tigation into the claims which the discipline might register, concerning knowledge-creation, objectivity and value. The discipline is thus scrutinized as a specific moment within the flow of cultural history, and as a branch of human knowledge with attendant claims to method and legitimacy. The principal concern of this investigation will be to chart possibilities for the future of literary studies, rather than to provide yet another description and analysis of its past. Nevertheless, brief comments on the history of the discipline will help situate the concerns of this study. The following historical generalizations concerning the rise of literary criticism and the subsequent rise of literary theory are offered as scene-setting devices only, to help inaugurate the central concerns which follow.

1

In order for literary studies to achieve status as a discipline, it was evident to scholars within the Cambridge School and within New Criticism that it would be necessary to establish method, a sense of objectivity, formalized literary-critical procedures and a credible system of value determination. By the 1950s, the discipline was in full swing, with very few detractors concerning its claims to scientism, rigour and rule-governed knowledge-production. The shift, from the golden age of literary criticism (the early 1940s through the 1960s) to the golden age of literary theory (the 1960s through the 1980s) was symptomatic of a self-reflexive speculation concerning this recently authorized activity of criticism. While "theory" was, from the start, a group of contesting theories rather than a singularity, all positions and theories have shared a lack of conviction concerning the objectivity of criticism. While many disciplines have undergone a crisis of legitimacy, most have emerged, albeit a little shaken, to continue far less cautiously when making knowledge claims. In the case of literary criticism, the crisis still looms, precisely because the original grounds upon which institutionalized criticism was founded, are seen to contain more scientism than science. Even the practitioners of criticism balk at the scientistic formalization of procedures, critical methods and the constitution of literariness. Both broad areas within literary studies - criticism and theory - find rule-governance for criticism to be inappropriate and unconvincing. Sociologically speaking, after the efforts of the Cambridge School and the New Critics to secure a tentative academic footing for criticism, the only factor which has added to criticism's supercultural credibility has been that the discipline has attracted numerous colourful, intellectually avante-garde and outspoken individuals. One would have expected the early attempts at formalized method, proce-

dure and goals to have been consolidated. Instead, within literary studies, there is widespread suspicion of scientism.

Institutionalized literary studies was shown to be historical, cultural and partial, rather than ahistorical, transcultural and impartial. The discipline's claims to objectivity were seen to be fallacious, and the allocation of aesthetic value to literary texts was exposed as a politics rather than an epistemology. Moreover, the rise of theory, from the 1960s to the 1980s, occasioned a confusion for the singularity of the discipline of literary studies, by offering a bewildering array of conceptually complex and, often mutually exclusive, theories and methods of literary analysis. Theorists and critics, sharing the same disciplinary space, frequently regarded each other with distrust, even contempt. From the critic's perspective, the theorist had fouled the communal well, thus spoiling the water for everyone. From the theorist's perspective, literary criticism required complete revision, and that "business as usual" in literary criticism was distinctly unusual when reviewed alongside the rigour of other human sciences. Margolis says succinctly:

> Wherever we examine disciplines addressed to the most characteristic cultural artifacts - for instance, in interpreting literature, in determining the meaning of historical events - it is noticeably difficult to avoid accommodating relativistic claims. But also, wherever we admit that the history of a science substantively infects the findings of that science as in fixing the reference of theoretical entities and in acknowledging the idealizing and improvisational function of explanatory laws we enculture science, and in doing that, prepare it for relativistic concessions. (Margolis 1991: 11)

Almost every player in the field of literary interpretation has acknowledged that the "laws" of interpretation fixed by the New Critics were idealized. A moment of hesitation occurred, and many employees within the discipline of literary studies began to search for a way forward, one which would allow them to continue with acts of literary criticism while overcoming, or skirting, the disabling insights of literary theory. Literary criticism may have been guilty of privileging acts of criticism by according them the status of context-free operations. The notion of criticism may well have been laying claim to Kant's notion of critique - as a means of establishing culturally disencumbered knowledge - rather than to the Hegelian notion of critique as "grounded in specific experience" (Connerton 1980: 25). Whatever the case, the practice of literary criticism entered a crisis of credibility, and its practitioners sought a confident way forward. One manoeuvre involved the realization that if literary criticism could no longer lay claim to transcultural knowledge production, then literary criticism could still continue, as an

explication of culturally bound knowledge and value. If it is less intellectually troublesome to suggest that *Hamlet* is great, for a particular culture at a particular time, rather than to suggest that it is transcendentally and universally great, then literary criticism might find safety by positioning itself within a system of specifically cultural production and analysis. The emerging practice of cultural studies has attracted a number of scholars who are eager to talk about books while avoiding the inflated and naive claims implicit in transcultural literary criticism.

2

The notion of cultural studies can be traced to the founding work, in the 1950s and early 1960s in England, of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, particularly in the period during which Stuart Hall was director. Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) has even been identified as the "founding" text (see Brantlinger 1990: 38; Turner, 1990: 52), which established the strongly interventionist energy of the cultural studies endeavour.

The practice of cultural studies has never made claim to being a discipline. Rather, it has been a response, an intervention, and an intellectual politics. Blundell, Shepherd and Taylor make the following observation:

> In a strict sense, cultural studies has neither a constantly identifiable subject matter nor theoretical positions that are characteristically its own. A constant in the cultural studies enterprise has, however, been a sense of critical political involvement - in particular, a desire to understand and change structures of dominance in industrial capitalist societies.
>
> (Blundell et al. 1993: 3)

Cultural studies began as a dissatisfaction, a pastiche of angry responses to the perceived wrongheadedness of various disciplines. Its impetus was a cluster of rebellious energy, thus identifying it as an indignant reaction - a position within intellectual politics rather than a method and a discipline beyond intellectual politics. Barker and Beezer describe the origins of cultural studies in England in this way:

> Cultural studies was a street urchin of a subject area, nicking other people's handkerchiefs when it suited - but using them to shine shoes or patch clothes, thumbing its nose at academic manners, being cheeky to everyone. English, sociology, film studies, later psychology and especially psychoanalysis, bits of political

> (and especially state) theory, and so on - all were plundered for whatever we needed at the same time as we challenged their status as "disciplines". At the same time, relations of other but equally important kinds went on with a variety of radical political movements: socialist organisations from time to time, the women's movement, anti-racist organisations, local culture and arts organisations.
>
> (Barker & Beezer 1992: 2)

In short, the enterprise of cultural studies has never been to lift itself clear of various political ends - the political desire to initiate change in a particular historical situation has been its principal source of energy. Lawrence Grossberg says that the British tradition of cultural studies "has *always* responded to the particular conditions of its intellectual, political, social and historical contexts". Also, "Cultural studies has always been a contested terrain ..." (Grossberg 1993: 22). In another article, he identifies the centrally interventionist energy of cultural studies as follows:

> ... it is an intellectual, even a theoretical practice driven less by its own theoretical project than by its engagement with, its attempts to respond to the demands of, a world outside of the academy ....
>
> (Grossberg 1994: 1)

While it is true to say that the context within which any intellectual enterprise arises has a determining force on the shape of that enterprise, in the case of the rise of cultural studies, this determining force has been paramount. The assumption has always been that intellectual activity should be at the service of ethically based mechanisms of cultural-political change, rather than the assumption that cultural-political life should become a site for intellectual analysis.

