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Value: the theme dominates current discussion of the humanities, both implicitly and explicitly. Barely a week goes by without another op-ed on ‘the value of the humanities’ in a major news outlet; likewise, in everything we study, the question of value resides in our choice of subject matter and approach, whether we address it directly or not. In bringing this theme to the foreground, our graduate conference hoped to spark open discussions of these issues more broadly among a community of emerging scholars.

The multifarious strands in which graduate students could pursue this theme was reflected in our Call for Papers. For instance: is value always historically and socially contingent? Can any kind of value be considered universal, such as basic rights? Does value have a moral dimension? How has value been attributed to texts throughout time, and how does that affect how we view them presently? What, in short, can be learnt from the literature of value, and the value of literature? And how have these values functioned within the academy, in what we study and how we study it? We invited papers covering texts that reflected specific values and how they are constructed, as well as markers of value (use and usefulness, difficulty, religious significance, political engagement, artistic integrity etc.), valuations along lines of gender, racial, national, linguistic and sexual difference, valuation in material culture, and many other topics.

The diversity of our delegates reflected the wide-ranging interest in our topic. Many universities in United Kingdom were represented, along with American universities including University of Virginia, Carleton University, and Duke University. Panels reflected a wide breadth of time periods and approaches, ranging from 'Medieval Value: Myth, Saga, Romance' to 'Economics in Prynne, Auster and Bourdieu'. The keynote speakers were a particular highlight of the conference. Patrick Hayes (Oxford), Helen Small (Oxford), and Thomas Docherty (Cambridge) offered a panel discussion on the value of the humanities, offering a diverse spectrum of opinion. Our own Conference Committee member, Kristin Grogan, also had the opportunity to conduct an excellent one-on-one interview with Thomas Docherty, which she published in *The Oxonian Review*. Later in the day, Mark McGurl (Stanford) gave a stimulating keynote talk on giants in literature and the problems that they pose for realist fiction.

The conference wrapped up with a dinner at Las Iguanas, where discussion of the day’s events ensued. A special thanks goes out to our keynote speakers for all of their thought-provoking presentations. Finally, a huge note of thanks to the 2015 Conference Committee: Kristin Grogan, Alison Moulds, Emily Holman, Sarah Green, Richard Porteous, Millie Schurch, Kanta Dihal, and Noreen Masud. The day could not have been possible without their efforts.
'A Generalization of Suffering': The Impersonal as an Aesthetic and Ethical Value in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Leonardo Bevilacqua, University of St Andrews

David Foster Wallace has been described as influential among American writers who have attempted to shape a new, reformed humanism after Theory. However, his assertion that good fiction is about ‘what it means to be a (fucking) human being’ may seem at odds with the quality of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, who read more like the artificial subjects typical of postmodern novels than psychological realist characterisations based on human verisimilitude. Indeed, according to E. M. Forster’s famous definition of ‘flat characters’, they ‘are constructed around a single idea or quality’.¹ Almost any of the inmates of Ennet House can be a case in point. What are Ken Erdedy and Kate Gompert but pure and simple personifications of the general predicament of any drug-addict or depressed person? Most of their personal stories are so typical and similar to one another that it is difficult to think about them with the same level of curiosity and doubt that we reserve for fully-fledged individuals—whether fictional or not. This lack of particularity is what makes any analysis of the characters in *Infinite Jest* both difficult and interesting. Most readers of this novel report intense feelings of profound empathy towards many of the secondary figures in the novel. Wallace’s characters, then, seem to reconcile postmodern flatness with a liberal humanistic reliance on the emotions and the universality of suffering: how can this be?

My contention is that *Infinite Jest*, when read through the lens of character-theory, reveals an aesthetic attempt to represent individuals that the reader will care about and value not for their particularity, but rather for their impersonal qualities—that is, those aspects of their being that do not pertain to their status as ‘persons’. The person—inasmuch as this concept is fluid and dependant on historical context—never entirely coincides with the individual, but rather constitutes his or her fundamental core. This nucleus is inextricably linked to an idea of abstraction and rationality and it has been clear, ever since Aristotle’s famous definition of man as the ‘rational animal’ and the dualism that this implies, that Western culture has long considered personhood to be the source itself of what is intrinsically ‘human’ and therefore ‘valuable’ in an individual. This is even more the case in the context of neoliberalism, the ideological landscape in which *Infinite Jest* is set. Neoliberalism encourages subjects to think of themselves—their own talents, energy and time—as yet another resource to be made the object of investment and maximisation. It is no coincidence, then, that most characters in this novel locate their own individual worth in personhood, and that their suffering originate from the sense of their own insufficiency as entrepreneurs of the self. In fiction, ‘personhood’ is signified through the particularisation of a character’s personality, and in fact, both liberal and neoliberal aesthetics have made personality central to their representational concerns. In this context, *Infinite Jest* constitutes an attempt to

articulate an alternative way of writing about character. The task of encouraging the reader’s empathy towards characters whose specific personal traits have been reduced to a minimum acquires an eminently ethical dimension. If readers can recognise the importance and value of another person’s life only on the basis of what is impersonal in them—that is, that dimension of the individual that transcends his or her personality—then they can also reconsider with a critical eye the influence that neoliberalism has on their own conceptions of themselves.

I will present my argument through the reading of a single scene in *Infinite Jest*—the so-called ‘wraith scene’—which has implications so clearly metafictional that it will allow me to discuss the novel as a whole. The scene takes place towards the end of the book, when Don Gately, one of the two main characters, lies in a hospital bed, having been shot. Since he cannot move or speak, he is able to converse with only one of his many visitors: a ghost who is able to read Gately’s mind and make Gately hear him. The wraith, as he is always referred to, is the ghost of the late James Incandenza, the director of a work called *Infinite Jest*. The film, also known as ‘the lethal Entertainment’, is so compelling that its viewers die from inactivity and self-starvation, almost literally glued to the screen. The fact that the film and novel are eponymous calls for interesting parallels between the structure and purpose of each, and Wallace encourages and complicates this line of thought by having the wraith discuss its aesthetic ideals with Gately. The reading of *Infinite Jest*—the novel set against *Infinite Jest*—the film allows Wallace’s discourse on impersonality to emerge most clearly. The dichotomy between the personal and the impersonal is explored by means of their respective aesthetic counterparts: major and minor characters; or—in the words of the wraith—‘protagonists’ and ‘figurants’.

While shooting his last work, the wraith claims, his aim was to depict ‘real life’s egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment’. *Ibid.*, pp. 835-36. The wraith’s egalitarian ideals are a response to the inequality that he deems to be implicit in any narrative because, as he asks Gately, ‘who remembers the extras in the background in any given scene in a movie?’. These mute ‘concessions to realism’, as he calls them, might be minor and peripheral in the framing, but they are fully-fledged human beings in their own right, just as much as the protagonists are. And in fact, this ‘sort of human furniture, figurants the wraith says they’re called, these surreally mute background presences really revealed that the camera, like any eye, has a perceptual corner, a triage of who’s important enough to be seen and heard v. just seen’. *Ibid.*, p. 835. These figurants are ‘completely trapped and encaged […] in [their] mute peripheral status’ and it is easy to see how the wraith’s words could apply to *Infinite Jest*—the novel, too, in which the quantity of pages and the fragmentariness of the plot allow for entire episodes and sub-chapters to be dedicated to those that otherwise would be only back-

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ground presences’. The wraith’s distinction between ‘figurants’ and ‘protagonists’ makes explicit a preoccupation with the representation of personhood that dates back to the very origin of the novel as a genre. Thus even though the wraith’s aesthetic principles are distinctly neoliberal, they develop from assumptions that are shared by the liberal novel. In The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel, Alex Woloch argues that, as the full development of the novel coincided with the spread of democratic institutions all over Europe, the genre has often self-consciously dramatised the tension between the necessity of a given narrative structure (its ‘perceptual corner’) and the inequality resulting from the uneven distribution of character–space, by using the contrast between the two as a mirror of social inequality in real-life politics. The wraith’s analogue for the fully-empowered individual, thus, reflects the liberal democratic ideals discussed in Woloch’s study: to be a person means to be complex and articulate, and free enough to manifest one’s own interior depths. Figurants, conversely, are those that are ‘always relegated to back- and foreground. [...] [T]heir faces [...] animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound.’ What is interesting here is that such concerns reveal an idea of ‘character’ based on a dualistic concept of ‘individual’ divided between exterior and interior life, the latter being the source of its personhood.

Interestingly Hal—arguably one of the protagonists of the novel—voices similar assumptions:

‘I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex. ‘I read’ [...] ‘I study and read. I bet I’ve read everything you’ve read. Don’t think I haven’t. I consume libraries. [...] My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect. ‘But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. [...] I’m not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.’

Both the tone and the context of the scene create a sense of anxiety and uneasiness that emerges from Hal’s words. Left mute and paralyzed by a sort of epileptic attack, he is trying to defend himself against the accusation that he bought his college application essays—and, therefore, that he is not ‘good enough’. What transpires is also a strong sense of his own significance relative to (and therefore, dependant on) the value of others: ‘I bet I’ve read everything you’ve read’. It is this focus on the worth of one’s own personal attributes in relation to those of others—as revealed in the words and thoughts of so many of his characters—that explains Wallace’s retreat to the impersonal as a mode for valuing and caring about the self that does not compromise the appreciation of the value of others, and therefore does not prevent the subject from bonding with its peers in profound and meaningful ways. Hal and his father are, after all, two of the most important figures in the Enfield Tennis Academy, an institution defined by a rhetoric of

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3Ibid., p. 834.
4Ibid., pp. 11-12.
'self-transcendence through pain', rather than self-development.⁵

This form of competitiveness—extreme, intended to bring talent beyond itself through constant effort—is typical of neoliberal ideology in its almost overt disrespect for the limitations and needs of individuals. Hal, too, thinks of himself as a sort of human enterprise surrounded by competitors in all spheres of life. This anti-essentialist notion of the self—the self as a product, rather than the source, of economic investment—together with a focus on the rationalization of resources and maximization of profit, leads to the kind of existential exhaustion felt by so many of the athletes at E.T.A. In this context, Hal’s insistence on not being ‘a machine’ is clearly an attempt to create a way of thinking about himself whereby his value as an individual is intrinsic, rather than dependent on continuous performance. Thus while the wraith celebrates the status of ‘protagonist’, Wallace makes it a metaphor for the most pernicious form of subjectivity of his time—the cult of the self that backfires on the subject.

And even though, with its almost two hundred characters, Infinite Jest—the novel would seem at first to be a product of the same ‘radical realism’ advocated by the wraith, it celebrates minorness in all its aspects. In order to understand why that is so, we need to focus on the premises of the wraith’s aesthetic egalitarianism, which also has its roots in the tradition of the liberal novel. ‘Narrative flatness [...]’, Woloch claims, ‘maintains a disjunction between ‘personality’ and ‘presence’, dissociating the full weight of an interior character from its delimited, distorted exterior manifestation’.⁶ In this model, the existence and the complexity of that pre-existing substratum of interior life is never questioned: it is precisely because of this implicit assumption, in fact, that ‘flatness’ can signify distortion and reduction. But the wraith’s insistence on equality and a form with no ‘perceptual corner’ diverges from the discourse of the liberal novel and is indicative of a tendency Greenwald Smith deems to be typical of neoliberal aesthetics: ‘instead of a form that highlights the presence of inequality [...] the form of the neoliberal novel reinforces the belief that inequality no longer exists’.⁷ In this respect, what is most revealing about the wraith’s comments to Gately is that he intends his own ‘radical realism’ to remedy a form of injustice which takes place on a purely aesthetic level, and does not precede it: ‘real-life’ crowds, as he says, are already ‘figurantless’—no master ‘perceptual corner’ attributes relative importance to people and their lives.

Wallace’s Infinite Jest, conversely, depicts a polarized social landscape which does highlight inequality, and does so without relying on the notion of any pre-existing personhood. The

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⁵Ibid., p. 660.
inmates of Ennet House, in particular, are ‘minor characters’ in more than one sense: socially marginalized and alone, they have long abdicated any self-sufficiency or will-power—both of which are constitutive dimensions of personhood—to the substance they are addicted to. These people represent the negative side of the spectrum of neoliberal subjectivity: they are not even able to take care of themselves, let alone compete against others in any respect. In *Infinite Jest*—the novel, a strong sense of these minor characters’ condition of inferiority is exacerbated by the occasionally patronizing tone of the narrative voice, which often makes fun of their inability to choose for themselves, and their ineptitude, since they are always carried away by events. He even seems to derive some enjoyment from the suffering and misadventures of his own creations: every time the voice reprises the technique of narrated monologue to describe a certain figurant’s thoughts, the gross and often funny solecisms of their idiolect are left exposed on the surface of the text.

The narrative voice’s interpolations point to another dimension in which these ‘figurants’ are less-than-persons: their status as fictional characters. This ontological subordination gives their social marginality a formal analogue. Wallace’s metafictional playfulness is made almost explicit in yet another passage from the wraith scene, where the wraith’s power over Gately’s mind is compared to that of a narrator over his characters. For ‘a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody’s like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something’, and in fact, Gately soon realizes that he cannot possibly know the words he comes up with, and that they must be the result of the wraith’s monologue entering his own head. As he describes it, ‘the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape’. Ennet House ‘figurants’, readers are encouraged to realize, are given a voice of their own, but this does not entail that they also have a personality to express: like mere puppets, all they can do is channeling the narrative voice. They are represented as devoid of that fundamental nucleus that grants the status of person to the individual. Intermittently, in the novel, we are given a sense that on both the thematic and formal levels, these minor characters are nothing more than ‘non-persons’. In the machine of the novel, each represents precisely what Hal refuses to be: ‘a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function’.

Wallace’s narrative strategy, in this respect, is twofold. Firstly, he elaborates on the liberal novel’s notion of character-space and articulates an aesthetic alternative to the illusory equality of the neoliberal work of art. In fact, he grants ‘figurants’ much more narrative space than non-polyphonic novels would be able to do, and yet he foregrounds their typicality to such an extent that none of them can be said to be a ‘complex and articulate protagonist’. Their flatness is highlighted by the quantity of spaces allocated to them, rather than it being reduced. By failing

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8Wallace, p. 831.
9Ibid., p. 832.
to let any particularity of a character emerge from a certain quantity of narrative space, Wallace deliberately challenges the assumption that the qualities that constitute a free and rational subject—the person—are intrinsic to the individual. Secondly, and most importantly, he makes the stories of these ‘figurants’ so moving and tragic that it would be difficult not to empathize with their fate. The recognition of a kind of suffering that is almost entirely stripped of particularity induces readers to see that these subjects are still valuable individuals, even though they are not fully-fledged persons. And this recognition shifts the readers’ attention from the negative implications of the ‘non-person’ label to an appreciation of others in virtue of their ‘impersonal’ dimension—a kind of sacredness that is intrinsic to the individual and does not depend on the depth and complexity of their personality.