Stuart Hall clearly identifies cultural studies as a politics:

> The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was the locus to which we retreated when that conversation in the open work could no longer be continued; it was politics by other means. Some of us - me, especially, had always planned never to return to the university, indeed never to darken its doors again. But then, one always has to make pragmatic adjustments to where real work, important work, can be done.
>
> (Hall 1990: 12)

Grossberg further notes:

> For cultural studies, the question of power must always be located within a field of struggle, not as a zero sum game in which one either simply wins or loses, but rather, as an ongoing effort to change the balance and organization of forces. In this light, we can better understand cultural studies' commitment to the popular,

> not merely as a set of texts but as the terrain on which political struggle must be carried out in the contemporary world.
>
> (Grossberg 1994: 7)

Many of the central practitioners of cultural studies see, as part of their function, resistance to recuperation and incorporation into conventional tertiary institutions; resistance to the reification of cultural studies; resistance to one theoretical base; and resistance to transformation from a practice into a discipline. It is strictly "for the people". Thus, an oppositional zeal is crucial to the practice. Cultural studies, as one of the potential successors to literary criticism, retains the notion of the informed intellectual transforming consciousness by means of his/her published insights. This, according to Tony Bennett, may be a miscalculation if the aim of cultural studies is still interventionist and political. Bennett suggests a change of tack:

> As an alternative, then, cultural studies might envisage its role as consisting of the training of cultural technicians: that is, of intellectual workers less committed to cultural critique as an instrument for changing consciousness than to modify the functioning of culture by means of technical adjustments to its governmental deployment.
>
> (Bennett 1993: 83)

If cultural studies is to retain its political emphasis, then it is required to be endlessly nomadic. If it crystallizes at any time into a discipline, settles into a theoretical base, or becomes recognizable as a movement, it eventually becomes a new orthodoxy. Bailey and Hall offer this warning:

> It is perfectly possible that what is politically progressive and opens up new discursive opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s can become a form of closure - *and have a repressive value - by the time it is installed as the dominant genre* .... It will run out of steam; it will become a style; people will use it not because it opens up anything but because they are being spoken by it, and at that point, you need another shift.
>
> (Bailey & Hall 1992: 15)

The ideal is to resist the reification of cultural studies, and this may be impossible. It may be that only breakaway energies from cultural studies will keep the political agenda viable. Raymond Williams is concerned that cultural studies programmes lack "that crucial process of interchange and encounter between the people offering the intellectual disciplines and those using them" (Williams 1989: 157).

This concern helps to define the energy of cultural studies - at its best, it is market-driven. Its goals as a community service outrank its purely intel-

lectual goals. It is more about empowerment than about advances in disciplinary knowledge. The emphasis is on education. Research exists to be of service to the market community. Raymond Williams describes the fluidity of culture as follows:

> The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience.
>
> (Williams 1958: 334)

Cultural studies is always a participative study of becoming, rather than a disinterested view of static situations. As a founding principle, cultural studies entails a rejection of "the final analysis" or of a complete version of culture. Cultural studies is interactive rather than "acting upon", and the interactive process ends only when the human race ceases to generate new cultural positions and matrices. Knowledge, then, is not a striving towards completeness, but is more local in its desires - it is interactive as a goal as well as a process. Completeness is impossible, as the "object" can never be known, because it is never a thing, but a network. Isolating one aspect of the network is to falsify. Also, the "object" can never be known because it is constantly changing. Moreover, completeness is impossible, because the narrative can only be complete when every point - in time and space within the human network - has interacted with every other point in the network.

A large part of the original impetus, in emerging cultural studies programmes in England in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on the rejection of the idea of high culture. The programmes were designed for working class adult education courses, which undermined established Arnoldian canonicity by offering works of "popular culture" for study. In this way, such courses were aligned to the theoretical front which aimed to expose the culturally regulatory effects of "high culture":

> ... early cultural studies work was explaining the potential for resistance and revolt against determinate dominatory forces.
>
> (Barker & Beezer 1992: 8)

Thus, historically, the rise of cultural studies courses grew from a politically and class-based concern to put a halt to the indoctrination implicit in "high culture" English courses. There was a fervent desire to "democratize" cultural value. However, by the 1990s, many of these courses continue to rely on "key texts", not the Arnoldian key texts, but a new selection which is repeatedly shown to access culture (in its broadest sense) most aptly and readily. This is quite different to a true democratization of cultural value, and points to the fact that cultural studies has failed to escape the notion of

the "key text", thus undermining some of the original energy of the project. And this failure to avoid selection, exclusion and preference points to the impossibility of teaching anything but a highly mediated fragment of the cultural matrix and its products. The result is always identifiable as another ethical frame of reference, and may be simply another "lit. crit." course aimed at a different class or cultural group. This is entirely acceptable behaviour, but it is far from the grand ideals of a cultural studies programme. Moreover, as it moves into the mainstream of university courses, its centricity reinforces the canonicity and institutionalization that the original impetus sought strenuously to avoid. This state of affairs causes concern. Barker and Beezer wish to reaffirm cultural studies as belonging to "ordinary people":

> It is a project of thinking through the implications of extending the term "culture" to include activities and meanings of ordinary people, precisely those constituencies excluded from participation in culture when its elitist definition holds sway.
> (Barker & Beezer 1992: 5)

However, there is no cultural totality governing "ordinary people", and the invocation of the term usually signifies an attempt to speak in the name of a fictitious totality. In the displacement of cultural elitism, it is difficult not to prepare the ground for a new elitism.

As an opposition to prevailing curricula, cultural studies presents a challenge to the whole notion of the humanities. Michael Denning suggests that "it is necessary that we begin to imagine cultural studies not simply as the critique of the disciplines, but as an alternative to the humanities themselves, a reformation of general education ..." (Denning 1992: 41). If cultural studies wishes to retain its original interactive basis between teacher and student, then the reformation of education must be a community venture. As an ethically-driven intervention, it may function to challenge the structures of the humanities - its disciplinary divisions, its aims, its class-based origin, its teacher-student relations, and its methods of grading. In short, the occasion of cultural studies may provide the impetus for a spring-clean and revision of the intellectual routines performed in the humanities and human sciences. Of course, because of the oppositional impetus of cultural studies, there is a far greater uniformity of opinion concerning what is wrong than of what a new rightness should consist. Rightness, of course, is all - that is, in the realm of cultural competition. And, as in all revisions of "knowledge" during the knowledge-crises of recent decades, while some advocate the permanent displacement of the idea of true knowledge, others want to replace the old with new cartographies of the good, the bad and the ugly.

Paul Willis (*Common Culture* 1990) indicates that one enduring goal for cultural studies will be not simply to exist in opposition to the prevailing (class-based, elitist) educational system in England, but to transform the educational system. Willis says:

> The field of education is likely to come under even more intense pressure. It will be further marginalized in most people's experience by common culture. In so far as educational practices are still predicated on traditional liberal humanist lines and on the assumed superiority of high art, they will become almost totally irrelevant to the real energies and interests of most young people and no part of their identity formation.
>
> (Willis 1990: 147)

3

Having discussed some of the trajectories of cultural studies, it is appropriate to investigate the notion of cultural ethnography, for these two enterprises may share common ground and common problems. The cultural studies enterprise and the discipline of cultural ethnography may be viewed as the two arms of a balance, each emphasizing that which the other chooses not to emphasize, but both nevertheless existing generically within the same space. When viewed in tandem, they prompt one to confront the founding question of intellectual activity (and its site, the university): should the emphasis be on knowledge in or of the world? All intellectual activity cannot escape being both "in and of", but the question of degree is what is at stake. One may speak of two poles of intellectual endeavour, despite the fact that all intellectual activity is positioned somewhere in between. The first, traceable to Mannheim, portrays the intellectual as questioning all assumptions, the Cartesian figure who is loyal to nothing and resists cultural enticement - the "free-floating intellectual" (Mannheim 1936: 156). The second is traceable to Gramsci (1971), the "organic intellectual" who refuses to subordinate group interest in favour of abstract knowledge. This intentionally situated stance accentuates the political nature of meaning as being an horizon which cannot be transcended.

Historically, Mannheim's notion has dominated, stressing the historically dislocated and culturally unstuck position of the intellectual. The response, in the late twentieth century, has been a swing of the pendulum to the other extreme, characterizing the intellectual as a political worker, heroically within the division of labour and not exempt from it. A succinct, if slightly flippant description of these two intellectual poles is expressed by Roger Keesing: "Where feminists and Marxists find oppression, symbolists find

meaning" (Keesing 1987: 166).

As the cultural studies enterprise has expanded and moved beyond Britain, it has had to grapple with this duality, because at times it has taken the shape of cultural ethnography and at other times the shape of political praxis. It has become the site of this founding question of where it legitimately belongs, which can have no definite answer. It may be true to suggest that already, by the 1990s, cultural studies and cultural ethnography have become amalgamated, each representing different emphases, and each changing the other. Thus, cultural ethnography is reminded that the ideal of pure observation is impossibly cold in its voyeuristic gaze, while cultural studies is reminded that the complex matrices of activity called "culture" require rigorous and dispassionate analysis, if we are to understand the phenomenon of the organization of human meaning.