This ‘impersonal’ variety of characterization acquires an eminently ethical significance as soon as its rhetorical effects on the reader are considered. Here, too, we need to compare Wallace’s work to that of the wraith. As the wraith tells Gately, the ethical impulse behind the making of Infinite Jest—the-film was to ‘make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life’. The ‘young self’ he is referring to is his son Hal, whom the wraith had seen ‘retreat to the periphery of life’s frame’ and ‘becom[e] a figurant’—that is, ‘blank, inbent, silent, frightening, mute’. The wraith’s ‘lethal Entertainment’, then, was designed to transform a ‘figurant’ into a ‘protagonist’. Here, once again, the inconsistency of the wraith’s aesthetic project is revealed: why would he need to induce his son to become a protagonist, if life itself is a ‘figurantless crowd’ and personhood is coextensive with individuality? A viewer’s personality, the wraith implicitly contends, can benefit from the film’s ‘central and articulate protagonist[s]’ and further develop, like some sort of capital that can be enhanced through continuous re-investment.

This makes the wraith’s words to Gately remarkably close to what Rachel Greenwald Smith has called the ‘contract-model’—a way of thinking about the value of fiction that is typical of the age of neoliberalism and in which novel-reading, like any other activity, is compared to an investment. According to this model, readers exchange their time for the emotional value that story and character will elicit from them. Coherent with this model, the wraith’s poetics is meant to maximise the reader’s gains, in that it does not allow for any ‘flatness’—a blank to be filled with the reader’s time and imaginative effort—but rather, makes everything in the characters explicit, all their voices loud and clear. Thus while the liberal novel encourages speculative thinking about others, Infinite Jest—the-film is made on the assumption that the personality of a character is only a tool to enrich the reader’s interior emotional landscape. This reflects the fact that, in the age of neoliberalism, networks of personal relations are often thought of as potential

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10Ibid., p. 839.
11Ibid., p. 835.
12Smith, pp. 35-37.
resources for the individual advancement of the subject, just like anything else.

Wallace’s own work, many readers would agree, offers the same kind of emotional intimacy with characters promoted by the ‘contract model’. But while empathy is, in fact, a constitutive part of his ethical and aesthetic endeavour, it is important to highlight the differences between his ideal of the value of fiction and a typically neoliberal one. Consider the following passage from his interview with Larry McCaffery—a statement of poetics of sorts that makes for an interesting comparison with the wraith’s speech:

Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of generalization of suffering. [...] We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside.\(^{13}\)

The points of convergence between Wallace’s words and the ‘contract model’ are obvious: fiction repays the time and attention of the reader by fulfilling some of her emotional needs. But what diverges from that model is his reliance on the ‘generalization of suffering’, an aesthetic experience that is based on the universal—and therefore, impersonal—qualities of the subjects represented. Thus while the liberal and neoliberal variations of the novel are meant to give readers the impression of having direct access to the existential suffering of others, Wallace contends that empathy is ‘necessarily a vicarious experience’. And, as we have seen, the kind of characterization that he adopts in \textit{Infinite Jest} is perfectly coherent with his statement.

Comparing Wallace’s novel to the wraith’s speech helps us to see that his ‘poetics of the impersonal’ has two major implications. Firstly, it prompts readers to take a critical stance towards the notion that they should fill in the blanks in the representation of an individual that any ‘perceptual angle’ necessarily creates. This, in turn, is linked to the idea that we can never know the interior experience of the people around us. We can only try to imagine it from the outside. Wallace’s insistence on the fundamental impossibility of knowing what painful existential experiences feel like emerges repeatedly in his interviews as well as in his portrayal of Kate Gompert in \textit{Infinite Jest}. Under this light, the imaginative co-creation of the character that readers of the liberal and neoliberal novel are invited to perform acquires the same invasive and patronizing overtones of the wraith’s ‘lexical rape’. Why should we enter other people’s minds and speak for them, rather than respectfully admit that the specifics of their profound experience are often

unknowable to us?

The second, and most important, implication of Wallace’s ‘generalization of suffering’ is that by associating suffering and the feeling of respect that follows from it, it encourages the reader, too, to think about alternative ways of conceiving the self compared to those that are ubiquitous in the age of neoliberalism. What makes the experience of reading *Infinite Jest* ‘nourishing, redemptive’, according to this reading, is a kind of characterization that help us to see clearly that Hal’s obsession with his own intellect and merits is futile, and that, while we too are prone to assuming similar attitudes to ourselves and our personal worth, we tend to value others for their ‘impersonal’ and universal status as sentient beings rather than for their capabilities. The shift from the appreciation of characters towards a different appreciation of ourselves is crucial, and made explicit by Wallace in his remarks on identification. *The poetics of the impersonal functions as the vehicle for this shift by showing that the individual can be stripped of any notion of autonomy and transcendence while maintaining what is sacred and valuable in him or her. It also explains how the ‘deconstructed’ subjects can coexist, in Infinite Jest, with a humanistic focus on suffering and its feelings. The impersonal—as an aesthetic paradigm—is an ethical value insofar as it reconciles postmodern skepticism regarding individual freedom with genuine care and compassion for ourselves and others.*

**Works cited**

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*Secondary works:*


Relativism and the Institutional Structure of Knowledge in the Twentieth-Century American Academic Humanities

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Allan Bloom’s 1987 polemic *The Closing of the American Mind* begins with the following proposition: ‘There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative’.¹ Bloom’s language of the ‘one thing’ and ‘absolute certainty’ means to point up the sentence’s obvious paradox: if truth is truly relative, the statement ‘truth is relative’ must be relative also. While the paradoxical implications of relativism are familiar (see e.g. the introduction to Nozick), commentators have devoted less attention to the ways in which a belief in relativism has governed both the institutional structure of the twentieth-century American university, and the formal arrangement of the knowledge that this institution has generated.² The following account of the institutionalization of relativism begins with the flourishing of American pragmatism and the progressive education movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and then moves to the postwar dominance of continental poststructuralism in the Anglo-American humanities department. I begin by exploring how a connection between relativism and individualism manifests in conceptions of ‘critical thinking’ and the educational mission of the university. While arguments for the supremacy of the individualist point of view historically rested on an aristocratic basis, I show how these arguments acquired a democratic thrust as the university became a mass institution in the twentieth century. This intellectual history, I argue, has resulted in two major consequences with respect to the organization of knowledge: confidence in the explanatory power of context, and faith in the superiority of the particular over the general or universal.

That this essay takes Bloom’s argument seriously could seem politically troubling, since Bloom has been consistently repudiated as a representative of neoconservatism (see esp. Nussbaum). This analysis, however, works as much as possible in the domain of the structure of knowledge rather than politics. I follow here the avowedly leftist critic Bill Readings, who concurs with Bloom’s diagnosis of the intellectual condition of the university while rejecting the political remedies that Bloom believes this diagnosis requires.³ Although the argument that claims about knowledge are ineluctably political has a certain validity, I claim that the inverse is also true, that political claims also always embody presuppositions about the structure of knowl-

²I have intentionally spoken broadly of “the university”, rather than distinguishing between specific disciplines. The major reason for this is that I wish to preserve the idea that specific methods of organization and administration of the university as a whole have had consequences for the university’s accumulation and dissemination of knowledge that transcend disciplinary boundaries. This is clearly evident in the American-style “liberal arts” degree, in which specific disciplines still figure as “parts” of the university “whole”, and study in a specific discipline is meant to contribute to the student’s general intellectual development rather than lead to the acquisition of particular expertise.
edge. So while the following argument will occasionally stray into the territory of the political, its attention will remain upon the consequences that specific political claims entail for epistemology.

Interestingly, certain aspects of Bloom’s thinking have found recent resonance at disparate sectors of the political spectrum. For example, writing in *The American Conservative*, the political theorist Patrick J. Deneen claims that the American education system has become in certain respects the realization of Bloom’s worst fears: ‘Academia is committed to teaching “critical thinking” and willing to allow nearly any avenue in the training of that amorphous activity, but eschews any belief that the content of what is taught will or ought to influence how a person lives’.\(^4\) A commitment to ‘critical thinking’ on this view leads to a relativism that emphasizes the variable receptions or interpretations of an object rather than the object itself. Deneen’s claims are a version of the familiar literary studies trope of a text having as many meanings as it does interpreters. His lamentation of the displacement of content harmonizes interestingly with the feminist critic Rita Felski’s provocative censure of the prevalence of ‘contextualization’ in literary studies, which argues that dominant interpretive practices in the humanities have come to rely on what Felski, following Paul Ricoeur, terms a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (“Context Stinks!” 574).\(^5\) Such a hermeneutics, Felski claims, enables the interpreter to appear ‘attentive’, or a critical thinker, where the text is oblivious: ‘What the literary text does not see, in this line of thought, are the larger circumstances that shape and sustain it and that are drawn into the light by the corrective force of the critic’s own vigilant gaze’.\(^6\) “Critical reading” is the holy grail of literary studies’, notes Felski elsewhere; the tendency of such a reading practice is to displace significance from texts under discussion to critical performances of interrogation and subversion.\(^7\) The argumentative move that underlies the ideologies that Deneen and Felski question is a leap from biography to interpretation: because every interpreter brings a unique and inviolable consciousness to an artistic encounter, so runs the idea, his or her every interpretation must be similarly unique and inviolable.

The link between context and interpretation prepares the way for a link between the institutional structure of the academy and the epistemological structure of academic knowledge. Deneen connects the relativistic emphasis on critical thinking to the increase in administrative willingness within the higher education establishment of the past half-century or so to defer to the idiosyncrasies of individual student-consumers as the measure of all meaning: ‘Today, in the name of choice, non-judgmentalism, and toleration, institutions prefer to offer the greatest possible expanse of options, in the implicit belief that every 18- to 22-year-old can responsibly

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\(^{6}\) Ibid.

fashion his or her own character unaided’. As Gail McDonald has noted, this belief is far from specific to ‘today’. The opposition between a point of view that emphasizes critical thinking and student autonomy and one that stresses educational content and student participation in tradition has in fact structured the debate over American education for at least a century and a half.\(^8\) The university reformer Charles W. Eliot, for instance, Harvard’s president from 1869 to 1909, wrote in 1885:

> The proposition that a boy of eighteen can choose his own studies, with the natural helps, more satisfactorily than anybody else can choose them for him, seems at first sight absurd; but I believe it to be founded upon the nature of things [...]. Every youth of eighteen is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which neither does nor ever will exist. His inherited traits are different from those of every other human being; [...] his will-force is aroused, stimulated, exerted, and exhausted in ways wholly his own.\(^9\)

This rather extreme homage to particularity is radiant with what Newton Arvin once called the ‘great “glad” glow of Emersonianism’.\(^10\) In Emerson’s thinking the university plays the crucial role of stimulating young Americans to shake off their European intellectual baggage and create a new, distinctly and intrinsically American mode of thought. ‘A man’s genius’, Emerson writes in ‘Spiritual Actions’, ‘the quality that differences him from every other, susceptibility to one class of influences, the selection of what is fit for him, the rejection of what is unfit, determines for him the character of the universe’.\(^11\) Rather than a quality reserved for the few of the intellectual elite, genius is Emerson’s name for the individuality of a person that renders him uniquely and irreducibly himself.\(^12\) The imperative for the Emersonian individual is to cultivate this particularity to the utmost, such that the individual can be said to act autonomously, thinking every decision and action through for himself, instead of in timid conformity with his society’s received conventions. ‘Is it not the chief disgrace in the world’, Emerson asks in his 1837 address ‘The American Scholar’,

> not to be an unit;—not to be reckoned one character;—not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicated geographically, as the north, or the south?\(^13\)


\(^{12}\)I use the male pronoun in the paragraph to be consistent with Emerson’s text.

The disgrace here, in other words, is to have one’s opinions, beliefs, and actions overdetermined by context.

The ‘great “glad” glow of Emersonianism’ also permeates the work of one of the most crucial intellectual influences upon the twentieth-century development of the American university, the philosopher William James. James articulates a ‘radically empirical’ philosophy of ‘pluralism’, premised upon two basic claims: first, that reality appears in different forms to different human perspectives. Second, that the world is forever in flux, ‘uncompleted’, ‘awaiting part of its complexion from the future’, and thus resistant to the assertion of truths that remain stable across time and apply across multiple human subjectivities. The result is a philosophy that valorizes the particular against the universal, the transient against the permanent, the part against the whole; it is, as James writes, ‘essentially a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts’ (Writings 1160). The epistemological implication of this description is a ‘pluralism’ essentially identical with its contemporary form, namely a conviction that ‘The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over’. Thus, James concludes, ‘The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality,—is, at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant’.

For Emerson and James, relativism enables the flourishing of particularity. If individuals are no longer judged with respect to some sort of transcendental, universal standard, then it becomes possible for individuals to cultivate their particular ‘genius’ and develop those aspects of their selfhood that are uniquely their own. The critic Frank Lentricchia has forcefully advanced this strain of thought, arguing that James’s pragmatism is an ‘emancipating critical force which would liberate the particular, the local, the secret self from intellectual, economic, and political structuralizations which would consume, control, deny all particularity, all locality, and all secret selfhood’. There is little doubt that this formulation correctly describes the political inflections of James’s philosophy, which tend rigidly to identify the particular, the transient and the part with the political progress, and the universal, the permanent and the whole with political reaction. In the course of his vehement opposition to the Philippine-American War James equated imperialism with a nefarious investment in abstract intellectual categories, writing: ‘Damn great Empires! including that of the Absolute’. The failures of the presiding American presidents,

16 William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, (New York: Norton, 1958) p. 19.
according to James, lay in their insistence on ‘treating an intensely living and concrete situation by a set of bald and hollow abstractions’. Higher-order characterizations amount to violence, while apprehension of concreteness and particularity is a moral imperative, in the domains of both epistemology and politics.

James’s view is substantially consistent with postwar theoretical incarnations of relativistic thought. An interesting text to examine with this in mind is Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (1979), which had its genesis as a report on the organization of knowledge in the contemporary university for the government of the Canadian province of Québec. In his introduction Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, depicting a vision of a social world fragmented into discrete and substantially isolated linguistic communities or ‘language games’. For Lyotard, these language games figure as ‘clouds of narrative language elements’. ‘Conveyed within each cloud’, he continues, ‘are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable. In effect, Lyotard argues that every individual develops at a particular and unique intersection of multiple linguistic contexts, and that these contexts form the background against which the individual’s utterances take on specific meanings. Because both these contexts and the individual’s position within them constantly shift, it is impossible to determine stable rules of interpretation that would enable definite determinations of meaning. Substantially meaningful communication, for Lyotard, is not really possible, because every individual remains trapped within his or her particular matrix of contexts.

Lyotard’s position becomes clearer when compared to the claims of his major philosophical rival, the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality posits a society in which individuals, even individuals from different language games, make themselves mutually intelligible through conversation, which Habermas thinks of as a reciprocal giving of reasons. Habermas understands individuals in society as ‘participants in a practical discourse’ for whom it is possible to ‘test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are “right”’. It is in Lyotard’s treatment of Habermas that the political stakes of his philosophy of language really become clear. For Lyotard communicative rationality amounts to coercive conformism; the crucial political step, for Lyotard, is to recognize ‘the heteromorphous nature of language games’—i.e. the incommensurable gap that separates different linguistic contexts. This recognition, according to Lyotard, ‘implies a renunciation of terror,

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which assumes [language games] are isomorphic and tries to make them so.\textsuperscript{22} Obviously directed at Habermas, this rather overwrought likening of genuine communication to terror effectively expresses an extreme relativism. Judgments can be made only with respect to specific linguistic contexts, and because, when scrupulously analyzed, the linguistic context of every individual is unique, Lyotard arrives at a conception of savoir—knowledge—that must be radically particular and incommunicably private. Lyotard’s postmodernism begins to sound like the insistence of James’s pragmatism that ‘Private and non-communicable perceptions always remain over’.\textsuperscript{23}

Lyotard’s argument slips from is to ought: he argues that the structure of knowledge is radically atomistic, and that given this individuals ought not to attempt to overcome this radical atomism. It offers its reader no way to think similarity, commonality, or persistence. Quite apart from the destructive effects of such a philosophy on a university institution substantially based upon communication and collaboration, it is difficult to understand how an idea like particularity could be conceptually meaningful without its dialectically correspondent notion of universality. As with James, who once wrote ‘System, as such, does violence whenever it lays its hands upon us’,\textsuperscript{24} the only kind of knowledge Lyotard’s extreme particularity grants is knowledge circumscribed by a radically narrow context. As the critic Ross Posnock has noted, a theory of extreme particularity cannot think comparatively or historically, and such limitations prove fatal to the project of a putatively critical thought. Posnock connects this epistemological characteristic with the political dimensions of James’s philosophy:

His protest against bigness and his championing of the idiosyncratic and the small constitute less an engagement with history and its constraints than a stubborn refusal to interrogate their workings. His refusal is rooted in a self-confessed, and self-imposed, sense of political ‘impotence’ that is (temporarily) relieved by articulating moral opposition. The Jamesian cultural critique, in short, functions as a therapeutic.\textsuperscript{25}

Posnock, writing in 1991, goes on to claim that James’s mode of engagement has become detrimentally characteristic of the contemporary intellectual approach to politics and to knowledge. Does this remain true? Does a text like \textit{La condition postmoderne} remain representative? According to one view, humanistic academic thought in more recent years has resisted the identity between an insistence upon particularity and political liberation, and sought to engage with the structural, systematic elements of political reality. Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott, for instance, posit in their recent volume \textit{Theory After ‘Theory’} (2011) the arrival of a new intellectual regime, one that differs from the previous in its refusal to link ‘epistemological indeterminacy’ with ‘poli-
ical freedom'. Attridge and Elliott suggest that the Anglo-American humanities have broadly accepted that arguments that understand changes in perception or literary form as substantial acts of political resistance have been overly optimistic. But what is most significant about this formulation is the choice to focus only upon the link between epistemological indeterminacy and political freedom, rather than to evaluate claims for epistemological indeterminacy in themselves. Whatever its connection with political freedom, this formulation implies, epistemology remains fundamentally and insurmountably indeterminate.

The acceptance of this fundamental indeterminacy has led to a prevalent irony that is analogous to a conceptual dynamic identified in the 1980s by the philosopher and critic of post-modernism, Gillian Rose. Rose characterizes postmodernism as 'despairing rationalism without reason', observing that postmodernist critiques of enlightenment rationality unfold through methods of argumentation that nonetheless depend upon the procedures and assumptions of rational thinking. In a similar way, adherents to relativistic particularity work in environments of scholarly collaboration while producing books, articles, and conference papers that undermine their own content by urging the fundamental impossibility of communication. In Barthean fashion, these texts advocate the significance of the role of the reader, but because the significance of this readerly role lies precisely in its undetermined, autonomous character, these texts can have nothing to say about it apart from their affirmation of its intrinsic contingency. To argue that such an epistemology is too extreme is not to argue for a flawless transmission of meaning in which the reader's response coincides absolutely with the author's intention. It is rather to claim that some aspects of meaning do in fact transcend the barriers of individual consciousness to form shared bodies of knowledge, and that contemporary epistemology would do well to consider the ways in which these formations are possible, having already devoted so much attention to the ways in which they are imperfect. If, as Attridge and Elliott argue, the humanistic academy has made substantial progress in the domain of thinking the political in a way that transcends the Jamesian therapeutic of individual protest, it has been less successful in conceiving of knowledge as something that may be constructed, developed, and accrued, rather than simply destroyed.

There is a significance in labeling the history of this approach to knowledge an 'institutionalization' as opposed to a simple history of ideas. In some sense all histories of ideas are institutionalizations, insofar as ideas always manifest in the material dimension of texts, practices, and networks. But by way of conclusion I would like to argue that the specific history of the twentieth-century American university renders the ascendance of relativism 'institutional' in an especially strong sense. The twentieth century in the United States saw the greatest moments of

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academic expansion in modern Western history. After the Second World War, the university’s already significant growth accelerated dramatically, such that the number of Americans studying for bachelor’s degrees increased by 50%, while the graduate population increased by 900%. This context is crucial for the comprehension of the dominance of Continental theory in the United States at the end of the century, whose beginnings critics tend to locate in Jacques Derrida’s presentation at the famous 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University. I suggest that it is not a coincidence that a philosophy that understands knowledge as indeterminate and radically localized to each individual subject emerged at the same historical moment as this transformative influx, for the problem then became how to justify a comparatively mass expansion of what had been historically an aristocratic pursuit.

‘Mass expansion’ and ‘aristocratic’ might seem exaggerated language, for the English department was hardly taken over by the ‘masses’ in the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, ‘mass expansion’ implies first the sheer scale of the humanities’ growth over those hundred years, and second the humanities department’s democratization, significantly a result of professionalization. There now existed a concrete professional path for aspiring literary scholars to follow, which (in theory, though not in practice) allowed the cultural field of the academic humanities to conceive of itself as a meritocracy. This is the contrast the term ‘aristocratic’ means to evoke.

The change from criticism towards the end of the nineteenth century to criticism after the middle of the twentieth has everything to do with the transformation of criticism as the preserve of an elite few whose mission is the explanation of culture to the public into a comparatively enormous industry of intellectual production. In the case of literary criticism, especially, what was until this point a small and rarified discipline had somehow to justify that, quite simply, there would be enough work to do for the new industrial-scale networks of cultural production that were English departments in the latter half of the twentieth century. The rise of relativistic theory obviated the question of whether or not there was enough work by displacing, as Felski notes, the emphasis from the text to the critic: there is always more critical work to do, because there is always some further element of context—for Lyotard, some further element of one’s particular matrix of language games—for the critic to elucidate. This answers the criticism that, for example, a continual concentration of scholarly resources upon the same relatively circumscribed sample of literary texts that results in the excavation of increasingly miniscule minutiae about the lives and works of, say, Virginia Woolf or T. S. Eliot, might not be an arrangement

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30 On the fate of aristocratic ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American education see Graff, esp. Ch. 2; on the professionalization of the American humanities see Menand, *Marketplace* and in particular Menand, *Discovering Modernism*. 
conducive to the production of significant and stimulating humanistic scholarship. The lives and works of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot can never have enough critics, because the stress in the equation of critic and text falls more strongly on the side of the critic, whose scholarship represents a necessarily unique and novel point of view in its performance of a context-excavating vigilant gaze. Relativistic theory’s trapping of meaning within each subject’s specific matrix of language games confers inviolable distinctiveness upon every critical perspective. It allows every member of this newly expanded and institutionalized discipline to claim on the basis of democracy and egalitarianism the sacrosanct individuality that was the traditional preserve of previous generations of aristocratic critics. Since the humanities department has persisted in its postwar form of the large-scale professionalized network, it is unsurprising that, as Attridge and Elliott’s work illustrates, ‘epistemological indeterminacy’ has remained overwhelmingly influential, but as Attridge and Elliott also testify, certain new theoretical approaches have begun to change their focus from the limits of knowledge to knowledge’s possibilities. Given the present struggle of the humanities to maintain its claims to individuality and intellectual freedom in a university system ever increasingly subject to the bureaucratizing imperative of administrative rationality, such changes of focus must be considered welcome developments.

Works cited

Primary works:


31Menand notes in The Marketplace of Ideas that from the perspective of the market, this persistence is absurd. The discrepancy between the number of students who choose to undertake PhDs every year and the number of jobs that confront them upon graduation represents a state of affairs ‘that in any other context would seem to be a plainly inefficient and intolerable process’ (143).

32The best example would be so-called ‘speculative realism’, associated especially with the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux.


**Secondary works:**


“Lovers of Wisdom”: Alchemy and Materiality in Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*

Margaret Maurer, University of Cambridge

Daniel Miller opens his book *Materiality* with the following claim:

There is an underlying principle to be found in most of the religions that dominate recorded history. Wisdom has been accredited to those who claim that materiality represents the merely apparent, behind which lies that which is real.  

Miller expands these comments on religion to include many belief systems, societies, and cultures. Throughout history, he argues, the material has been devalued in favor of the immaterial; simultaneously, the material is the only way to express the immaterial. The result is temples and cathedrals, wars and bumper stickers, art and fashion—the world we live in. Miller’s anthropologically based examination of stuff, as he terms it, explores how these underlying beliefs might be questioned or interpreted, using case studies from contemporary cultures throughout the world.

Miller’s comments have a particular and peculiar resonance with the practice of alchemy, because its relationship to the material and immaterial has posed problems throughout its history. Alchemy, an inherently material practice, was divorced from its physical goals and experiments through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and re-imagined as a spiritual or psychological tradition. Simultaneously, the many different strains of alchemical thought were simplified and conflated. While these practices are usually first traced to Enlightenment thinkers who wanted to discredit alchemy and separate it from empirical science, this desire to disengage and de-emphasise the material occurs even among some alchemical theorists and practitioners. Elias Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* was published in 1652, making it the first English historical anthology of alchemical texts. This essay will examine how Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (henceforth *TCB*) curates the alchemical texts that he anthologises, downplaying alchemy’s physical and material components and combining disparate alchemical texts in order to support his own cohesive and simplified theory of matter. By closely examining the structure and paratextual writing of *TCB*, it becomes clear that the materialist theory Ashmole presents is his own, rather than a universal truth implicitly presented in the alchemical works he anthologises. While Ashmole describes himself in the text as an impartial historian tasked with collecting and preserving alchemical texts, his own theories on alchemical materiality take a precedent, influencing how he presents and interprets the anthologised texts, and ultimately compromising his claimed objectivity.

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2For an in-depth history of alchemy and how it came to be viewed as an immaterial practice, see Newman and Principe’s “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”.

Recently, historians have begun to question the dominant historical narratives of alchemy. Despite what J.K. Rowling might say, alchemy is not the work of wizards or magicians who would turn lead to gold. Instead, alchemy was both an art and a science concerned with the understanding and transformation of matter. It was not so much interdisciplinary as it was predisciplinary, combining elements of religion, philosophy, art, and science. Its resistance to categorisation led to its rejection during the Enlightenment as a pseudoscience and later fetishisation during the nineteenth century as an occult and magical practice. Alchemy’s failure to cohere to the scientific method and objectivism that Enlightenment science espoused placed it at odds with the categories that were anachronistically applied to it. As a result, nineteenth-century historians downplayed the alchemical pursuits of prominent scientists, including Isaac Newton, to portray them as forerunners to empirical and “true” science. Carl Jung’s writing on alchemical symbolism and psychotherapy continued to downplay the material aspects of alchemy. Jung wrote that alchemists did not pursue their craft for material gain, and instead, their experiments explored the unconscious psychic life of the human race. Alchemy’s history and influence were largely erased, and it was classified as a spiritual pursuit, stripped of its connections to the material.

While a number of historians have addressed how Renaissance alchemy was reimagined as a spiritual or psychological practice, alchemy’s troubled relationship with the material can be traced even earlier. In some ways, our current difficulty in defining early modern alchemy stems from the fact that early modern alchemy has never had a cohesive and all-inclusive definition. As Nummedal observes, “In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, there was as yet no consensus about how to define alchemy... It is essential that we preserve this messiness, rather than trying to oversimplify alchemy, or worse, anachronistically to privilege one kind of alchemy over others based on our modern categories”. Alchemy followed the belief that matter could be changed from one form into another through chemical experimentation. But “alchemy” was an all-encompassing term, used to describe various projects, from pharmacology to philosophy to metallurgy. It was utilised across social ranks, because it was not part of a university or guild structure. Alchemy was made up of many different practitioners with just as many goals and beliefs.

Elias Ashmole (1617–1692) was one of these practitioners. He is perhaps best known today as an antiquarian, whose manuscripts and cabinet of curiosities are housed at Oxford’s Bodleian Library and Ashmolean Museum. In his time, he was known as a man of diverse

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4William R. Newman and Lawrence Principe, p.404-408.
6Josten’s biography of Ashmole provides a detailed account of his life, including annotations of Ashmole’s own
talents. Fuller’s History of the Worthies of England notes, “Elias Ashmole... skilful in Ancient Coins, Chymistry, Heraldry, Mathematicks, what not?”7 In 1652, Ashmole published TCB, the “largest printed collection of alchemical poetry in the English language”.8 Today, when many scholars cite TCB, they examine the anthologised texts, rather than Ashmole’s production of the volume and paratextual additions. Particular attention has been paid to the inclusion of Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” and Ashmole’s biographical notes on John Dee, but Ashmole’s own interests have not been examined.9 Scholars blindly accept Ashmole’s claim that he is presenting an impartial, historical view of the authors featured in TCB, and his writing, the “Prolegomena” and “Annotations”, which bookend the volume, have gone unnoticed. These scholars, it seems, take Ashmole at his word. Ashmole repeatedly stresses in his “Prolegomena” that he is not imparting his own knowledge, because he is unskilled: “I know enough to hold my Tongue, but not enough to Speake” and therefore, “My Annotations are limited within the Bounds of what is Historical... and all Glosses upon the Philosophical Worke purposely omitted, for the same Reasons that I chose to send forth other Mens Children into the World, rather then my own”.10 By envisioning the texts as children, Ashmole stresses their connection to their writers, imagining them as their very flesh and blood. He uses this metaphor to distance himself, once again highlighting his impartiality as a historian. Ashmole says he originally included his own beliefs and theories, but “I withdrew my Thoughts (having never as yet set my selfe Effectually upon the Manuall Practice”).11 Ashmole had not attempted physical alchemical experimentation; he did not have a laboratory, and approached alchemy from a completely theoretical stance. These interests influenced the volume’s construction. While the anthologised poems often implicitly or explicitly discuss chemical processes and equipment, there is no discussion of laboratories in Ashmole’s commentary, and only passing references to chemical instruments or applications. Instead, Ashmole focuses on the spiritual enlightenment that can be derived from alchemy. His theoretical interests in alchemy define how TCB imagines and presents its texts to its readers, downplaying the physical or “Manuall Practice”. In The Compound of Alchymie, featured in TCB, the medieval alchemist George Ripley argues against theory without manual practice, saying, “I was dyscevyd wyth many falce Books/ Wherby untrue thus truly I wrought:/ But all such Experyments avaylyd me nought”.12 Ripley’s theory cannot be divorced from the

9 For instance, Janacek stresses Ashmole’s impartiality, calling his writing an “antiquarian approach to alchemy” and stressing Ashmole’s precision as a historian (309). Linden and Sanders use Ashmole to discuss Chaucer’s alchemy; Yates uses Ashmole’s biographical information on Dee and Kelly. These scholars and many others use Ashmole’s writing as evidence for scholarship without questioning how Ashmole influences that evidence.
10 Ashmole, A4r & B4v.
11 Ashmole, B2v.
12 A.G. Debus, p.191.
physical world. Manual practice is essential, because without physical evidence, it is impossible to tell the true alchemist from the charlatan. Ironically, Ashmole praises Ripley’s philosophical genius, but ignores this warning.