Moreover, because cultural studies grew out of a suspicion of institutionalized aims, methods and theories, it has always interrogated rather than accepted, and self-interrogation has become a regulatory device of cultural studies. Suspicion of all founding theories and methods has given cultural studies an air of energetic and perpetual crisis. Cultural studies brings to cultural ethnography a vigilant distrust of the idea of transcendental "knowledge", of a singular theoretical base, and of institutional affiliations. While cultural ethnography has not been blind to these concerns, cultural studies reinvigorates them and insists on their centrality to disciplinary activity.

At base, the common endeavour shared by cultural studies (as an investigative politics), and cultural ethnography (as an academic discipline), is the elucidation of identity as a cultural construct. They both proceed from the premise that the individual is nothing of the sort, but is constituted by, and occupies, cultural space. Hall even goes so far as to postulate identity as the product of a confrontation with some category of "other". Identity is thus the fruit of struggle:

> Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself.
>
> (Hall 1991: 21)

The move to regard identity as constituted by opposition, a move which is gaining authority in various sites of struggle and within intellectual disciplines (post-colonial, black, feminist and gay movements, and their attendant disciplines, for example) meshes well with the originary impetus of cultural studies as fundamentally oppositional to prevailing conditions and institutions. However, this notion may have more political currency than descriptive power, in that identity relations between "dominant" and "other"

are already deeply intertwined prior to the assertion of otherness. Mutual invasion has already occurred when otherness is recognized.

4

Within ethnography, there are four overwhelming problem clusters, which can best be indicated by means of questions, as follows:

- what is culture?
- what is the base unit of culture?
- what is ethnographic method and its object of knowledge?
- how is the culture/high culture distinction constituted?

Each of these problem clusters will be discussed, as a shorthand way of introducing cultural ethnography. Raymond Williams reminds us that the notion of culture is unquestionably complex:

> The complexity of the concept of "culture" is remarkable. It became a noun of "inner" process, specialized to its presumed agencies in "intellectual life" and "the arts". It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in "whole ways of life". It played a crucial role in definitions of "the arts" and "the humanities", from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the "human sciences" and the "social sciences", in the second sense. Each tendency is ready to deny any proper use of the concept to the other, in spite of many attempts at reconciliation.
>
> (Williams 1977: 17)

Culture may be regarded as a vast network of symbolic relations, sustained by individual minds, enormously complicated and detailed, constantly altering and adjusting. Numerous disciplines strive to study part of it - all of the humanities and human sciences - but by tackling a part or an aspect, the wholeness of the phenomenon is left unattended. The disciplinary space currently occupied by cultural ethnography may be the proper place in which to inaugurate a study of all aspects of human knowledge, although this enlarged and reconstituted disciplinary space would require a far more developed conceptual and procedural framework for its operation.

The term "culture" can be misleading because it implies essence, centre, edge and stability. In fact, a culture is most often a compromise situation that occurs when various micro-cultures are forced to occupy the same space and share the same legal, financial and civic amenities. Moreover, the term "culture" implies an enduring phenomenon, whereas it is always a flow and a process, always coming-to-be while it ceases-to-be in other respects.

Hannerz says of the complexity of "culture":

> Downscale, then, culture is likely to be characterized by the concreteness, the situational rootedness of its meanings. Upscale, it takes in increasing diversity. If a sense of a whole grows out of this, it is probably that of a moving interconnectedness, nothing less, not necessarily anything more. To get to the realities of contemporary wholes, we may often have to shatter the mystique of traditional anthropological holism. Orderliness, harmony, durable equilibria, and smooth adaptiveness: all those characterizations are debatable.
>
> (Hannerz 1992: 22)

Traditionally, cultures have most often been geographical entities. A local community had shared meanings. Increasingly, means of communication which do not require close physical proximity between sender and receiver replace traditionally constrained forms. As Willis states wittily:

> Immediate next-door neighbours may know nothing about each other's work, workplaces or wider kinships. Often they share only their postcodes. Organic communities and organic communications are slowly disappearing.
>
> (Willis 1990: 141)

However, there may be two energies at work in human relations, namely, the opposed energies in favour of conformity and difference, or homogeny and heterogeneity. Lévi-Strauss offers the following observation:

> We can easily now conceive of a time when there will be only one culture and one civilization on the entire surface of the earth. I don't believe this will happen, because there are contradictory tendencies always at work - on the one hand towards homogenization and on the other towards new distinctions.
>
> (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 30)

Moreover, McLuhan's prediction of a macro-cultural "global village" need not imply the dissolution of micro-cultures. The electronic age has given impetus to micro-cultural formation in addition to macro-cultural consent. Modems, websites and electronic bulletin boards facilitate the creation of highly specialized micro-cultures with access to instantaneous global communications media.

Nevertheless, the predicted globalization of culture has received much academic attention (see, for example, Featherstone 1990, King 1991, Wallerstein 1974, 1984) and there are strong factors in support of this contention. One may cite the increasingly inclusive global information network; the increase in the number of people on the move (emigrés, refugees, business persons, vacationers); the increase in multinational projects, referred

to by Appadurai (1993: 329) as "technoscapes" and the increase in world access to media entertainment. However, globalization creates its own contrary impetus, as micro-cultures resist global homogenization. The local resistance to masternarratives reinvigorates the desire for micro-cultural identity. Strong moral force is often attached to the desire to constrain the flow of international culture, because the latter is seen to engulf and erase all micro-cultures in its path. Anthony Giddens observes that as culture is globalized, it contracts, as part of the same process:

> At the same time as social relations become laterally stretched and as part of the same process, we see the strengthening of pressure for local autonomy and regional cultural identity.
>
> (Giddens 1990: 182)

Historically, one may observe that the origins of present globalization originated in the European state system. This template of the nation-state was deployed throughout the world. These nation-states always existed within a complex and understated system of interdependence. But, as Giddens shows, this has not been a uniform process, but one in which increased interdependence between two nation-states may entail the increasing isolation of another as in strategic alliances and war. While there is disagreement among theorists as to the dominant causes of globalization (usually centred on whether or not capitalism may take all the "credit" or not), these two forces of globalization and localization are antinomial expressions and thus inseparable, although entailment occurs only from globalization to localization, and not vice versa. (The formation of very local cultures does not necessarily entail a move towards globalization). Of the two cultural energies, towards the local and the global, Paul Willis believes that the globalizing energy is breaking up (Willis 1990: 129ff). The problem with predictions of this kind is that globalizing culture has both explicit and implicit forms. The explicit consists of official culture and dominant culture as presented in official actions, as well as state subsidized or funded places, media, events and facilities. This is the system that is most often referred to as dominant or hegemonic culture. Less explicit common culture is shared principally because it is not explicit to the individual - the webs of belief and practice that, for example, differentiate the cultures of Europe and Asia. Most often, the individual is unaware of adherence to these beliefs and practices, because assent is subliminal, or is regarded as commonsensical and obvious. A middle-aged middle-class banker and a young, unemployed punk, in England, might both defend the practice of a pint of warm bitter in the local pub with a game of darts, and the correctness of defending the Falklands against Argentinian invasion. It is the millions of

details of everyday life and belief, which exist in a realm *beyond question*, that constitute the implicit form of homogenizing cultural energy. The subterranean, elusive and resonant nature of much homogenizing enculturation makes it difficult to isolate its effects and, particularly, to determine whether these globalizing effects are increasing or decreasing.

One aspect of the transnational flow of culture often overlooked is the role of the academic. George Konrad makes the following observation:

> The global flow of information proceeds on many different technical and institutional levels, but on all levels the intellectuals are the ones who know most about one another across the frontiers, who keep in touch with one another, and who feel that they are one another's allies.
>
> We may describe as transnational those intellectuals who are at home in the cultures of other peoples as well as their own. They keep track of what is happening in various places. They have special ties to those countries where they have lived, they have friends all over the world, they hop across the sea to discuss something with their colleagues, they fly to visit one another as easily as their counterparts two hundred years ago rode over to the next town to exchange ideas.
>
> (Konrad 1984: 208-209)

The crucial issue is to determine the power of this group to influence the direction and type of transnational culture flow. Members of the group have access to truly metropolitan culture - culture common to all metropoli. Often, they are critical of, or disdainful of, global popular cultures. Their high degree of literacy, education, and access to goods, information and other cultures, make them potentially a profoundly important group on the world cultural scene. But they are insufficiently organized as a coherent group and often their implicit motivation is to preserve "high culture" (as they conceive it) as the domain of the few.