Ashmole’s passion for history, he claims, is the central motivation for TCB’s creation, and he emphasises his role as an impartial historian both in his writing and in how he chooses to present the anthologised texts. He writes, “Our English Philosophers Generally, (like Prophets) have received little honour... in their own Countrey” and “How great a blemish is it then to us, that refuse to reade so Famous Authors in our Naturall Language, whilst Strangers are necessitated, to Reade them in Ours”. He acknowledges his nationalistic goals—he specifically chooses English alchemists writing in English. TCB’s publication is a response to continental writing; the concept and title are taken from Theatrum Chemicum, an anthology of Latin texts, published in six volumes between 1602-1660 in Germany. The English writers who appear in Theatrum Chemicum wrote in Latin; TCB features English alchemists writing in English, and the use of the vernacular is patriotic. Ashmole created TCB to make these manuscripts available to his countrymen, so that they could know and celebrate their alchemical heritage. He further stresses his desire for historical authenticity, saying he preserved the “Spellings different” and “uncouth Words” so that “the Truth and Worth of their Workes might receive no Diminution by my Transcription”. Ashmole resembles a modern editor of a poetic anthology, attempting to maintain authorial intentions within a volume; he wants the text to be “Naturall” and true. Ashmole values the historical significance of the texts, and as a collector, he attempts to display these works within a historical context.

In fact, the physical act of collecting was a major part of compiling the anthology. Ashmole describes the texts as “Collected Antiquities” and writes that he consulted a masterful copy of Norton’s Ordinall which he “chiefly followed” but made sure to “compare with fourteen other Copies”. By tying TCB to these manuscripts, Ashmole shows his anthology’s authenticity, its direct lineage to ancient texts and the ancient writers who fathered them. Throughout “Annotations”, Ashmole notes borrowing and buying manuscripts; his own library contained manuscript copies of many works featured in TCB, including manuscripts from which he copied out verses by Ripley, Norton, and Chaucer. Ashmole the collector is not a separate person from Ashmole the anthologiser, and these common interests worked together to produce TCB. But the volume is not merely a physical collection of manuscripts; it is a theatre where readers may “converse with

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13 Ashmole, A2r & A2v.
14 A.G. Debus, B4r.
15 Ashmole, A4v & p.455
16 See Black for a complete listing of Ashmole’s library.
17 Swann, examining the relationship between texts and collections, uses Ashmole as an example, asking: “Is the writer who gathers the texts he has produced within the bounds of a printed book legitimised as an ‘author’ because he is a collector?” (11) Ashmole’s discussions about collection within his writing suggests he seems to think so.
the Dead, or consult with their Monuments”. The text itself is a space, a museum to house and present Ashmole’s collection, complete with commentary. And, like any museum, the reader interacts with material through the lens of its curator.

TCB’s organisation illustrates how Ashmole controls the reader’s relationship to the text(s). Ashmole does not organise the volume chronologically or alphabetically. Instead, he begins with the two most famous tracts, Norton’s *Ordinall* and Ripley’s *Compound*. The only anonymous tracts included in the first half are ascribed by Ashmole to a student of Norton’s and Raymond Lull, another renowned medieval alchemist. The other anonymous alchemical tracts appear last in the volume, placed after texts that are linked to famous alchemists. Following this is Ashmole’s “Annotations and Discourses” and glossary of “Obsolete Words”. Ashmole’s commentary is heavily focused on the works of Norton, Ripley, Dee, and Chaucer; for many alchemical tracts in *TCB*, he does not write any commentary. It seems Ashmole’s order and attention is based on a system of worth; the works he places at the beginning are the same works he praises highly in the commentary, noting the authors’ wisdom and significance. As the reader progresses through the commentary, they are pointed to the beginning of the volume and asked to physically turn back the pages to return to those preferred texts. The commentary Ashmole’s order creates a hierarchy for the reader, drawing their attention to the texts Ashmole himself reveres.

Furthermore, Ashmole’s polished page design and print formatting influences how the reader views the collected texts and their relationships to one another. The poems are carefully reformatted, adorned with title pages and intricate woodcuts by Robert Vaughan. The formatting makes the texts, which span hundreds of years of alchemical thought, appear to be a unified collection, rather than an amalgam of sometimes conflicting alchemical ideas and practices. While in the body of the text Ashmole uses Garamond typeface, in his “Prolegomena” and “Annotations”, he places quotations from the anthology on a new line in Blackletter typeface, which resembles ornate manuscript writing. Besides physically separating the quotation from his own words, the typeface highlights the texts’ relationship to manuscript culture and notes their historical value. Ashmole also does not modernise the spelling of the collected texts, a choice that emphasises their age and authenticity. Ashmole’s lens creates a unified and cohesive past, ancient wisdom which is placed in contrast with his modern and objective commentary. While the formatting is elegant and clear, the resulting volume presents an uncomplicated alchemy of ancient wisdom which is placed in contrast with his modern and objective commentary. While

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18 Ashmole, B4v
19 A.G. Debus, p.465 & p.467
20 A.G. Debus, p.xxxviii

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the mythic past, oversimplifying its complex history.

Ashmole chooses certain types of texts to include in his volume, and the choices that he makes impacts the history of alchemy that he presents. From a vast array of scientific texts, Ashmole only selects specific, revered, and esoteric works of alchemical poetry. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was an increase in the printing and circulation of “practical” alchemical literature, including distillation manuals and recipe books that used chemical techniques to create perfumes, alcohols, and medicines. Ashmole makes no mention of these books and does not include them in his work; they were concerned with material practice only. Ashmole’s own interest in alchemy dealt with the spiritual and allegorical, and so the history that he collects excludes texts that were merely practical instruction. While the texts he chooses for the volume are hardly unified, they are all esoteric poetry, using allegory and obscurity to communicate knowledge only to the “worthy few”. Ashmole explains that poetry helps to facilitate the protection of knowledge from the unworthy, saying, “Poesy has a Life, a Pulse, and such a secret Energy... Nor did the Ancients wrap up their Chieuest Mysteries, anywhere else, then in the Parabolical & Allusive part of Poetry, at the most Sacred, and Venerable in their Esteeme, and the securest from Prophane and Vulgar Wits”.22 Both the form and content of the poems included in TCB create ambiguity that allow for this imposition. The texts’ hidden nature, amplified by the poetics, make the poems open to interpretation, allowing them to be used as evidence for any particular project. These texts could be used, and indeed were used to support various political, religious, and scientific views.23 Poetry as a medium is so open to interpretation that it can justify contradictory theories. Ashmole’s understanding of materiality is a single, rather than singular, alchemical theory. Therefore, by exploring how Ashmole presents and analyses these texts, we illuminate not the texts themselves, but Ashmole’s own materialist theories. His interpretation is, in his mind, the absolute truth given to him by these alchemical scholars, that through their writing, he is able to find “that Eminent Secret... of the Kingdome of God”.24 Describing alchemists, Ashmole says:

For they being lovers of Wisdome more then Worldly Wealth, drove at higher and more Excellent Operations: And certainly Hē to whom the whole Course of Nature lyes open, rejoyceth not so much that he can make Gold... as that he sees the Heavens open... and that his own Name is fairely written in the Book of life.25

Ashmole’s alchemical understanding betrays Neoplatonic sentiments: he sees the universe as a book that can only be interpreted by a select few—much like the book he is creating. But he

22Ashmole, B3r.
23Mendelsohn shows how alchemy was used as a metaphor across the mid-seventeenth-century political spectrum, dispelling earlier scholarship linking alchemy with Puritan radicals. As Ashmole was a royalist, he supports Mendelsohn’s thesis.
24Ashmole, A2.
25Ashmole, A4v
Maurer - Lovers of Wisdom

goes further, claiming that all true alchemists have no desire for worldly possessions, and are motivated purely by their desire to celebrate God’s creations. Through chemical operations, an alchemist can attain wisdom and view the world that is beyond the material, but the material itself is of no consequence. This outright rejection of the material in favor of the spiritual aligns with Ashmole’s downplaying of “manuall practice” in his textual selection and analysis.

But many alchemists did not reject the material, and some did not even concern themselves with the immaterial. In fact, this devaluation of the material in favor of the spiritual is not representative of all of the texts in Ashmole’s anthology. In certain texts, there is no separation between matter and spirit: the spirit is material. A pseudo-Ripley text reads, “Our Sulphur is... quick, called the Spirit of Slyfe” and a later poem calls sulphur “the soule of Saturne”. Sulphur was known as the material spirit of metal; the spirit and material were not seen as separate, but unified. Similarly, an anonymous poem praises blood: “Whatsoever itt is that is alive, / Without Blood they may not thrive”. In Galenic medicine, blood was believed to transport pneuma—translating to “breath” or “spirit” from Greek—throughout the body. Blood was both material and the literal spirit of a person. Another poem, conflicting with these texts, distinguishes between body and spirit, but talks about “a marriage of Body & Soul the Spirit betwixt”. The esoteric nature of the poem makes it difficult to know if the body, soul, and spirit are symbolic of specific materials or chemicals, like sulphur, but whether it is literal or metaphorical, the relationship between body and spirit is a harmonious union if they can be distinguished at all.

These instances within the anthologised texts are in direct contrast to Ashmole’s theories, which are heavily influenced by Paracelsianism. Paracelsus (1493–1541) was a Swiss alchemist who rejected Galenic medicine in favor of a revolutionary and alchemical understanding of the body and world. He believed in a microcosm-macrocosm relationship between the universe and individuals: there was a divine relationship between man and God pervading all of nature. Paracelsus claimed an alchemist could better understand this relationship through his alchemical experiments. Ashmole often references Paracelsus, citing him to explain everything from magic to disease. Ashmole argues, “There are yet hid greater things then these, for we have seen but few of [God’s] Workes”. In Ashmole’s hidden Neoplatonic world, only alchemists can perceive the truth of God’s covert symbols. In an annotation discussing Norton’s Ordinall, Ashmole explains his theory of materiality in greater detail, writing a lengthy four-page response, including:

The Power and Vertue is not in Plants, Stones, Mineralls, &c. (though we sensibly

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26A.G. Debus, p.383 & p.405
27A.G. Debus, p.433
28A.G. Debus, p.xvi
29A.G. Debus, p.441 & p.461
30Ashmole, B2r
perceive the Effects from them) but tis that Universall and All-piercing Spirit, that
One operative Vertue and immortal Seede of worldly things, that God in the begin-
ning infused into the Chaos, which is everywhere. Active and still flowes through
the world in all kindes of things by Universall extension... in the close Prison of
Grosse and Earthie bodies) as to take it from Corporiety, free it from Captivity, and
let it loose that it may freely worke as it doth in the Aetheriall Bodies.31

Throughout all of the works included in the anthology, there is no mention of this “Universall
and All-piercing Spirit”, including in Norton’s *Ordinall*. After all, Paracelsus, which seems to
be the alchemical source of this “All-piercing Spirit”, was born after the *Ordinall* was written.
Ashmole’s “Annotations” are riddled with anachronisms. The first mention of Paracelsianism in
England was not until the 1570s, and Paracelsian tracts were not published in England until the
seventeenth century.32 Around the time of TCB’s publication, Paracelsian writing reached its
peak in England, but for the medieval writers Ashmole anthologises, Paracelsus was not an influ-
ence. Throughout all works included in the anthology, there is no mention of a book of life or a
Neoplatonic universal spirit, and yet Ashmole spends pages discussing its existence.33 Ashmole
has taken a variety of alchemical texts, spanning hundreds of years of alchemical thought, which
have varying accounts of what constitutes the relationship of the body and spirit. However, he
does not try to reconcile or discuss these views, but instead, imposes his own.

By divorcing Ashmole’s commentary from its supposed anthologised sources, it can be
understood on its own as a piece of alchemical philosophy. While an alchemist uses the phys-
ical world to “perceive the Effects” of the spiritual transformation, alchemical changes are the
release of the spirit from the material body. Not only is the immaterial distinctly separate from
the material, but the material is base and deplorable: it is a “Prison”, “Grosse and Earthie” in
contrast to the spirit’s closeness to God and the “Aetheriall”—it is something to be overcome,
escaped. Instead of a harmonious union, the spirit and body are separate and opposing. While
the body needs the spirit in order to be anything more than “Chaos”, the spirit is imprisoned by
the body. In contrast to many of the writings included in the anthology, Ashmole imagines the
goal of alchemy as completely immaterial; through alchemy, the spirit can be freed. This calls
to mind Miller’s observation about religions: “Wisdom has been accredited to those who claim
that materiality represents the merely apparent, behind which lies that which is real”.34 Ashmole
takes alchemy, which is entrenched in the material—the central tenet being the belief that one
material can be changed into another—and repurposes it to imagine a hidden immaterial world
that is just beyond the reach of perception.

31 A.G. Debus, p.446–447
32 For Paracelsus’s rise in seventeenth-century England, see Rattansi.
33 A.G. Debus p.xxiv-xxv
34 Miller, p.1.
It is an over-simplification to deny TCB as a historical project, or to argue that Ashmole’s sole purpose was to propagate his own theory of matter. Rather, Ashmole’s claimed desire for historical preservation is not his sole motivation. Ashmole wanted to legitimise alchemy, or at least, the alchemy that he espouses. While he claims that he is preserving history, he uses the Theatrum as a platform to discuss his own materialistic theories, and in doing so, both downplays the material elements of alchemy and oversimplifies alchemy’s complex and sometimes conflicting principles and practices. While any historical account necessitates simplification, the narrative that Ashmole creates both excludes, tailors, and changes factors of early modern alchemy. Ironically, Ashmole’s desire to preserve and propagate alchemical ideas leads him to the same historiographical practices which were employed less than a century later to delegitimise alchemy. It is clear that while these practices continued to plague historic portrayals of alchemy for the next three centuries, they began much earlier than historians of science have previously noted, and for more reasons than simply to discredit alchemy.

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In his work “The Field of Cultural Production; or, the Economic World in Reverse”, sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu outlines his view of the dichotomous relationship between literary prestige and economic capital in the modern world. In so doing, Bourdieu examines how their inversed methods of functionality contribute to and operate within a larger power system that ultimately controls the workings of capitalist society. Integral to Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production is the notion that “every position [...] depends for its existence and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants on other positions in the field” ¹, or as Barbara Hernstein-Smith puts it, “with respect to value, everything is always in motion with respect to everything else—if there are constancies in literary value, they will be found in those very motions” ². This paper will elaborate on the idea of constancies within the cultural-economic system, positioning it against what Bourdieu labels “outdated or classic works” ³. These works belong to the literary and artistic field, which is itself contained within a field of power, characterized by economy and autonomy⁴.