The term "subculture" requires discussion. Historically, the term is used to refer to culture of resistance, culture which is oppositional, and/or which arose from shared problems whereby no model exists for their solution. (This idea is traceable to Albert Cohen (1955: 53-61)). The sense of community emboldens the subculture to find (often socially unacceptable) solutions to perceived problems, and this oppositional or "abnormal" response is deemed to take on validity and normalcy when it is undertaken by greater clusters of individuals. Stated in another way, Hannerz postulates that the subcultural process "involves a baseline symmetry of perspectives among participants, cumulatively stabilized and amplified by the back-and-forth flow of meaning among them" (Hannerz 1992: 71-72).

Subcultures are prolific in any dominant culture, and may arise on the basis of age, gender, race, class, profession, ideology, neighbourhood, re-

creational pursuits, sexual orientation - in fact, subcultural identity can be based on anything that is shared. In short, shared difference is the key impetus for subcultural development. Subcultures become micro-cultures when the oppositional, embattled impetus of their origin falls away, and the small unit of culture endures because it now has its own internal momentum.

Moreover, one needs to include in this discussion the notion of transient cultures. Here, individuals coalesce briefly, and then disperse. Some centripetal force (such as a Live Aid concert, a football match, or a political rally) creates, for a short while, a transient culture to some degree. This is not to say that all participants are temporarily reduced to the sum of their shared cultural experience. They retain their other subcultural connections and, *in addition*, participate in the transient culture. There are various such centripetal agencies, such as opposition to a governmental decision, or resistance to just about anything. Just as the origin of more enduring subcultures is usually found in shared opposition to what is perceived to be unacceptably dominant and exclusionary, so transient cultures are frequently formed in this manner. Willis (1990: 141 ff) calls these "proto-communities", and correctly identifies them as the sites of emergent subculture:

> Reality is in advance of our imaginations. Proto-communities, or aspects of them, have lain behind or helped in the development of much of the "new politics" - feminism, anti-racism and especially grass-roots "greenism".
>
> (Willis 1990: 142)

The notion of the "base unit" of culture has intrigued anthropologists for decades. In *Structural Anthropology* (1963), Lévi-Strauss proposes the existence of "the atom of kinship". This idea can be related to the proposal of basic structures of assent and dissent in the individual (which will be discussed later in this essay). Both are attempts to isolate the smallest unit of ethnographical "knowledge", the arduous search for the base component from which to rebuild the complex webs of culture at any given time. The project may ultimately be impossible. Is there such a thing as an irreducibly primary unit or atom of human relation? Moreover, if one were authoritatively to posit such a unit, the task of reconstructing the totality of culture might take so long that by the time one has finished, the culture will have disappeared, overtaken by new cultural networks. Nevertheless, the principle of structure and of an irreducible unit may be useful, by positing a primary focus of attention and the existence of principles governing the way in which an individual constructs a network of assent/dissent within an individual consciousness.

Moreover, in *The Savage Mind* (1966), Lévi-Strauss discusses language

as a system of difference, with no absolute values ascribed to any signifier. When transposing this notion from linguistics to cultural ethnography, one arrives at a purely relational definition of the base unit, which is no definition at all. In other words, in the attempt to isolate a base unit of culture, it may never be possible to extricate that unit for analysis - every relational unit must be included in the discussion in order to arrive at a proper definition of the first relational unit chosen for discussion. Then one is back where one began - with the complex web of culture.

Perhaps the base unit of culture, if it can be said to exist at all, should be located neither in the individual nor in an item of cultural knowledge but, in the same way that complex computers originate in binarism, and on/off switching, the base unit of culture may be the act of assent or dissent, in the individual response to any item of cultural information. This assent/dissent may take many forms. Frequently, such assent/dissent is never indicated or articulated. It is often implied or entailed. Aggregations of assent/dissent create complex clusters, which in turn comprise the total belief system, within an individual at one time.

If one is to accept the notion that a base unit of culture exists (but may not be recoverable, as a result of the ethnographic equivalent of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle), then it follows that a global episteme exists. Perhaps the goal towards which all isolated disciplines within the human sciences and humanities aspire, is the grasp of such a global episteme at all moments in history, at which point all synchronic inquiry into human knowledge would presumably close. This matter, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. The preceding discussion concerning possible versions of a base unit of culture leads directly to the issue of how best to view human knowledge creation.

Without wishing to enter into a lengthy discussion of Lévi-Strauss's strategies for seeking the primacy of myth over infrastructure as the principal determinant of social reality, this intellectual tussle in the past decades between Marxists and structural anthropologists can have bearing on modern ethnographic trends. Lévi-Strauss's notion of myth, although formulated as a result of research into "primitive" societies, can be used to describe the deep-structure assumptions of members of "developed" societies. The "commonsense" or unimpeachable Western notions of freedom, individuality, civil rights, democracy, progress - as well as the fairly stable kinship structures and relations pertaining in these societies - are all aspects of the myths which are prevalent in the West. And the function of infrastructures, whatever else they may achieve, is to serve, regulate and preserve those myths. Thus, when a culture is relatively happy with its myths, then infrastructures are seen to be at the service of civil society. When a culture experiences a

shift at the deep-structure level of myth, the structures are seen as reactionary, repressive, stagnant, and counter revolutionary. Eventually, the infrastructure will have to shift along with the mythical shift. (In literary studies, for example, the myth of the high culture of Victorian England lost currency by the early 1970s, but the institution of Victorian myths in literary studies is still being dismantled, twenty years later.)

One of the valuable aspects of a Foucauldian-type study of history, based not on class, politics or economy, has been to direct attention to the web of micro-powers which constitute social existence - "an infinitely complex network of 'micro-powers', of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life" (Sheridan 1980: 139). Power is thereby no longer perceived as monolithic, but as occurring constantly within countless daily transactions. The technology of power thus becomes the technology of these ceaseless interactions, and "history" becomes cultural rather than economic, political or social. The exercise of micro-powers may be the base unit of culture, the minute amount of energy which, like atomic bonding in chemistry, allows for complex structures to occur. And these chemical bonds, minute surges of power between individuals, constitute the activity of common culture. This metaphor of the chemical bond corresponds to the earlier discussion of minute gestures of assent and dissent in the individual - both describe the exercise of micro-power. While emanating from an entirely different tradition, this search for micro-power corresponds to the search for the specific relations within individual lives - a people's history that avoids sweeping sociological generalizations by refusing to acknowledge them. The base unit of all human meaning may occur in the "chemical bonds" which regulate interaction, and while these bonds are always dynamic, altering constantly, they are always in place. Thus, it is evident that knowledge of humans and their meanings - the primary place from which all disciplines, practices, structures and superstructures emanate - is best located in the so-called "popular culture" of human interaction and human interest. By attempting to reconstruct the experience of consciousness, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) became a fine example of a revised approach to the study of human meaning, by placing culture - rather than class - centre-stage: "We cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation" (Thompson 1963: 11). Culture may well precede political and class identity. In so doing, Thompson parts company with the "classic" Marxist position in which class, as a product of economic relations, is seen to precede culture. The means of production are not ignored as determinants of social reality, but their primacy is questioned. Anthropology and not sociology or economics, may be seen as the principal discipline for the study of human interaction and meaning (although it must be acknowledged

that Thompson found anthropology to be unpalatably ahistorical).

Thompson's notion of the primacy of discrete anthropological investigations over those of class, politics and economy, is supported by Raymond Williams (1961). It is Williams who strongly anticipates the ultimate localization of knowledge, towards a pursuit of the discrete human situation. The aim is to recover "the felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and feeling" (1961: 63). These "structures of feeling" are the only legitimate generalities in the retrieval (if that is possible) of human experience at particular places and at particular times in history. A history of "feeling" restores the human aspect of knowledge, and proposes the return of the concept of knowledge to its human centre.

In support of culture, rather than class or economy, as originary, Willis finds the materialistic explanation of mass consumer culture to be inadequate as an explanation of cultural practice:

> We do not suggest the vacation of all critical spaces. Admiring, accepting, understanding market mechanism cannot supply an adequate framework and philosophy for encompassing and understanding whole human processes and sensuous cultural activities. Informal cultural production itself reminds us that creative human capacities will always work a selective and critical dialectic with the products of the market - enlarged and enabled by them but always exploiting a gap between how things are supposed to be consumed and how they really are or might be used.
>
> (Willis 1990: 132-133)

In short, the idea of the passive consumer, enthralled by commodity fetishism, portrays the consumer as a helpless victim incapable of cultural production. In contrast to this, throughout the pages of *Common Culture* (1990), Willis gives life to the dry abstraction of the "consumer", and demonstrates the exercise of will in the "common" individual. And Willis stresses that meaning-creation is not exclusively in the hands of the creator of the mass product, but to a large degree in the subcultural or "common" cultural reception of that product. By regarding the masses as sheep, one is foreclosing investigation of the vast area of meaning production known as common culture. It may not be possible to make confident pronouncements concerning the primary place in which to discover the wellspring of human meaning, because the disciplines of economics, sociology, history, anthropology and psychology may ultimately be too large to be shuffled as if they were playing cards. Moreover, these fields all interrelate, and thus cannot be treated as separate. But it may be possible to identify trends in thinking, and hunches concerning where to find the richest spoils. Increasingly, an

anthropology which overcomes essentialism, ahistoricism, and the problem of the partiality of observation (to be discussed below), may become the locus for all work concerned with the creation and understanding of human meaning, because it has the capacity (albeit only partially) to understand human institutions and procedures by approaching human knowledge as a series of micro-events at the level of the individual, which may only be understood if the interiority of the experiencing consciousness is considered. Individuals would be credited with a greater degree of agency, rather than being regarded as passive recipients and victims, an idea made popular by the Marxist theory of pity. The idea that various groups or classes are acted upon because of their exclusion from control of the means of production is rejected in favour of a contention that all people participate in culture creation. This premise is shared by many current researchers within cultural studies, as well as in studies of popular culture, ethnography and the aesthetic. Depicting the working classes as passive consumers is seen to be in ignorance of the complex technologies of power and culture exercised by all individuals.

This shift, within cultural studies, towards an elucidation of the discrete as an antidote to the fictional generalizations implicit in socio-economic renditions of the mass position of the pitifully "disempowered", is matched by a shift in anthropology, from macro-cultural to micro-cultural analysis, and from sychronic to diachronic ethnographies. Geertz's now famous notion of "local knowledge" is matched by the notion of "local history" - an historically based anthropology (see Biersack 1989; Sahlins 1985). If accurate knowledge of the creation of human meaning is to be located in smaller cultural units rather than in larger ones, then the dynamic nature of these micro-cultures must be acknowledged. In short, oppression, poverty and discrimination do not automatically paralyse individuals into becoming passive consumers. Human agency remains operative and effective in altering the shape of micro-cultures. The aim is to recover "the way ordinary people make sense of the world" (Darnton 1984: 4).

5

Having suggested that a renovated cultural ethnography may be an appropriate place from which to view the notion of human knowledge, attention needs to be given to the precise ways in which ethnographic activity should be constituted. Cultural ethnography has not escaped the crises of method and legitimacy which have, in recent decades, swept through the humanities and human sciences. The awareness that, methodologically, ethnography

may be problematic, is at least half a century old. In 1936, Firth was troubled by the contamination of ethnographical discourse by the writer but, at that time, the issue was perceived as a "problem", because the basic assumption was that objective knowledge is possible, if only extra rigour is exercised. Firth makes the following call:

> The greatest need in the social sciences to-day is for a more refined methodology, as objective and dispassionate as possible, in which, while the assumptions due to the conditioning and personal interest of the investigator must influence his findings, that bias shall be consciously faced, the possibility of other initial assumptions be realized and allowance be made for the implications of each in the course of the analysis.
>
> (Firth 1936: 488)

The interactive and participative nature of knowledge production is recognized, but only as a problem with a distinct solution, rather than as an inescapable consequence of the abandonment of naively objectivist notions.

It is now a commonplace to point out that in the classical period of anthropology (from the 1920s to the 1970s), ethnographic discourses were accorded authority, transparency and objectivity. This granting of truth-status to the discipline was extreme and unreflective. The period that followed was equally extreme. Once it was recognized that various factors impeded the possibility of granting wholesale truth-status to these discourses, the discipline fell into disrepute. Principal among these impeding factors were: (i) the recognition that the ethnographer interferes with the object of study by his/her presence (the uncertainty principle once again), (ii) that the ethnographer interprets from a cultural-ideological position, and thus engages in "strong" rather than "neutral" readings, (iii) that the ethnographer always enters the chosen culture at a certain point, using interpreters or selected representatives (privileged speakers) who themselves are subject to the same limitations mentioned above; (iv) and that the medium of presentation, namely discourse, is itself a cultural product, and not a neutral vehicle.

The first three of these methodological realizations all undermine the ethnographer's claim to objective knowledge. And, in the subsequent swing of the pendulum away from claims to objectivity, ethnographers have, at times, championed ethnography as intrinsically non-objective, either as a game, a personal experience or a personal interaction. Geertz says of modern ethnography:

> If there is any way to counter the conception of ethnography as an iniquitous act or an unplayable game, it would seem to involve owning up to the fact that, like

> quantum mechanics or the Italian opera, it is a work of the imagination, less extravagant than the first, less methodical than the second. The responsibility for ethnography, or the credit, can be placed at no other door than that of the romancers who have dreamt it up.
>
> (Geertz 1988: 140)

And in another famous passage, written earlier than the above, Geertz claims:

> Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right.
>
> (Geertz 1973: 29)

And James Clifford accentuates the primacy of the partial and the invented, in his description of ethnography:

> ... twentieth-century academic ethnography does not appear as a practice of interpreting distinct, whole ways of life but instead as a series of specific dialogues, impositions and inventions.
>
> (Clifford 1988: 14)

In order to distance themselves from the cavalier truth claims of "classical" ethnography, some modern ethnographers have openly aligned themselves with imaginative story-telling. Describing history in non-positivistic terms, nearly half a century ago, Collingwood had this to say:

> The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of thought .... The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event.
>
> (Collingwood 1946: 213)

In the extreme, an awareness of the subject position of the writer can cause one to fear that the only effect of any discourse is to present the writer, thus making all notions of knowledge (beyond the writer) impossible. As Geertz says:

> Ethnography becomes, it is said, a mere game of words, as poems and novels are supposed to be. Exposing how the thing is done is to suggest that like the lady sawed in half, it isn't done at all.
>
> (Geertz 1988: 2)

And Natalie Davis (1983: 5) adds: "What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past". Instead of trying to resist the impossibility of objectivity - by attempting strenuously to approach it in the face of overwhelming odds - modern ethnography has often swung to the other extreme, thereby laying itself open to trivialization. Vincent Crapanzano responds to the more creatively indulgent aspects of Geertz's case studies in this way:

> Geertz offers no specifiable evidence for his attributions of intention, his assertion of subjectivity, his declaration of experience. His constructions of constructions of constructions appear to be little more than projections, or at least blurrings, of his point of view, his subjectivity, with that of the native, or more accurately, of the constructed native.
>
> (Crapanzano 1986: 74)

In the extreme, ethnographic discourse may be viewed as personal and anecdotal narrative. However, the poles of objectivity/subjectivity, observation/intervention, essence/event, and description/story-telling need not be the only options open to ethnography and all other human sciences. The disciplines of the human sciences may be strengthened, rather than totally hamstrung, by rigorous self-doubt and careful attention to method. If truth-status is denied to ethnography, the discipline may adopt an interactive approach to knowledge, somewhere between the arrogance of transcendent truth claims and the self-abasement entailed in claiming to be no more than a personal narrative.