The value of literary autonomy translates to symbolic capital—recognition of the greatness and subsequent prestige that results from that recognition. Symbolic capital exists within what Bourdieu calls the field of power, which constitutes all varieties of capital but is dominated by the earning of economic profit specifically. As such, symbolic capital and therefore literary autonomy is not as dependant on the field of power, its value being more culturally abstract. Bourdieu maintains that “the more autonomous the field is, the more it suspends the dominant principle of hierarchization” to which it is subject ⁵. It does so by discrediting the dominance of economic capital by achieving a status that extends beyond the merit or value of such capital, while at the same time forgoing the accumulation of economic profit. Its high symbolic status simultaneously decreases its desirability as consumer product. Bourdieu’s system operates according to this inversion, whereby more autonomy or symbolic capital, results in less economic capital, and vice versa. Works that achieve total autonomy are those which emancipate themselves from the field of power. They thus become outdated or classic, no longer having a position in the field that dominates modern society. However, Bourdieu’s theory seems to problematically synonomize ‘classic’ and ‘outdated’, thereby overlooking classic texts that can arguably stake claim to both symbolic and economic capital. One such example is the work of William Shakespeare,

³Bourdieu, p.314.
⁴Bourdieu, p.319.
⁵Bourdieu, p.320.
who, despite inciting debates over canonical legitimacy and relevance, nonetheless embodies constancy within the literary and artistic field. I intend to use Shakespeare’s works to deconstruct elements of Bourdieu’s conception of the field of cultural production. I contend that Shakespeare transcends the boundaries between the autonomous and heteronomous (or economic) principles Bourdieu proposes, thus challenging facets of the literary and artistic field that his work seems to overlook. In so doing, Shakespeare provokes contemplation about which other writers might be called upon to further complicate the field’s operation.

Bourdieu’s essay envisions a stark divide between “the orthodoxy of the works of the past” and the new works that enter the literary or artistic field. By emerging foremost at the economic end of the spectrum of cultural production, new works subsequently displace previous ones into positions more autonomous than economic. In so doing, these older works come closer to that which Bourdieu associates with the classic and/or outdated. The new works do so by parodying the old ones, with the result that these older works “are rendered incongruous or absurd”. However, Bourdieu assumes that new works’ references to prior literature divulge the context-specific nature of the older works, making them seem incompatible with the cultural concerns of the modern day. It is here that Bourdieu’s conflation between classic and outdated works becomes problematic. Granted, there are examples wherein particular values or literary depictions of the past are insoluble to the present, thus those works invite the parody which proposes their irrelevance (the works of Samuel Richardson come to mind, as his frequent portrayals of naïve and disillusioned female characters contrast starkly with modern perceptions of strong, intellectual women). Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s theory seems to overlook new works that pay tribute to previous works in ways that demonstrate reverence whilst simultaneously attempting to accrue symbolic capital for themselves through the act of association. Such is the case in Allison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, an autobiographical graphic novel which highlights the author’s struggle as a young girl growing up with a closeted homosexual father, while discovering and exploring her own homosexuality. Bechdel frequently uses James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as one of the story’s reference points, drawing on a shared love of literature between father and daughter while using the cultural prowess of an early twentieth-century work to address more modern, and personal, issues. For example, she uses the Icarus-Daedalus dichotomy to explain the evolution of her relationship with her father—identifying him at first with Daedalus, the master creator (Bechdel describes her father’s constant preoccupation with the physical alteration and restoration of their home) and authoritarian, while she takes on Icarus’ child role. However, she later reverses their characterizations: she becomes the parent-figure to whom her father confesses his shame of being a closeted queer, and it is her father as Icarus, who, in committing suicide, “plummet[s] from

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6Bourdieu, p.311.
7Bourdieu, p.312.
8See *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748)*
Bechdel's intellectual achievement is twofold: she establishes her own credit as a scholar with a thorough demonstrative understanding of a challenging academic work,—the very inclusion of which acknowledges the cultural significance of *Ulysses*—and she utilizes the “classic or outdated” towards a more modern interpretation that yet exhibits the ongoing relevancy of Joyce's novel.

As in Bechdel's use of Joyce, multiple modern references to Shakespeare speak to the timeless significance of the Bard, despite his status as 'classic' and perhaps, to some, outdated. This is evident in the continuous adaptation of his works in creatively modern ways and for a variety of mediums—as recently as the December 2015 film release of *Macbeth*—which prevent his works from becoming truly antiquated. Nonetheless, a seemingly conflicted opinion about the playwright and poet's authority exists within modern literature and learning, manifesting most prominently within the canon debate over Shakespeare's place in today’s curriculum—that is, whether he still deserves one. However, the constant debate over his relevancy nonetheless proves that Shakespeare is in fact still a topic of conversation. As Jane Coles argues, “the very act of having to contend/engage with the authorized canon reaffirms its power” 11, demonstrating the prevalence of the literary canon in academic discourse even as that discourse aims to limit the power of that being discussed. Bourdieu simplifies this notion: “the production of discourse about the work is one of the conditions of its production” 12, and such production cannot be discounted even in the most precarious circumstances. This aspect of Bourdieu's theory suggests that Shakespeare's involvement in the ongoing debate over canonicity not only demonstrates social interests invested in him as brand and writer, but it also ensures the continued production of works that reiterate his relevance while nonetheless affirming his classic status as part of the Western literary canon.

The canon debate is a significant site for analysing Shakespeare's works as simultaneously classic, autonomous and contemporary in the field of cultural production. As a result of the aforementioned inverse operation between autonomy and economy, increased autonomy indicates that an author can afford, so to speak, to be less concerned with the law of economic power. However, those who would advocate for revamping the English literary canon, particularly as it is taught in schools, complicate Bourdieu's transposition. Coles notes that in accordance with curriculum rules, teachers are including Shakespeare but only requiring students to read selected

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12Bourdieu, p.317.
passages instead of full plays\textsuperscript{13}. This indifference towards classic works reflects Harold Bloom’s view that “great works are unasked for and perhaps unwanted obligations” \textsuperscript{14}. The implication is that works that Bourdieu would categorize as classic and/or autonomous, are in fact losing that prestige, becoming “unwanted obligations” such that they are now drudgingly mandatory; and yet, their constant mandate marks the impossibility of their antiquation. This should arguably reduce their autonomy, as such negative attitudes towards these works decrease the reverence in which they are held, but the fact that they are so exhaustingly prominent marks an irony in their autonomy which complicates Bourdieu’s view of how the cultural system operates.

Fitting comfortably into both field classifications, Shakespeare provides provocation for questioning whether any writer can truly be considered completely autonomous from the field of power, prompting a somewhat ironic inquiry into how relevant the term ‘outdated’ really is to the field of cultural production. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the play as dramatic form contains a radical doubt that subscribes to, and is always subsumed by, the cultural power system \textsuperscript{15}. Even according to Bourdieu, the theatre is an example of “bourgeois drama... [which] might be ‘dated’ but not ‘outmoded’” \textsuperscript{16}; therefore, the play is nonetheless always already contained within the field of power, not unlike a memory in the unconscious. This omnipresence of the classic is evident when considering how new writers choose to incorporate in their own works even those thought to be long forgotten. Bourdieu insists that “young writers will refuse everything their elders are and do” \textsuperscript{17}, but also that new parodies “get beyond” the old works “not by denouncing [them] but by repeating and reproducing [them] in a socially non-congruent context” \textsuperscript{18}. The non-congruent context here is specifically significant for revealing the absurdity of the previous texts, whose pre-modern content supposedly inhibits relevance and, thus positions them towards the autonomous end of Bourdieu’s spectrum. However, the very fact that the new works are “repeating and reproducing” the old ones effects a re-emergence of the old texts into a relevant sphere, despite and alongside the fact of their autonomy. This enacts a re-entry into the dominant hierarchy that makes possible their continued economic profit while maintaining their largely autonomous, classic—though not necessarily outdated—status. Moreover, Mary Frances Hopkins asserts that “we need to know the texts and forms of the past in order to fully understand those of the present” \textsuperscript{19}. It is through the repetitious and reproductive act of so-called parody that older texts retain their autonomy and economic relevance simultaneously.

\textsuperscript{13}Coles, p.59.
\textsuperscript{14}Bloom quoted in Michael Bristol, \textit{Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare}, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.41.
\textsuperscript{16}Bourdieu, p.332.
\textsuperscript{17}Bourdieu, p.319.
\textsuperscript{18}Bourdieu, p.313.
Further to this point, Jan Kott notes that “nowadays Shakespeare is placed in no time and in no particular place” 20 and indeed the number of vastly different setting choices and dramatic interpretations—from *Julius Caesar* in a modern women’s prison21 to *Macbeth* reimagined with tiny plastic ninjas22—speak to Kott’s astute observation. Shakespeare’s placelessness challenges Bourdieu’s notion that parody reveals the non-congruent context of past literature; instead, Shakespeare’s works become endowed with a universality that defies time and class hierarchy while nonetheless maintaining its potential for economic profit. As Hernstein-Smith concludes, “the value of a work changes according to changing values/interests of a community” 23, and Shakespeare is credited for “embodying human emotions that haven’t changed” 24. While the autonomy and classicism we associate with Shakespeare stems largely from his representation of the realm of the highly intellectual and sophisticated—the elite class—Lawrence Levine describes the popularity of Shakespeare among the nineteenth-century working class, during which his plays were enacted at a variety of establishments, both bourgeois theatres and in such “low places” as cloth houses 25. Levine notes how Shakespeare was integrated into American culture by being “denigrated and diluted” 26 which made his works popular because “he was integrated into nineteenth-century culture and presented within its context” 27. Levine’s observation about Shakespeare’s presence in the Victorian era further complicates Bourdieu’s notion of the parody. While the presentation of Shakespeare’s works may have been demoted from the elite standard of the bourgeois theatre, the playwright’s popularity and recognition, therefore autonomy, is augmented by its removal from sophisticated performance. Thus, the parody serves to demonstrate how Shakespeare can be suited to a modern context despite his classic status.

In essence, Shakespeare merges the divide between what Bourdieu calls the heteronomous principle, dominated both by economic profit (capitalist art), and the autonomous principle (art for art’s sake). While Bourdieu insists that the “play of homologies between fundamental oppositions [...] gives the field its structure” 28—a structure of parallel inversions whereby an increase in economic profit decreases cultural and symbolic capital (autonomy)—this notion appears problematically reductive, especially when one returns to the issue of canonicity and the canon debate. The very reason for the debate is educators’ questioning whether the material that has been reinforced in curriculums because of its iconic literary status should continue to be included in modern educational contexts, which some feel have moved beyond the applicability of

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21The *Julius Caesar Project*, dir. by Taryn Jorgensen (Toronto Fringe Festival, July 2014).
23Hernstein-Smith, p.10.
24Elsom, p.25.
26Levine, p.40.
27Levine, p.50.
28Bourdieu, p.325.
such canonical texts. The issue becomes one that directly parallels, not inverses, the hierarchical movement between literature’s autonomy and economy: on the one side, works in the canon, such as Shakespeare, have been held to such a standard of value that schools globally have continued to purchase his works to educate students; on the other, an arguable decrease in opinion of his works, as no longer relevant or required in education, enacts a decline in autonomy which demands a decrease in economic capital by removing said texts from an education system that would then cease to purchase them. The canon debate demonstrates how writers like Shakespeare can complicate and challenge Bourdieu’s theory about the structure and operation of the field of cultural production, by aligning elements that he deems to be “functional oppositions”.

My skepticism extends to Bourdieu’s notion of the nature of economic capital, which he measures according to a work’s reception by its audience. He writes that the “strict application of the principle of hierarchization means that producers and products will be distinguished according to their success with the audience, which is evidence of their interest in economic and political capital which secures their success”\(^29\). Success is not measured by the pedigree to which a work is held by its readers, but rather becomes a symbol of economic interest, which translates to economic capital. Therefore, a successful work that maintains a constant presence in the economic hierarchy becomes representative of the mass interest it incites. This coincides with Bourdieu’s theory that disinterestedness is dually heightened with autonomous works: autonomous works achieve capital through recognition and prestige only, and the resultant disinterestedness of the masses, whose lack of interest manifests as the lack of economic capital allotted to autonomous works, serves to increase their autonomy as classic and consequently, outdated. However, Michael Bristol’s inquiry into society’s over-consumption of Shakespeare complicates Bourdieu’s dichotomy. Bristol believes that “Shakespeare retains his authority [...] because suppliers of cultural goods have been skillful at generating a social desire for products that bear his trademark”\(^30\). Bristol aligns Shakespeare’s literary authority with his ability to produce economic capital through a constant “social desire” that simultaneously affirms his economic and symbolic value\(^31\).

I argue that Bourdieu’s parallel conception of autonomy and outdated-ness thus draws a logical link between economy and relevance. The more autonomous a work is, the less relevant to the masses, to whom its access is restricted through liminal production. However, I maintain that Shakespeare implodes the divide between autonomy and relevance by demonstrating that symbolic capital can be integrated into mass culture through various mediums. For example, John Guillory states that the list via the curriculum syllabus—which gets associated most often with the more autonomous works of the literature canon and, by extension, with the “culturally

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\(^{29}\) Bourdieu, p.327.

\(^{30}\) Bristol, p.28.

\(^{31}\) Bristol, p.28.
literate”—is itself an exemplary artefact of mass culture. Autonomy is then conveyed by the masses through a medium distinctly their own, which in turn links concepts of autonomy and mass culture—therefore cultural relevance. The course syllabus becomes representative of the ways in which literary works’ autonomy is measured and recognized, yet nonetheless acknowledged as contemporary in its very inclusion on such lists.

Shakespeare references in popular culture operate in a similar way. Bourdieu frames this combination of the classic and the contemporary by explaining that “whereas occupants of dominant positions are strongly homogenous, the avant-garde positions bring together for a certain time writers and artists from different origins whose interests will sooner or later diverge.” Bourdieu concedes that the “avant-garde” works—the newcomers—are capable of enjoining works from different eras in ways that yet form a cohesive whole with a right to a position within the literary and artistic field. Adapting one of Shakespeare’s plays for modern film enacts this union, and one can brainstorm several recent examples wherein such a joint-venture has occurred (for instance *She’s the Man*, a twenty-first century interpretation of *Twelfth Night* or *10 Things I Hate About You*, an albeit loose tribute to *The Taming of the Shrew*).

While Bourdieu might label the film a parody, and he would not be incorrect in doing so, the categorisation becomes devoid of insult when one considers how the film introduces the works of Shakespeare to a new generation, in a way that may prove more effective than the obligatory school syllabus. Similarly, Graham Holderness astutely argues that “if play and film occupy entirely different spaces, they cannot be compared or evaluated against each other; not only do they enjoy their independent prestige [...] but the film is rendered incapable of violating the integrity of Shakespeare.” Holderness notes that film is a medium that maintains a prestige of its own in the modern day, and while it may not possess the autonomy allotted to a writer like Shakespeare, the combination of the two hardly serves to detriment the original referent. However, even if one insists on the contrary, we then return to Levine’s previous argument wherein the denigration of Shakespeare, by having his works performed in places of ‘low culture’, succeeds in integrating him into American culture by asserting and maintaining his universal relevance. Furthermore, Holderness calls film “a radical exploration of the play,” and the very notion of being ‘radical’ re-establishes Shakespeare’s autonomy within a modern context, which effects yet another complication of Bourdieu’s vision of the workings of the literary and artistic field.