Without wishing to make grand claims for a merger between the disciplines of ethnography and history, it is possible to locate strong links between these two branches of human knowledge. Traditionally, history has concerned itself with cultural transformation, and anthropology with cultural reproduction. Sahlins proposes an amalgamation of these disciplines, as the central means of analysis of human meaning:

> The great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in the process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?
>
> (Sahlins 1981: 5)

The dialectic between reproduction and transformation becomes the pivot upon which such an inclusive discipline turns. Nevertheless, such a proposal is beyond the confines of the present study. My intention in drawing attention to the common ground shared by these disciplines, is to suggest that the research undertaken concerning history as a narrative act could equally be applied to cultural ethnography, and to anthropology as a whole. Because of the reliance, by both history and anthropology, on narrative and rhetorical procedures, their written accounts "display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (White 1987: 24). The idea of human knowledge is always represented within narrative, which must be regarded as a "strong" medium, that is, one with various imperatives, procedures, demands, expectations and constraints. As an emissary of meaning, narrative is far from servile. Writing history and anthropology is like employing an interpreter who insists on adding colour and flavour to the process of knowledge transfer. White (1973, 1978, 1985, 1987) and LaCapra (1983, 1985) have demonstrated the literary nature of writing history, and their observations are equally applicable to anthropology. At least one of the reasons why these important works have had little influence on the disciplines of history and anthropology is that they have a disabling, even paralysing, effect on historical and ethnographic discourse. If the very DNA of both disciplines is infected by discursive tropes and literary devices, how can they continue without terminal anxiety? If the strategies of the fictive are inescapably inherent in historical and anthropological discourse, how can these disciplines make knowledge claims?

What is required, if the disciplines of history and ethnography are to retain a credible basis while acknowledging the work of "literary historiographers", is the recognition of a shift in the basic epistemological functions and achievements of the disciplines of human knowledge. The notion of the "single, true account" must be abandoned as an impossibility, to be replaced by an interactive attitude to the notion of the other, diachronically (by means of the discipline of history) and synchronically (by means of anthropology). The paradigm of human knowledge must remove itself from the strong opposition between absolute knowledge (the transpersonal account, objective, disinterested and complete) and extreme relativism (the personal account, disabled by discursive tropes and the impossibility of transcending the subject position). Interactive knowledge is the excluded middle within this opposition, a mediate position or, rather, an array of mediate positions which provide accounts but which do not "account for". Proximity and distance between researcher and subject constantly alters, as each "throws light" on the other. LaCapra says: "Indeed a humanistic disci-

pline remains vital to the extent it is possible within it to engage points of view that pose fundamental questions to one's own" (LaCapra 1985: 142).

The recognition that a host of disciplines in the humanities, having made strong claims to objectivity, are now to be regarded as deeply encultured in their knowledge-production processes should not occasion a dizzy rush into the sea of textuality, and a submission to extravagant relativism. The critique of naive objectivism is a step in the sophistication of human knowledge claims, and should not end the pursuit. A more precise revision of how human knowledge is arrived at, and of what it consists, namely, as encultured activity, reveals not the unknowability of events and products, but the human complexity involved in the coming-to-be of knowledge. The presumption that rationality moves across the surface of life, regarding and interpreting it with implacable correctness, is a fascinating symptom of how human inquiry empowers itself, and becomes most unlike its essentially human self.

Frequently, the realization that knowledge is deeply encultured, leads to a version of knowledge with a greater sensitivity to the "humanness" of knowledge, but the temptation prematurely to announce a mode of inquiry that is not self-deceptive, is overwhelming. Most attempts at more methodologically astute human knowledge posit foundations while simply offering new versions of a masternarrative. Foucault points in the direction in which a technology of knowledge is possible, although one which is immeasurably vast and detailed. And that is exactly what human knowledge is - a vast series of historicized and positioned utterances, all too frequently self-delusional in their claims to foundation and objectivity.

The shift away from classical ethnography towards an interactive approach has the effect of emphasizing the *act* of interaction rather than the knowledge-product presumed to emanate from classical ethnographic fieldwork. What is important is this person at this time interacting with this group via these intermediaries. No context-free truth claims can be made, and thus, attention is focused on the act. Clifford (1988: 41) speaks of interpretive anthropology as "a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects".

As Geertz has shown, attention is given to the case study. Also, the dull, "scholarly" style of writing gives way to a more energetic, personal narrative. Pratt asks indignantly of classical ethnography: "How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?" (Pratt 1986: 33). The cultural visibility of the ethnographer is crucial to the future of the discipline, and of all disciplines concerned with human knowledge.

6

Having moved, by progression, far from the notion of literature, it is time to move, once again by progression, back to the notion of the literary. The first of such steps involves a discussion of the pair of terms, "culture" and "high culture", because the notion of literature has often been cited as one of the constitutive elements of "high culture".

In dominant Western culture, there has come to be a clear distinction between the mass of everyday protocols and procedures which may broadly be defined as culture, and the best that a culture has to offer. The existence of the humanities or the liberal arts as distinct from the social sciences is evidence of this split. And the split has further implications - the "highest" forms entail, on the part of those with the authority to identify the high forms, a venture into the realm of value. Culture and high culture can be separated by "is" and "ought", or fact and value. The notion of the aesthetic is a formalization and elevation of ethnocentric symbolic value. The shift from a cultural object to an aesthetic object involves the degree to which the proposer of artistic value can successfully *abstract* the object from its context. This is the revered symbolic object, which is seen to be self-sustaining, no longer requiring the culture of its production in order to survive, and entailing an entire system of cultural value.

The curious irony involved in the creation of an object of "high culture" is that, as more prestige accrues to the object, the greater the severance of that object from the time, place and circumstances of its production. The aim of the endowment of cultural prestige is, eventually, to release an object from its own cultural origin, so that it may be seen as transcultural and universal. The social process of creating great art involves severing the artwork from temporality.

Incidentally, there have been many attempts, particularly within cultural studies, to interrogate the culture/high culture, or artifact/art distinction, precisely in order to prevent reification, which is viewed as a strategy to procure transcendence for objects from one's own culture. The reverse process involves exposing these attempts at transcendence as culture-driven, thus restoring all products of culture to the site of their cultural origin and deployment. This reinforces the idea of local value against attempts at transcendence, fetishism and reification. Incidentally, it is also ironic to observe that postmodernist attempts to devalue the notion of art by *parody* may have the opposite effect. Steven Connor says:

> If the postmodern cultural project aims to invert the structure of the fetish which characterizes modernism, then in a certain sense, it reconstitutes it too, for one of

> the strangest characteristics of fetishistic projection is that to invert it is to repeat it.
>
> (Connor 1992: 252)

However, "high culture" fetishism is persistent, impervious to any attempts to curtail or discredit its activity. This state of affairs leads one to postulate that it is a deep-structure cultural imperative. The accumulation of objects of high culture is described by Clifford (1993: 53) as "rule-governed, meaningful desire". Further:

> The good collector (as opposed to the obsessive, the miser) is tasteful and reflective. Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself - its taxonomic, aesthetic structure - is valued, and any private fixation on single objects is negatively marked as fetishism.
>
> (Clifford 1993: 53)

Of course, with regard to rare or unique objects, this rule-governed desire is crucial in maintaining the high culture/popular culture division. In the case of literature, the opposition is maintained differently. Revering Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* results in different kinds of activities. *Sunflowers* is protected as a unique object, and it has great monetary value. By selling *Sunflowers*, one would receive an enormous amount of capital, thus emphasizing the relation between cultural value, power and capital. Owning a copy of *Middlemarch* (unless it is the original manuscript) accrues no capital value. One may buy a copy of a great work from a second-hand store for very little, and still participate fully in the cultural reification of the text. Simply stated, it is not any particular copy of the text that has value, but the non-material original. That is why we speak of a copy of *Middlemarch*, when we mean an instance of *Middlemarch*. Each copy allows the owner to participate in the group reification of a non-material original text. The value of the work is to be found in the network of minds intent on reifying it.

However, that which both reifying activities have in common is the maintenance of the idea of transtemporal essence. Reverence accorded to *Middlemarch* is no different to the act of worship in a Christian church, insofar as the essence is immanent and non-corporeal. It is nevertheless as singular as *Sunflowers*. Thus, despite the numerous differences between the style and implications of revering a work of literature and a work of fine art, what they share is the process of reification, of salvaging a thing from time. And the idea of a "monument of culture" can be regarded as little more than a contradiction. Simmel makes the following observation, in an essay entitled "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture":

> In contrast to life, vibrating, restless, endlessly self-evolving, form ... stands as life's fixed, ideal, and immovable product, whose uncanny counter-effect is to fix, indeed to freeze, all vitality; it is as if the creative motion of the soul were always to die in its products .... This is the real tragedy of culture.
>
> (Quoted in Connerton 1980: 120)

The institution of the university assists in fostering the notion of the transtemporality of revered cultural objects. Intellectuals within the humanities are inclined to emphasize the longevity of certain "key" texts and objects, thereby participating in the creation and maintenance of the transtemporal cultural object. The entire educational system offers, for study, highly mediated cultural objects whose supertemporality is implicit in their presentation. Individuals become accustomed to believe that, in spite of the dynamic nature of culture, transtemporal culture is not a contradiction, and they thereby contribute their assent to the phenomenon of cultural reverence.

To return to the elucidation of the similarities and differences between reified texts and reified objects, it must be remembered that reified objects (such as paintings) are already in existence, whereas the ontology of a text (but not that of a book) is more complex to determine. The ontological conflation of "text" and "book" rests on the New Critical assumption that the meaning of a text can be located in "the text itself". This methodological manoeuvre stretches the truth of the matter - the current meaning of a text is to be located in all of those reading-participants who, as a collectivity, ascribe cultural meaning and significance to a text. The issue of where and how textual meaning occurs will be discussed in more detail below. It has been necessary to invoke it here, to point to the book/text distinction in the creation of revered cultural objects.

A strong difference between texts and other commodified objects is that, concerning the latter, one can amplify the value of an object without interacting with it. By buying a painting at a high price and storing it, one can be making an investment (consider the American and Japanese investments in Impressionist painting in the 1970s as a prime example). But to participate in the reification of a text, one cannot simply own it. In fact, "copies" may be worthless - one can read a library copy and still participate in reification. This leads one to describe great works as *incomplete dialogues* or as potential events. The text is a communicative gesture, frozen and inert until someone reads it. In short, the process of the reification of objects, and of works of literature, is very different. Participation is required in the case of reified texts, for the reification to occur at all. One can hate a painting while boosting its reification (by paying a price in excess of its communally agreed value) but this is impossible with texts. The difference is made most explicit when one considers the scenario of the poor professor and the rich

cretin. The poor professor reifies *Hamlet* by studying (and subsequently writing and speaking about) its value, whereas the rich cretin buys a first folio of *Hamlet* and may never read it. The reification of the text can add to the commodity value of the book (a first edition of *Hamlet* will command a price higher than that of a first edition of *Some Fleas I Have Known* by I.B. Itching) but not vice versa. By overpaying for the latter text, the rich cretin will not be participating in reifying the text. So, to understand the reification of works of literature, we must view them not as objects or statements, but as *dialogues in potential*. The existence of literary value in a culture presupposes a network of individual interactions with the text.

Valued cultural objects are held in high esteem because they have exchange value. Appadurai defines the commodity situation as follows:

> But how are we to define the commodity situation? I propose that the commodity situation in the social life of any "thing" be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.
>
> (Appadurai 1986: 13)

While revered texts cannot be regarded as accruing exchange value, they do undergo processes of social "exchangeability", as their reputations gradually (or sometimes quickly) shift, within the network of informed interest surrounding the text. Revered texts have intense social histories, or that which Igor Kopytoff (1986) regards as life histories. The biography of a text, like the biography of a person, is an event-chain description. Each event is defined as an alteration in the network-attitude to the text, or as differences between sub-networks. The network here entails the totality of literary-interpretative communities, however large or small they may be. The only real sense in which a revered text may exist is in its social life, in the series of events which constitute its past and present social engagements. The phenomenon is an event rather than a thing. The term "great work "obscures this commonplace observation, by implying independent existence and objecthood, whereas cultural meaning and value is a process, constantly altering. What occurs could be approached as a dynamic cultural politics of reputation. (The term "politics of reputation" is borrowed from Appadurai, 1986: 20.)

If the various ways in which, in time and space, a book becomes a great work, are viewed collectively as the book's biography, one begins to comprehend the complexity of this biography. What are its origins? Which cultures value the book, and in what ways is it valued? What has been the course of its various careers at the level of network and sub-network? With what other books is it seen to relate (generically, aesthetically, historically,

ideologically, and so forth)? This social biography of great works is far more wide-ranging than the notion of literary history, to the extent that it would investigate trends of literary-historical "handling" of the text as part of the biography under scrutiny. As one explores these biographical aspects, it becomes clear that the life of the book is traceable to a complex web of judgements and predictions, which in turn are all traceable to structures, chains or lattices of assent and dissent at the level of the individual. It is tempting to postulate that an attitude or an ideological position is comprised of complex chains of assent/dissent combinations, whose elements constitute the DNA or the base units of culture.

7

It is a considerable irony that those who have, in the past twenty years, heaped scorn upon critics of the Cambridge School and the New Criticism for attempting to create binding procedures for the act of interpretation, currently occupy disciplinary space within the university precisely because of these highly successful pioneering scientistic endeavours. Chastising and ridiculing the overzealous formulae of literary criticism proposed by the New Critics presents itself as an act of bad faith, in view of the fact that these pioneering rhetorical-methodological gestures created the firm institutional footing which today creates jobs for droves of literary-critical intellectuals. While it has become fashionable to draw attention to the deeply encultured and positioned nature of literary-critical activity, no one dreams that the logical conclusion of such critique might be to disallow discipline status to literary studies, and that these intellectuals may be arguing themselves out of positions in universities. Self-destruction is unthinkable to literary critics. What is clear in the domain of literary studies is that its practitioners - critics and theorists - all benefit from university affiliation. Besides, the profession of literary studies has such a developed machinery of conferences, journals and networks, as well as a strong and self-perpetuating market base, that the discipline-status of literary studies seems unassailable.

At least in part, this sense of unassailability in spite of a strong crisis of foundation, method and purpose is traceable to the fact that there are protective mechanisms in place, the most effective of which may be that the profession of literary studies controls literary meaning-access. This is achieved by a variety of means, principally institutional and, more specifically, by the invention of a constitutive and supportive vocabulary. The formation and employment of literary critical vocabulary and rhetoric as a

mechanism of power has received little scholarly attention. It is a shame that a discipline which prides itself on scrupulous attention to detail, has neglected to lay bare the political-semantic dynamics of its own founding vocabulary and discursive apparatus. The detection of ambiguity, for example, implies the discovery of semantic units (words, phrases, sentences or passages) which are unclear, but whose semantic trajectories are being closely monitored by practitioners of criticism. The force of designating ambiguity is to indicate that more than one meaning was intended, and that the professional reader has privileged access to the multiplicity of authorial intention, as well as to the various attendant meanings. Another plum of critical vocabulary is the term metaphor. No-one disputes that metaphor implies the yoking of different semes to create new, contributory meanings. Literary criticism must be praised for recognizing the metaphorical origin and perlocutionary force of many linguistic acts, but it must also be recognized that the discipline has profited enormously as a result of being authorized as the master of complex meaning. Metaphors mean, mostly, that which literary criticism legislates them to mean. Moreover, irony is an attempt to suggest that the critic has access to authorial intention, which is, at best, an inflated claim. In short, professional readers are authorized to employ diagnostic machinery, and to make prognoses. Their suitability as wielders of professional cultural power is no more questioned than the profession of the general medical practitioner. Never before has a set of procedural terms alone so strongly constituted disciplinary space. Moreover, one cannot overlook the enabling effects of repeated practice. If all of one's professional time is taken up with reading and speaking about difficult books, one develops strategies of authority. Even when the discipline of literary studies is in a crisis of self-definition, and all its practitioners are shown beyond doubt that the meanings they "discern" are (at least in part) traceable to their own pre-existing structures of belief, the profession remains intact. Once professionalization has been granted to a cultural activity, self-protective mechanisms develop, making de-professionalization a complex and difficult task. Eventually guilds occur, and the critic is established as an intermediary and an emissary, a cultural middleman and, once established, middlemen create their own indispensability.

The profession of literary studies may have become a globally accepted academic habit, but should it remain so? The practice of criticism is incommensurate with rule-governed behaviour, binding definitions of literariness and formalized procedures. Criticism is a craft, and crafts are cultural practices. Cultural practices, however sophisticated, central and culturally rich they may be, are themselves not academic disciplines, but are the subject of academic inquiry.