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33 Bourdieu, p.347.
35 Holderness quoted in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfeld, p. 213.
36 Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfeld, p. 215.
Towards the end of his article, Bourdieu delineates a formula for predicting the movement of literary works within the economic and autonomous hierarchies that make up the literary and artistic field of cultural production. He notes that “one cannot give a full account of the social trajectory [of a work] unless one establishes the configuration of the space of available possibilities, the social value attached to them and the meaning/value they received for different agents.” 37 By meaning or value, Bourdieu refers to the socially constituted perception the works in question have applied to others in the field. He also outlines specific conditions upon which the projected social trajectory of a work depends: a trajectory which I argue refers not only to a work's movement between positions in the field, but also its continued presence within society. These conditions include the movement of other works, which subsequently makes available other positions in the field; the social value, which combines mass economic reception and revered acknowledgment, and the effect that work has had on influencing, producing, augmenting etc. other works in the field. Shakespeare's relevance to all of these categories should predict a positive social trajectory—i.e. his continued social presence—in years to come. And such a trajectory is hardly undesirable for modern scholars. Martin Esselin argues in favour of maintaining a contemporary relationship with canonical works, despite the fact that they may accord with Bourdieu's criteria for the outdated. According to Esselin:

If you had a society with no canons at all, you would have no reference materials [...] you can’t get away from the pattern of one period reacting to another and the material one period has left behind becomes the basis on which you base your contradictions to the previous period. 38

This continuous dependence on the past to propagate literary potential and thus sustain the continued operation of the field of cultural production is well surmised by Andrew Zurowski, who notes that “in Shakespeare, everything is told, but nothing is told to the end, he is always asking for us to give him birth” 39. As such, Shakespeare's challenge to Bourdieu becomes a process of labour.

This paper has demonstrated that critical questioning is perhaps not unfounded even in a work as substantial as Bourdieu's, despite the authority with which he explains not only his view of the operation of the field of cultural production, but also the corresponding values of its various constituents. At the very least, his contention about the field of cultural production remains intriguing and logical, the essence of which is that “all value is radically contingent being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality or an objective property of things but rather, an effect of multiple, continually changing and interacting variables...the product of the dynamics of a

37Bourdieu, p.346.
38Elsom, p.33.
39Elsom, p.171.
system”\(^40\). Two of the most significant variables Bourdieu asserts is economic profit and symbolic capital, though he also argues for a space “outside-of-the-system”, which is occupied by what he labels classic or outdated works. I have attempted to grapple not only with his problematic synonymizing of these two terms, but also with the dichotomy he envisions between symbolic and economic capital, or the autonomous and heteronomous principles. Shakespeare proves to be an example of a classic author who retains both autonomy and the potential for economic profit; his works defy and challenge the inverse parallel between autonomy and economy upon which Bourdieu insists, balancing being classic and yet relevant. While scholars continue to inquire into whether Shakespeare can still be considered our contemporary, Michael Bogdanov insists “he must be, he will always be...his stories have helped to make up the fabric of our civilization”\(^41\). It is this ever-present, foundational significance that Bourdieu’s hierarchy fails to consider.

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*Primary works:*


*Secondary works:*


*She’s the Man*, dir. by Andy Flickman (DreamWorks Studios, 2006).


\(^{40}\)Hernstein-Smith, p.30.

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Economics of Value: Emerson, Thoreau, and the (Literary) Market

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In the early to mid-nineteenth-century United States, the spread of the so-called market revolution led to a number of transformations—including industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of a credit economy—which literary historians have linked to developments such as the expansion of readership, the increasing commercialization of literary production, and the professionalization of authorship.¹ New England was among the areas affected most immediately by these economic and cultural transformations, and it was a group of intellectuals from this region that came to be perceived as cautioning most emphatically against the ills of the market. The writings of some Transcendentalists seem to support the traditional notion of the movement being more or less synonymous with resistance to market policies and practices. Theodore Parker, for instance, preached against “the feudalism of money” as a form of “tyranny of the strong over the weak”, while Orestes Brownson argued “that the Banks must be destroyed” and recommended his readers to aim at “abolishing hereditary property” altogether.² Such statements have often led to the assumption that Transcendentalism was advancing a genuinely oppositional philosophy—one that privileged spiritual over material value. With the emergence of scholarly interest in the intersection of culture and economics, however, such certainties have become increasingly subjected to critical scrutiny.³ In some more recent criticism, Transcendentalist writers thus emerge either as ambiguous about market practices or as consciously (or subconsciously) co-opted capitalists suspected of having spiritualized commerce in order to exculpate ruthless economic individualism. The charge that Transcendentalists used idealist rhetoric mainly as a cover-up for materialist practice has been advanced perhaps most influentially by historian Charles Sellers, who argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson, the key figure of the movement, provided “cloudy abstractions” to


³This approach has burgeoned over the course of the last two decades and has been accompanied by a number of important essay collections—see, for instance, Thomas L. Haskell and Richard F. Teichgraeber III, eds, The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, eds, The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), and Michael Hutter and C. D. Throsby, eds, Beyond Price: Value in Culture, Economics, and the Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Woodmansee's and Osteen's "Taking Account of the New Economic Criticism" (in The New Economic Criticism, pp. 3–50) gives a useful overview of the central premises of the approach and introduces the work of key practitioners.
sugar-coat “bourgeois banality” and legitimize “untrammeled capitalism”.

I wish to suggest in this essay that the truth lies somewhere in between, and that we should recognize the ambiguity about the market economy both in Transcendentalism in general and in individual figures themselves. Addressing questions about economic practice and its cultural repercussions, the writings of Emerson and Henry David Thoreau demonstrate that neither the resistance nor the co-optation paradigm adequately capture an altogether more complex state of affairs. In the following sections, I point to three related lines of enquiry to investigate a set of questions about Transcendentalist economies. The purpose of the first section is to revisit instances of market opposition in Emerson and Thoreau and to contextualize them against the background of a nineteenth-century discursive dichotomy between culture and commerce. The second consists of an analysis of a Transcendentalist rhetorical practice one might call “semantic recoding” — a metaphorical transubstantiation of economic vocabulary that, I argue, cannot ultimately be reduced to an act of market advocacy. The third and final section deals with the strategies Emerson and Thoreau followed to acquire cultural authority and investigates the way in which they pursued “a place partly outside and partly inside the market”. To argue that Transcendentalist writers were participants in the literary marketplace may contribute to qualify their image as economically “disinterested” intellectuals, but it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that they were mouthpieces of capitalist ideology. An analysis of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s often ambiguous economies of value may provide a more nuanced view of how the market revolution, the emergent discourse of literary autonomy, and the increasing diversification of the nineteenth-century literary field relate to one another.

Opposition and Engagement

Thoreau’s Walden (1854) begins with a famous chapter on “Economy”, which has often been read as a strident critique of antebellum America’s economic realities. The greater part of his contemporaries, Thoreau argues here, lead alienated “lives of quiet desperation” and are caught in a deluded chase for material possessions that are ultimately nothing but “golden or silver fetters”. Thoreau’s symbolic gesture of eremitic withdrawal to Walden Pond and his emphasis


5 My focus here is on the investigation of the Transcendentalist response to the contemporary economic and cultural market; analysing the differences between Emerson’s and Thoreau’s strategies would be the subject of another essay.

6 Teichgraeber, Sublime Thoughts, p. x. Borrowing a term coined by Michael Walzer, Teichgraeber reads Emerson and Thoreau as “connected critics”, as intellectuals “who were neither alienated nor detached from practices and institutions they criticized, but instead criticized from the inside by invoking what they took to be their society’s shared values as the grounds for criticism” (Sublime Thoughts, pp. xi, xii; see also pp. 3–74).


on an inherent difference between “outward” and “inward” riches would seem to suggest that the Transcendentalist vision was indeed oppositional, inasmuch as it cultivated a logic of “inward” or spiritual rather than “outward” or material value. A similar vein also manifests itself in Emerson’s writing. In an 1841 lecture on “Man the Reformer”, for instance, he complains that “the general system of our trade [...] is a system of selfishness” which is disconnected from “the high sentiments of human nature”. These “high sentiments” are essentially synonymous with what Thoreau calls “inward” values, which to both him and Emerson tend to manifest themselves in philosophy, literature, and the arts rather than in the economic sphere. If this sounds like a familiar dichotomy, it is because we have grown accustomed to an opposition between art and commerce that, historically speaking, is a nineteenth-century invention—one that reaches its rhetorical climax with Victorian sage writing, ranging from Carlyle and Ruskin to Matthew Arnold’s vision of culture as a bulwark against materialism, as a field of action that “helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth as but machinery”. It is this attitude of oppositional intellectualism that George Santayana famously criticized when he characterized Transcendentalism as a manifestation of an American “genteel tradition”, as an intellectual movement whose effete “transcendental musings” proved ultimately unable to cope with the nation’s “aggressive enterprise” and its “moral materialism”.

It seems too easy, however, to typecast the Transcendentalists as otherworldly radicals. Emerson, in particular, did not only criticize commerce—he also eulogized it. In “Man the Reformer”, he does not simply lash out at capitalist selfishness but also admits that “[t]he employments of commerce are not intrinsically unfit for a man”. Where Parker and Brownson preached against capitalism as feudalism in disguise, Emerson praised “the new and anti-feudal power of Commerce” as an agent of progress. Elevating commerce to the status of “a very intellectual force”, Emerson complicates the dichotomy between culture and capital. Critics like Sellers, who use such passages to claim Emerson’s complicity, tend to neglect their underlying ambiguities.

One of the most prominent examples of Emersonian ambiguity is his essay on “Wealth”, which first appeared in the 1860 collection *The Conduct of Life*. While the text may testify to

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13Emerson, *Collected Works*, i, p. 147.
14Ibid., p. 229 (emphasis added).
15Ibid., p. 233.
Emerson’s enthusiasm about the market and its potential, it does not mark his “turn” from market critic to market advocate. There is a sense of ambiguity in Emerson’s writing about economic topics that spans the decades from the early lectures to this late essay. This argument can also be substantiated on the basis of textual evidence, since “Wealth” shares the auto-intertextual nature of much of Emerson’s writing. While the essay was first published in 1860, Emerson delivered earlier versions of the text as a lecture from January 1851 onwards and at various stages included material from even earlier lectures such as the 1843/44 “New England” series. It is also worth emphasizing that the essay’s apparent market advocacy is ultimately transformed into a more complex position in the course of the text. To read its axiomatic statements—“[m]an was born to be rich”, “wealth is moral”—as proto-neo-liberalist effusions would be as lopsided an account as that of reading Emerson as an intransigent market critic. Rather, he combined a fascination with industry with a call for what one might loosely call its “poetization”. As he writes in an early journal entry,

> [e]very thing should be treated poetically—law, politics, housekeeping, money. A judge and a banker must drive their craft poetically as well as a dancer or scribe. That is, they must exert that higher vision which causes the object to become fluid & plastic. [...] Economy must be poetical, inventive, alive [...]  

The call for transforming economy through a “higher vision” resurfaces at the end of the “Wealth” essay, where Emerson points out that “[t]he true thrift is always to spend on the higher plane”, to “spend in spiritual creation, and not in augmenting animal existence”. To claim that Emerson spiritualized commerce and thus commercialized the spiritual therefore seems too simplistic an analysis. Emerson aimed at addressing audiences to whom trade and commerce were central aspects of life, but he rarely failed to direct them towards the spiritual. This is not to suggest, however, that he did not have a personal stake in doing so. As a participant in what Johannes Voelz calls a “market of inspiration” Emerson thereby established his own authority and created

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17 For the text of the “Wealth” lecture as it was delivered from the early 1850s onwards, see *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843–1871*, ed. by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, 2 vols (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), i, pp. 231–38. The original lecture series on “Conduct of Life”, on which the 1860 collection was based, also featured an additional lecture on “Economy” (*Later Lectures*, i, pp. 240–48), from which Emerson also drew material for the 1860 book publication of “Wealth”. For details about the textual history of the printed essay and its links to Emerson’s earlier writings, see also the critical apparatus of the *Collected Works* edition of *The Conduct of Life* (vi, pp. xxx–xxxiv, l–li, 425–27).


21 While Sellers acknowledges that towards the end of “Wealth” Emerson turns towards the spiritual, he ultimately dismisses this as a smoke screen for the materialist thrust of the text as a whole, which to Sellers is a thinly (if at all) disguised “panegyric to Gradgrind capitalist liberalism” (*The Market Revolution*, p. 379).

a demand for both his lectures and his books.  

Semantic Recoding

If Emerson in the journal entry cited above calls for an economy that is “poetical, inventive, alive”, one might say that it is not only its “higher vision” that turns “fluid & plastic”, but his own terminology as well. In another notebook passage, he famously calls his journal a “Savings Bank” in which to deposit the “earnings” of his intellectual labours. As critics like Sellers and Michael T. Gilmore have argued, the Transcendentalists’ use of a spiritual vocabulary to describe the market—or, more frequently, as in this case, the vocabulary of the market to describe the spiritual—more or less inevitably led them to espouse an economic rationality. There is a structural similarity here between the Transcendentalists’ use of economic terminology and that of more recent scholarship in the economics of culture. If a critic like Pierre Bourdieu borrows the term “capital” and extends its meaning by premodifying it with adjectives like “cultural” or “symbolic” to describe non-economic fields of social (inter-)action, what he does is not, one could argue, all that dissimilar to Emerson’s calling his journal a “Savings Bank” or the proceeds of his mental exertions his “earnings”. While these two types of metaphorical borrowing from the economic lexicon are motivated by different objectives, both are similar at least in terms of the type of criticism they have attracted.

As Teichgraeber and Dolan have demonstrated, the Transcendentalists’ use of what Dolan calls “the language of ownership” can be analyzed more productively using a more nuanced view that acknowledges the ambiguous nature of semantic recoding while at the same time seeking to avoid reductionist conclusions.

Thoreau—who, to use Emerson’s phrase, had a penchant for “substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite” —used semantic transformations to an even greater extent than Emerson.

Walden is full of such deliberate ambiguities—the “Economy” chapter in particular, in which Thoreau imagines “political economy” as an “economy of living” and describes himself as wanting to “transact some private business” through “trad[ing] […] with the Celestial


24Emerson, Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, iv, p. 250.

25For a critique of Bourdieu that is reminiscent of Sellers’s critique of Emerson, see Amy Koritz and Douglas Koritz, “Symbolic Economies: Adventures in the Metaphorical Marketplace”, in The New Economic Criticism, 408–19. Koritz and Koritz argue that, by borrowing concepts and terms from the field of economy, Bourdieu reduces social practice to economic logic and thus caters to the “totalizing impulse within economic theory” (“Symbolic Economies”, p. 409). Apart from neglecting Bourdieusian metaphors from discursive fields other than economics—think of the very term “field”, for instance—, Koritz and Koritz themselves seem to invest to a far greater extent than Bourdieu in a belief in the pervasive influence of economics.

26See Teichgraeber, Sublime Thoughts, pp. 20–29.

27Emerson, Collected Works, x, p. 428.
One of the most striking examples of Thoreau’s use of market terminology is an essay called “Life Without Principle”, which was delivered as a lecture on several occasions and first published in 1863, a year after Thoreau’s death. The text—which, as Robert D. Richardson has pointed out, is simultaneously Puritan in its sermonic tone and anti-Calvinist in its denunciation of “the immorality of trade” —begins with a number of redefinitions, which Thoreau uses to destabilize the meanings of words such as “profit”, “capital”, and “efficiency”.

The climax of the essay comes with Thoreau’s outrage at the California Gold Rush, which he depicts as a saturnalia of base materialism:

> The rush to California [...] and the attitude, not merely of merchants, but of philosophers and prophets, so called, in relation to it, reflect the greatest disgrace on mankind. That so many are ready to live by luck, and so get the means of commanding the labor of others less lucky, without contributing any value to society! And that is called enterprise.