The attempt to resituate criticism as cultural practice rather than as an academic discipline is not a threat to the continued existence of criticism, but is deemed to be a more appropriate reassignment of criticism. Engaging in criticism as a cultural activity rather than as an academic one does not diminish the intellectual status of the practitioner. Moreover, if engaging in a cultural activity is seen to be of a more diminutive status than that of academic work, then this is traceable to a matrix of opinion within a culture, and the values within this matrix are not super-cultural, that is, they are subject to change, precisely from interventions that intellectual-cultural workers may make. And while it may appear that identifying the cultural nature of literary criticism may be downgrading its status, culture consists of the vast catalogue of human responses and emotions, as well as the values attached to them which form the nexus of human meaning, from which all other meanings radiate. Literary criticism is centrally situated within human knowledge, but not in the ways it is normally professed to be - not as the objective legislator of literary meaning, but as a rich source of cultural production.

If it is advocated that criticism should more properly be regarded as cultural work, what would be the fate of the discipline of literary theory? Those engaged in creating formalizations of what criticism should do, and of what literariness should consist, would correctly be aligned with criticism as cultural work, as these are cultural matters. By contrast, those who seek to discuss the entire phenomenon of literature and its commentators would belong within cultural anthropology, and would become ethnographers of the symbolic. (One might observe that ethnography of the symbolic in complex societies, as a discipline, is distinctly underdeveloped.) Literary criticism and a substantial portion of literary theory need to relinquish their knowledge claims in order to develop within the full freedom of a culturally-generative activity. "Literature" is a web of human value, and acts of literary criticism, rather than being elucidatory and analytical, should be seen as celebratory and culturally creative - festive obeisances to the magic of literature which add substantially to symbolic cultural production. And while this celebration is culturally significant, it remains within the field of cultural production, and thus falls under the gaze of the ethnographer. If the literary canon is a rich "field", then literary criticism should not be viewed as the machinery of farming, whose purpose is to plough and to harvest beautiful crops. Rather, criticism is itself a field to be ploughed, containing crops to be harvested.

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In conclusion, it may be appropriate to make some tentative remarks about epistemological shifts, in the humanities and human sciences, in the past century. These disciplines, by taking their lead from disciplines which had already achieved science status, proposed similar, object-based epistemologies. By isolating singular entities as their proper focus of inquiry, and by making the concomitant (and traditionally popular) assumption, that such singular entities can be examined objectively, with professional distance and disinterest, the human sciences achieved disciplinary stature. However, at least one of the anxieties which has occurred in all branches of human knowledge, may be described as the need to shift from an object-based, to an event-based, epistemology. Disciplines as diverse as quantum mechanics, recent brain theory, ethnography and literary studies have argued that things may only properly be known in their interactions with other things. Events constituting relationship between things within linear time are, it has been suggested, a richer and more reliable source of knowledge than things viewed as static, discrete and stable. However, the history and procedures of knowledge are often based on convenience. It is far easier to study a butterfly which is affixed, in death, to a board on a researcher's desk, than to attempt to follow the butterfly on its seemingly capricious flights through the forest. Similarly, it is simpler to study a neuron in isolation, rather than to attempt to understand the basis of human consciousness by observing the type, range and intensity of the interaction of millions of individual neurons in the brain. The "Social Life of Things" (Appadurai 1986) complicates knowledge considerably but, it may be argued, all less complex forms of knowledge are hopelessly incomplete, because they ignore the seemingly endless permutations engendered by interaction, event, relation and kinesis.

The case of ethnography may serve as a useful example. The golden age of ethnography, earlier this century, did well by examining hitherto unknown cultures (unknown, that is, to the culture from which the researcher derived) but it constrained the limits of knowledge by assuming cultural stasis, cultural homogeneity and uniformity, the reliability of intermediaries and the objectivity of the researcher. More recently, ethnography acknowledges cultures as dynamic and multiple. They are constituted by interaction between numerous micro-cultures, an idea which, taken to an extreme, assumes that a conversation between two individuals affects a macro-culture (albeit infinitesimally), just as meteorology recognizes that the flight of a single bird may affect global weather patterns. If all knowledge is local, then local knowledge should always centre on local events, interactions and relations - rather than on local things. Moreover, ethnography recognizes

that intermediaries ("locals" who, for some reason, are chosen as filters, narrators and interpreters of local culture) already occupy dynamic relation-positions, and their pronouncements are events rather than objects of knowledge. And, of course, ethnographers themselves, in their interference with a local culture (occasioned by their mere presence) engage in a cultural knowledge-event which is reciprocal, unique and temporal, rather than being static, unproblematically knowledge-accumulative, objective, complete and transtemporal. All of these event-based realizations add up to the recognition, within ethnography, that when a researcher undertakes a study of another culture, what can properly be said of his/her findings is that this person, from this culture, at this time, interacted with these individuals from this other culture at this time within the dynamic flow of this other culture. Localization is seemingly endlessly reductive, but claims to wider, more objective and more complete knowledges are cavalier and spurious. Knowledge is always local and, in its specificity, it is shot through with kinesis. In short, knowledge is a difficult business, and claims made on its behalf are frequently premature.

In literary studies, a similar initial misconception prevailed, namely, that the object of knowledge was "the text itself", rather than the series of singular, discrete and partial literary-knowledge events which occur every time a person reads a book. What one witnesses here is the fracturing of the masternarratives of what a text might "mean". Such authoritative meaning-legislation, as assumed by a study of "the text itself", constitutes the same kind of appeal to transcendent authority that occurred in the golden age of ethnography - indeed, in the golden age of all knowledge systems.

The notion of this reader from this culture at this time reading this book is one aspect of the shift to local, and event-based, conceptions of literary knowledge. As I have suggested earlier, this is a cultural event, and should be regarded as one. Literary ethnography which explores the patterns of reading-events (and their subsequent knowledge-events) may be regarded as analytical rather than cultural, in essence. But these ethnographic events are still nonetheless subject to the same temporal-cultural positioning.

It may be true that, in all disciplines, masternarratives claiming to have supreme explanatory force, are a hangover from a world-view in which knowledge was envisaged as a vast and singular structure known to a divine being. When humanism transferred authority from God to man, the nostalgia for transtemporality persisted, in the founding principles of the modern disciplines of knowledge. Transtemporal knowledge remains as a possibility, but not by means of invented masternarratives, which are no more than sleights of hand, or simulacra of transtemporality. In order for a master-narrative - with true explanatory force - to exist, there is no short cut: all

event-detail will need to be incorporated, at the level of the individual operator (the personal event-history of each person, each neuron, and each atom), prior to the formulation of the masternarrative. Twentieth-century mathematics and physics have taught us that generalized predictions of individual behaviour - a narrative which speaks authoritatively for more than one individual, or even for more than one individual during one event - is a compelling fiction. Accurate and reliable event-prediction, even at the level of apparently uncomplicated subatomic particles, is an aspiration, rather than an achievement, within contemporary science.

The idea of a masternarrative, in any of the human sciences, becomes so enormous a task as to approach infinite data-collection. To rephrase E.M. Forster's declaration, in *A Passage to India*, that "Everything exists, nothing has value" (Forster 1936: 147), one may postulate that in the human sciences, every human event exists, and has infinitesimal, but definite, value. This is a necessary condition for a masternarrative of human knowledge. No generalized, and predictive, masternarrative can "stand in for" the wealth of event-data. Accounting for knowledge entails providing the full account - one cannot successfully cook the books by proposing inductively authoritative tokens.

If a reconstituted notion of knowledge, exploring the cultural event-seme as the basic unit of knowledge, is ultimately impossible because of the extent of what is required, then the project of human knowledge need not be jettisoned. The impossibility of objectivity, the uncertainty principle, the intervention of language - these disabling impediments to the "true account" need not cause researchers to engage in discursive freeplay as an antidote to epistemological despair. On the contrary, it is only when we begin to understand the real prerequisites to knowledge, in the late twentieth century, and the real obstacles to be faced, that the project of knowledge becomes a real possibility. Human knowledge is more difficult to proclaim than we imagined, and some of the activities previously accorded knowledge-status are cultural rituals, deeply embedded in the cultural specificities of their coming-to-be. Much of what has occurred within the discipline of literary studies requires reassignment as practice within cultural-intellectual space, because assessments of the meaning and value of specific works of literature enrich and extend, rather than transcend, the matrix of culture. By contrast, theorizations of what is at stake in literary critical practice, as well as studies of patterns of literary meaning-assignment and textual value within specific cultures, could most profitably occur within a reconstituted discipline of human knowledge, one which is infinitely more cautious than ever before, when making knowledge claims.

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