While this critique of economic self-centredness is remarkable in its own right, what is even more important is the way in which Thoreau appropriates, transforms, and inverts Gold Rush imagery to reconceptualize an external as an internal quest:

> with that vision of the diggings still before me, I asked myself, why I might not be washing some gold daily, though it were only the finest particles,—why I might not sink a shaft down to the gold within me, and work that mine.

To say that Thoreau transforms language to emphasize the internal over the external does not, however, imply that his was an entirely disinterested position. When he criticizes the approving “attitude [...] of the philosophers and prophets” vis-à-vis capitalist egotism and when he finds it “remarkable that among all the preachers there are so few moral teachers”, that “[t]he prophets are employed in excusing the ways of men", what he does, after all, is to highlight the importance of his own perspective and to substantiate his own claim to the authority of a “moral teacher”.

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31 Ibid., p. 164 (emphases in original).

32 Ibid., p. 166.
Cultural Authority and the Literary Market

How, then, did Emerson and Thoreau claim cultural authority, and how did they position themselves in the literary marketplace? Their participation in the literary market has been emphasized by a number of critics taking their cue from Gilmore’s influential book *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985), a New Historicist revaluation of classic American authors against the background of the nineteenth-century market economy. Where Charvat had neglected Thoreau because to him he counted as a “non-professional write[r]”, more recent criticism has taken up Gilmore to argue that “Thoreau was intent not only on finding an audience for his writings but [...] on being paid for them as well”.33 This wave of economic contextualization has also been influential in the Emerson scholarship that emerged in the last two decades. In an essay on “Emerson’s Income from His Books”, Joel Myerson, for instance, has used detailed research to document the financial aspects of Emerson’s professional career. In another contribution, Myerson describes Emerson as “a man who was not only competent but genuinely proficient with money”.34

Looking at how Transcendentalism as a literary circle presented itself in the ante-bellum literary marketplace, David Dowling concludes that Emerson succeeded in the “strategic manipulation of print media to establish Transcendentalism within American culture”.35 As this scholarship has demonstrated, opposition to or ambiguity about the market can itself be an effective market strategy; claiming that Emerson and Thoreau were engaged in creating an alternative economy of spiritual value does thus not necessarily lead to the traditional counter-cultural or oppositional narrative.

If it was not the literary market on the whole, what the Transcendentalists certainly did oppose was popular literature for a mass readership—with many of them sharing at least partly Thoreau’s view, as reported by Emerson, that “whatever succeeded with the audience, was bad”.36 Both Thoreau and Emerson entertained suspicions about the democratization and commercialization of literature—processes that, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s words, “introduc[e] the industrial spirit into the heart of literature”.37 The horror of a cultural scene in which, as

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36 Emerson, *Collected Works*, x, p. 416. To David S. Reynolds Emerson and Thoreau, on the contrary, “determinedly opened themselves to popular idioms” and shared a “comprehensiveness of cultural vision” (“‘A Chaos-Deep Soil’: Emerson, Thoreau, and Popular Literature”, in *Transient and Permanent*, pp. 282–309 [pp. 283, 299]). The problem with this argument is, however, that it equates “popular literature” with the popular *per se* and thus fails to account for Emerson’s and Thoreau’s often harsh accounts of mass market fiction (see, for instance, *Walden*, p. 105, and “Life Without Principle”, p. 158).
Tocqueville put it, “the taste for the useful predominate[s] over the love of the beautiful” was certainly real for a group of authors whose writing was mainly aimed at providing the latter rather than the former. Emerson and Thoreau were of course well aware of the fact that, economically speaking, they could not compete with the success of bestselling authors. Instead, they sought alternative audiences in other sections of the market, worked with small-scale but prestigious publishers, and offered a specific “brand” of writing unavailable to readers elsewhere. Their reaction to and their positioning within the market are thus the results of a careful process of deliberation rather than the signs of clandestine co-optation.

Conclusion

As Bourdieu and others have argued, in the nineteenth-century literary field sales figures and cultural prestige begin to follow an inverted logic in which those who fail in the mass market often have better chances to succeed in the race for institutional recognition. Transcendentalism and its cultural afterlives are a telling illustration of this phenomenon. From the late nineteenth century onwards, Transcendentalist writers gradually ascended to the highest spheres of canonicity—while much more popular public poets and domestic novelists in many cases lost (or never attained) canonical status. In the case of Emerson and Thoreau, such symbolic or institutional capital in the long run became convertible into economic capital, with books like *Walden* or Emerson’s *Essays* reprinted in larger editions and read by larger groups of readers than ever before. What seems crucial—and to some extent ironic—is that this twentieth-century surge in popularity—that is, the increasing investment in the Transcendentalists’ cultural or intellectual “value”—has tended to be predicated on the image of Transcendentalists as “alternative”, “counter-cultural” intellectuals who defied capitalism, alienation, and the mass-market.

38Ibid., p. 439.
40It is of course to a certain extent problematic to generalize about writers as different in terms of their publishing success as Emerson and Thoreau. In fact, neither the impact of Emerson’s career as a lecturer nor the sales figures of his books are representative of Transcendentalism as a whole. But even granted that Emerson was a successful participant in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, his sales figures were still moderate compared to those of authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or Harriet Beecher Stowe.
41As Lawrence Levine has argued, the distinction between what counts as “high” and “low” culture emerges in a US context only by the end of the nineteenth century. In the first half of the century, according to Levine, the “cultural lines were more fluid” and “cultural spaces less rigidly subdivided” (*Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988], p. 233). Still, it would be difficult to imagine Transcendentalist writing as the subject of large-scale “cultural sharing” in the earlier parts of the century (*Highbrow/Lowbrow*, p. 233). As Teichgraeber has pointed out, however, Emerson’s popular reception (and with it the popularization of Transcendentalist thought and writing) usually begins earlier—with the high print runs and cheap editions of Emerson’s writings after 1880 (see “Our National Glory”: Emerson in American Culture, 1865–1882”, in *Transient and Permanent*, pp. 499–526 [pp. 520–21])—and his status as an “elite writer” is consolidated later than is usually assumed (see “More than Luther in these Modern Days”: The Construction of Emerson’s Reputation in American Culture, 1882–1903”, in *Beyond Price*, pp. 159–78 [pp. 71–74]). While much work has been done on the nineteenth-century reception of Transcendentalism and on the trajectories of its twentieth-century institutional canonization, there is yet no study that investigates the movement’s twentieth-century popular reception.
commoditization of literature and culture. Readers thus often inadvertently reproduce a strategy of legitimation devised by Transcendentalist writers themselves. To be sure, Parker, Brownson, Emerson, and Thoreau all railed against the industrialization of life and the commercialization of culture—though, of course, with different degrees of intensity. Well aware of having to write for and speak to audiences whose lives were shaped by economic concerns, they fashioned themselves as public intellectuals whose authority drew legitimacy from a qualified scepticism about market policies. This is neither to imply that Emerson and Thoreau were in fact disinterested nor to reduce their writings to the status of crypto-capitalist propaganda. Transcendentalist writers were in fact neither detached apostles of culture nor determined apologists of commerce, but responded to the economic transformations and the shifting definitions of authorship in nineteenth-century America.

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Imagining Immaterial Value in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*

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In a now celebrated essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Zadie Smith went as far to declare Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005) to be carving a new “path” for fiction writing, identifying it as a bold doing away with the trappings of a lyrical realism that has exhausted itself.¹ In agreement with Smith, this paper considers *Remainder* to be an exemplary formal innovation in fiction. Yet I argue it is also more than that: it has found a form for the shifting economic and cultural conditions it confronts.

I want to put *Remainder* in dialogue with theoretical discussions about value and immateriality that have emerged out of the Marxist tradition in the past twenty or thirty years. These are theories that have tried to understand how capital increasingly focuses on the production of immaterial goods, from images to feelings to information, and how this reconfigures the received understanding of the value-form in Marxist political economy.

McCarthy’s novel is a quasi-satire of the new creative and information economies that these theories address. Set in contemporary London, the novel moves seamlessly from the worlds of financial logistics, to film production, to the ‘Seattle-themed’ coffee shops opening all over the city.² McCarthy gives us a protagonist who takes this world all too literally, becoming obsessed with managing and controlling every micro-sensation, every small piece of daily life in the city he encounters. As I will argue, this sets the stage for the novel to probe the limits of contemporary understandings of value in an age that tries to find it in everything.

The self-consciously political and theoretical stakes of McCarthy’s work has been well-noted, not least by the author himself, as evidenced by his own very public investment in—and provocative statements on—the politics of writing. McCarthy has made it his project to renew an engaged avant-gardism in fiction against what he sees as the naïve return to realism in recent contemporary writing.³ Yet *Remainder* does not champion difficulty for difficulty’s sake. It is no impenetrable proto-modernist text laden with philosophical references. It is rather, to quote Mark McGurl’s recent praise of the novel, “that rarest of things: experimental fiction that works”.⁴ McCarthy writes in an unfailingly simple prose, with very little in the way of flourishes. Almost no attempt is made to flesh out the inner-contents of its central character’s mind.

There is a self-conscious abandonment on McCarthy’s part of the project of psychological realism.

Nor though is *Remainder* a work of postmodern metafiction, even as it carries some of that genre’s playfulness and irreverence for verisimilitude. It is first and foremost a vehement satiric take on the current dynamics of late-capitalist production, in which it is said to be very much harder to conceptualize an ‘outside’ to capital’s relentless quest for surplus-value. We need only think here of the novel’s narrator’s obsession with tracing the logic of the macro-world of finance and logistics (increasingly the hegemonic sectors of the economy) right down to the micro-world of ‘Seattle-themed coffee shops’ with their punchcards. My argument, in keeping with this journal’s theme, is that the world conjured up by *Remainder* forces us to think through the relationship between value and literature today. By ‘value’, however, I mean a very specific kind. It should be clear by now that I am not referring to a received understanding of ‘literary value’ or ‘cultural value’ as meaning the production of consensus around what gains entry into the canon, and nor am I answering any question about what is the ‘value’ of literature in society (at least not directly). *Remainder* speaks to a conception of value that recent work in contemporary literary studies has, in my view, failed to properly engage—the theory of value that has historically animated Marxist economic and political theory, one that has been transformed by new conceptions of the immateriality and immeasurability of value under late capitalist production.

Before moving on to show the particular ways in which the novel’s idiosyncratic style engages with these questions, it would be helpful first to clarify our terms by way of a detour on the problem of immateriality as it has emerged in recent Marxist thought. It will then be possible to show how and why these new theories of value have renewed and rejuvenated political-economic theory in a manner productive for an analysis of McCarthy’s novel.

Let us first return to Marx’s original definition of value. For Marx, value is quite simply the expenditure of labour in the abstract, measured in time. What this means is commodities are exchanged on the basis not of some quantity of value to be found innately within them, but of the “socially necessary labour-time” expended on average in producing them: “so far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond”.


It is worth noticing that already in this sentence there is a very immediate connection between value and immateriality. Value has nothing to do with the materiality of the object that is its bearer; nor does it have to do even with the concrete labour associated with that object. The object or commodity is the site of capture of a purely social measure (the average conditions of production) of which the commodity is an emblem.6 So value is both material and immaterial; it is material at the site of production, but its capture and representation in the commodity renders it immaterial in exchange.

6 The fact that value is only ever realized through representation for Marx, rather than forming an observable substance, is always going to be of obvious importance if we are to think about value in relation to literature.
If value is already immaterial in some sense in Marx, in that it can only be represented, rather than discovered in and of itself, then what does it mean to speak of immaterial value—of, in other words, an acceleration of the problem of value’s indirect relation to itself? This is an old conundrum for Marxist theory.\(^7\) It has gained a new theoretical prominence over the past twenty years of so as theorists have begun to coin the terms immaterial production and immaterial labour as responses to not just a shift in theoretical perspective, but to the operations of capital itself.

Notable figures of this trend are Maurizio Lazzarato, and subsequently Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who would develop the related notion of “biopolitical production”. What these theories of immaterial production have tried to track is the tremendous incorporative energy of capitalist production as it has developed globally, particularly since the 1970s. They have tried to adapt their theories to the way in which the pressures of capital accumulation in increasingly postindustrial economies has tended towards the invasion of all spheres of life, since capital increasingly relies on the communicative, informational, and affective capacities of its subjects, capacities whose realizations are now grouped under the term immaterial labour. Since value is labour, and labour can be conceived as potentially all activity, whether traditionally considered ‘productive’ or not, it is possible to say, as Lazzarato does, that “immaterial labour produces subjectivity and economic value at the same time”.\(^8\) In other words, “capital has invaded our lives”.\(^9\) What appears to be meant by subjectivity here is all those capacities that constitute our life as social beings: our communicative abilities, our affectivity, our bodies, our dispositions, since it is now these (the socially reproductive elements of life) that capital relies on more than ever. Permeating all levels of life, capital in the so-called postmodern economy is understood to no longer have anything outside itself, and as such the more value is reasoned under these conditions to be produced both everywhere and nowhere at once (it might be helpful to think of this as a kind of deconstruction of Marx’s concept of value).

In the postmodern economy, then, value is rendered, to borrow Antonio Negri’s formulation of the problem, “immeasurable and immense”.\(^10\) The immateriality of value in this light comes not to mean something in the ether to which we don’t have access. It is rather something whose source cannot be located in a specific entity (the industrial proletariat for a more orthodox

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\(^7\) The feminist contributions to this debate were crucial, since they insisted on drawing attention to domestic labour, a lot of it emotional and affective, that was never recognized as ‘productive’ by an orthodox, and masculinist, Marxism. The seminal text is Silvia Federici’s ‘Wages Against Housework’: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975. The history of these debates are outlined in Kathi Weeks’ recent book *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.


\(^9\) Lazzarato, p. 142.

Marxism), nor captured in its entirety, precisely because it is immanent to life itself, rather than labour only in the sense of directly productive activity.

To return to the novel, it is this theoretical problem of the inevitable excess of value, now that it is immanent to all of life, and therefore the problem of its capture and containment in concrete forms, that *Remainder* confronts. It does so by reformulating the problem as an aesthetic one. Value was initially described as representative (the commodity “represents” labour). But it has now, with these new theories, transmuted into a crisis of representation. *Remainder*, in its self-conscious discarding of traditional novelistic representational strategies, puts the problem of immateriality and value in the language of its medium. The novel begins in the immediate aftermath of an unexplained ‘accident’. It has caused our narrator considerable brain damage, requiring him to relearn the basic motor functions of everyday living.\(^{11}\) The unidentified corporation responsible for the falling debris that strikes him, for that is as much as we know of the event, pays out a settlement of 8.5 million pounds on condition of absolute secrecy. This makes the narrator yet another brain damaged character in contemporary fiction, adding *Remainder* to the burgeoning list of contemporary “neuro-novels”–a term coined recently by Marco Roth to identify this trend–alongside recent works such as Ian MacEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) and Joshua Ferris’ *The Unnamed* (2010). Yet the fact of the settlement also obviously makes him at one and the same time a capitalist, albeit a capitalist with a very peculiar prerogative. The generous settlement he receives throws him into the world of finance and logistics, access to which he mobilizes towards strange large-scale “reenactments” of foggy memories and odd moments of his everyday life, the intention of which is to make him feel “authentic” again after the neurological disruption of his accident.

These reenactments are strangely obsessive, never-ending, and focus on the most extreme minutiae of lived experience to often darkly comic effect. The narrator stands at the helm of a vast production network of actors and logistics experts, financiers and film production workers. What he produces are not material commodities, however, but immaterial experiences and sensations—the zenith of which is the “tingling” he experiences when his reenactments go well. What he is trying to produce is thus ultimately himself, something he feels he has lost after his brain injury. Yet this is a new “self”, reducible only to the vagaries of his sensorium. He is then apparently the perfect (literal) embodiment of late capital: a man whose newfound condition renders all experience and all sensation compulsively producible and reproducible. Nothing is privileged over anything else: everything is reducible to its accompanying sensation, its affect and thus, under these strange new theorizations of value predominant today, everything everywhere is churning out value.

\(^{11}\)The narrator is quite deliberately never named, the reasons for which will become clear. I will therefore persist in referring to him simply as ‘the narrator’ throughout this paper.
This of course poses an aesthetic dilemma at the same time, at least insofar as it engages the problem of how to represent a world in which everything is radically reduced to the level of sensory impression, with no corresponding hierarchy of meaning with which to order it. For what is value stripped of mediation? What happens, the novel asks, when everyday experiences, basic bodily feeling, memory, all that our narrator has to re-learn following his accident and all that is supposed to precede value production, become the very locus of value itself?

McCarthy initially dramatizes this problem in the familiar terms of literary theory. In fact, the novel can be thought of initially as a kind of parodic take on Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect”, in which it is precisely those writerly details that seemingly contribute nothing to the overall structure and narrative of a text that produces its verisimilitude. Realist fiction has through this mechanism always strived to draw our attention to a world that is proliferating with meaning in the seemingly inconsequential material of the everyday. Jacques Rancière, in his *The Politics of Literature* (2011), observes that Marx himself took his central “hermeneutical gesture” from the French realist novel, which moved away from narrative as a “world of actions governed by rational ends and towards the world of meanings hidden within the apparent banality”. Rancière is referring to Marx’s analysis of the commodity, “at first sight, a very trivial thing”, the hermeneutic of which is the secret of value itself (the social relations of labour). *Remainder* is very obviously not in the realm of realist fiction. We need only listen to McCarthy’s own proclamations on the folly of that genre’s claim to be able to transmit “reality” to the reader. So insofar as the aesthetic logic of realism was tied, albeit indirectly, to a certain approach to value, as Rancière implicitly claims, McCarthy’s intervention in the novel can be read as giving us a new literary approach for a new conception of value. His fiction assiduously denies “the world of meanings hidden within the apparent banality” that Rancière describes, and tries instead to point towards the waning of hermeneutics with the creation of a literary world where everything proliferates sensations without corresponding meanings.

For it is McCarthy’s project to do away with the literary ambition of finding traces of authenticity in everyday life and as such *Remainder’s* rather conventional performance of the reality effect in its opening pages is only provided so as to eventually be able to trip up the reader’s expectations by undoing it. For instance, when the narrator first visits his financial advisor, he notices that the “reception area looked out over a cobbled courtyard, through a low window to the secretary’s right”. Here we have a relatively conventional and successful example of the

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13 Marx, p. 128.
14 Following Rancière’s logic, one could build a case from McCarthy’s novel that new conceptions of value in political theory might once again take their cue from fiction.
15 McCarthy, p. 10.
reality effect: a description rendered with superfluous detail, lending the described area a height-
ened verisimilitude and thereby fleshing out the world the novel is supposed to take place within. 
From here on out though, the prose descends into a repetitive and obsessive style, indicative of 
a mediatory zeal that is struggling to keep up with the proliferation of detail it is encountering. 
Our narrator is always struggling to “get things down”, or “capture” the most minute observable 
details and sensations of his surroundings. His speech begins to trail off into ellipses, an entire 
encounter with a homeless person is related in painstaking but confused detail only for it be 
revealed that it never happened at all. These breaks in the network of descriptive detail that 
the novel has been trying to build up also find their way into the environment of the fiction 
itself: an escalator malfunctions, spewing black grease onto the narrator’s trousers; phone lines 
get disconnected. In other words, both form and content conspire to create the effect of an 
experience entirely out of joint with its surroundings. Nothing is smooth. This is McCarthy’s 
first dramatization of the slippages of immaterial production and of the networks that are sup-
posed to sustain it, by way of connecting these failures with problems inherent in narration itself.

The narrator’s subsequent “reenactments” literalize this early stylistic jittering in the 
newl’s prose. All of those trivial descriptive details that initially seemed to be to the detri-
ment of the narrative thrust of the novel quickly become, as the narrator’s frenetic attempt at 
capturing the minutiae of experience increases, the narrative thrust itself. For what was initially 
a failure of narration, to make the world around him cohere into something that can be felt as 
authentic, now becomes a practical problem the narrator solves by throwing his money into pro-
ducing micro-worlds that are recreations of scenes he encounters or remembers (a block of flats 
he lived in, a street shooting he reads about, a visit to the car mechanic, and, finally and fatefuly, 
a bank robbery). All of these reenactments are designed to produce environments in which he 
can live seamlessly. Speaking of his first reenactment, in which a block of flats is purchased 
and actors are hired to live in them and perform repetitive everyday tasks, our narrator justifies 
his activities thus: “I wanted to reconstruct that space, and enter into it so I feel could feel real 
again”. It is clear from this that for our nameless and essentially characterless narrator feeling 
“real” again would mean the reconstruction of something resembling a “self”—a “self” which he 
of course lacks following his brain trauma. But the novel makes clear that this is not going to be 
made out of the usual matter of subjectivity—an interiorized consciousness with psychological 
verisimilitude, a standard definition of what a character in a novel should be, if we believe Ian 
Watt’s classic formulation. Rather, as Pieter Vermeulen has noted, McCarthy “does not depend 
on the mimesis of a traumatized psyche, but rather on the liberation of a dysphoric affect that 
confronts the reader with an evacuated subjectivity”. In other words, unlike more conventional

16McCarthy, p. 67.
18Pieter Vermeulen, ‘The Critique of Trauma and the Afterlife of the Novel in Tom McCarthy’s Remainder.’ Modern
trauma fiction, the point in all the reenactments for our narrator is to now fill his “evacuated” interiority with externally derived impressions, until the latter is enfolded so thoroughly into the former as to annul any clear separation between our protagonist and the world he inhabits. Early in the novel, the narrator watches Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* and observes admiringly that: “he [Robert de Niro, acting on screen] seemed to execute the action perfectly, to live it, to merge with it until he was it and it was him and there was nothing in between.” What is desired is an eradication of the excess that mediation necessarily produces and this ambition comes to dominate the re-enactments throughout the novel. As Tom McCarthy has put it in a recent interview, “my hero wants to “be” in some kind of movie *without there being a movie*.” That is, he wants to abolish the messiness of mediation.

We can begin to see the connections here with the conceptions of value being put forward in contemporary Marxist theory, ones that pose the problem of imagining processes of valorization that leave no excess (or indeed “remainder”). For the great imaginative hope of theories of immaterial value is a hope traceable back to Marx: that the productive energies that capital unleashes always produces something more than it can capture, and therefore, though the processes of incorporation may be totalizing in tendency, they are also always incomplete. In this regard, *Remainder* is interested in singularities, that is to say unrepeatable moments, things and events that cannot be captured in a form entirely adequate to them. It has thus featured as the crowning literary example of what Fredric Jameson has recently called the “aesthetics of singularity” that in his view now characterizes the contemporary moment. This is an aesthetics that can only produce ephemera and heterogeneity, and no longer any kind of historical consciousness in its audience. Yet it is worth remembering that singularity is also that which necessarily escapes homogenization (otherwise known as the production of exchange-value), or, to use the novel’s language, it escapes “capture”. Insofar as immaterial value requires capital to incorporate singularities, then not just the impossibility but the perniciousness of this new world of value production becomes clear, and it is this that the novel eventually tries to comprehend.

Once our narrator’s reenactments have developed into full-scale operations, employing contracted out managerial logistics, a props crew, the scouting of location sites, and the micro-management of the bodily movements of the re-enactors themselves, we have what literally amounts to an experiential factory, to the extent that the re-enactors “work in shifts” as a means of being “supervised indefinitely.” What is placed under permanent management in these imagined factories is of course “life itself”, to explicitly borrow a term from Hardt and Negri’s account

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19 McCarthy, p. 23.

20 Hart, p. 668.


22 McCarthy, p. 179.
in *Empire* of what they call “biopolitical production”. 23 What begins as a quest for the protagonist’s sense of self-authenticity becomes one that transfers its demands to a totalized experiential field. This is where the novel begins to relate its earlier ontological claims most fully to a wider critique of contemporary capitalism. The desire for authenticity, for a kind of experience that can only be articulated as a vague “tingling”, undergoes a process of bureaucratization. As our narrator notes of his logistics man Naz, his “zealotry (for the project) wasn’t religious: it was bureaucratic”.24

Yet there is a fundamental paradox in all this that the novel ultimately addresses. In conceiving of an economic framework in which what is being commodified is immateriality, then it must at the same time be recognized that there will be some slippage in this process—for how can something that has no discrete, identifiable form be reproduced *ad infinitum* under the production logic of capital? McCarthy’s contribution to this thinking is to illustrate, using the novel form as demonstration, the impossibility, and the darkly comic futility, of a relentless desire to incorporate the most intricate sensations of everyday life, or even the belief that this can finally in any real sense be achieved.

This is finally conveyed in the novel’s ending. The re-enactment of a bank robbery collapses into reality, with the impulse to capture all experience one-for-one finally culminating in an orgy of violence, the “miraculous” final event of which for our narrator is no longer the production of life, as it had been up until now, but death.25 As the re-enactment transforms into the real thing and people are at first accidentally and then deliberately shot, an omega point of sorts is reached where there is no longer any distinction between experience and its mediation. This is what has been sought all along, but the result is too overwhelming for any narrative device to capture:

> They moaned and wept and yelped and shrieked. I listened to them for a while, trying to work out the rhythm of the various sounds (...) but gave up (...) It was too complex to pin down right now; I’d have to get it reenacted later.26

No longer able to “pin down” the dense reality of what have now been reduced to “sounds”, but were once articulations of something meaningful (namely pain and agony), the narrator’s project finally runs aground here, and the novel begins to decelerate too. What is always obvious when reading *Remainder* is that there can be no ending adequate to the story it has been trying to tell. The final scene consists only of the narrator fleeing in his private jet that he demands be flown in circles for as long as it has fuel in its tank, “until it winds down like a fisher-price toy”.27

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24McCarthy, p. 235.
25McCarthy, p. 292.
26McCarthy, p. 297.
27McCarthy, p. 284.
This conclusion of mindless violence and entropy evokes the kind of closing vision expected of a J.G. Ballard novel, a writer McCarthy admires. The inability to find a more creative conclusion though, rather than to repeat the literary moves of his forbears, is indicative of a writer that is struggling to wrap up his own conceptual loose ends.

Nevertheless, as I have tried to show through a summation of the novel and the theories it confronts, McCarthy has moved towards finding a narrative form for tackling a particularly vexed question of political economy—the capture of value in an age of immateriality. In the end, it perhaps shows the impossibility of presenting this problem aesthetically that McCarthy must rely on a character stripped of all neurological agency to do so, and indeed deploy a narrative structure that is almost obsessively repetitive in structure. Nevertheless, it remains the case that Remainder indicates how, far from relying on the insights of theory for its imaginative drive, contemporary fiction, as it moves into the areas usually guarded by political economy, is capable of its own kind of theorizing.

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Middlemarch and the “Development of Sympathy” Claim for the Value of Literature

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Moral philosophers have long observed that human beings strain to feel compassionate concern for people whose lives are distant from their own. Aristotle notes in the *Rhetoric* that we tend to pity those who resemble us ‘in age, in character, in habits, in position, [and] in birth’, because such proximity makes us more likely to think their misfortune might befall us as well.¹ As Carlo Ginzburg reminds us, it is not just social distance but also geographical and temporal distance that weaken our powers of sympathy.² We are inclined to feel more for suffering nearby than for potentially graver pain endured on remote shores, or borne by people long dead.

Many writers have proposed that literary texts can narrow the distance between ourselves and other, alien selves by inviting us to imagine, vividly, the lives of others. The idea that literary works can enlarge our sympathies remains a potent, yet frequently problematic, claim for the value of literature.³ This defense of literature has strong roots in the thought of many Victorian writers, including George Eliot, Henry Mayhew, Elizabeth Gaskell, and John Stuart Mill. In numerous nineteenth-century prefaces, essays, and literary credos, we observe authors claiming that they write out of a desire to extend their readers’ sympathies, as well as public moralists lending philosophical support to that claim.⁴

The aim of eliciting sympathy through literary works lay at the heart of George Eliot’s vision for what literary realism could achieve. In her first published fictional work, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), her narrator declares:

[...] my only merit must lie in the faithfulness with which I represent to you the humble experience of an ordinary fellow-mortal. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles—to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you—such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary

This dedication to eliciting sympathy for ‘ordinary’ people remains fairly constant throughout Eliot’s literary career. Her understanding of who counts as ‘ordinary’, however, is less stable. Here, in Scenes of Clerical Life, Eliot defines ordinariness with reference to a socioeconomic middle. Ordinary people—subjects for whom she hopes to win sympathy in the form of ‘tears for real sorrow’—fall between the very rich and the very poor. They walk ‘neither in rags nor in velvet’. By identifying the ‘ordinary’ with the socioeconomically intermediate, Eliot positions poor people below, or beyond, the ‘ordinary’.

In ‘Amos Barton’, the first story in Scenes, the narrator’s argument that ‘ordinary’ people make worthy literary subjects takes on a quasi-statistical quality. Addressing an imagined ‘lady reader’ who ‘prefers the ideal’—not the ‘real’—in fiction, Eliot’s narrator insists: ‘At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons returned in the last census, are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise’. Eliot’s narrator mimics the language of census statisticians by applying statistical reasoning to qualities that the census does not and could not account for, such as wickedness and wisdom. She not only equates ordinariness with a numerical majority (eighty out of a hundred Britons); she also identifies ordinariness with the middle range of a distribution. Barton, her commonplace hero, is ‘superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity’. The view of normalcy propounded here invokes, and necessarily misses, the clarity of a statistical ‘normal’ distribution.

Earlier in her career, however, Eliot offered a different answer to this question of who counts as ordinary. In ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (1856) she suggests that the working poor are not only ordinary but are the essence of ordinariness. Making it clear that she has in view the very poor rather than the lower end of the middle class, Eliot contends that the ‘sacred task’ of the realist artist is to ‘paint the life of the People’. Capitalizing ‘the People’, Eliot positions the poor as metonymic of the population. She claims that in Germany the peasantry literally embody the ‘historical type of the national physique’, bearing ‘the stamp of their race’ on their faces and bodies (Ibid., 267). The poor, Eliot suggests, define the national type. Other population groups are deviations from their norm. Middlemarch marks a shift away from the intimate focus on the poor that characterized some of Eliot’s earlier fiction, such as Adam Bede (1859) and The Mill on the Floss (1860). Middlemarch is, as many scholars have noted, a magisterial attempt to capture what is ‘middling’, sketching the middle class of a mid-nineteenth century province in the Midlands. Thus, in an 1882 review of the novel, we observe the counterintuitive...

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6Ibid. pp. 41-42.
7Ibid. p. 45.
9Gillian Beer, ‘Myth and the single consciousness: Middlemarch and The Lifted Veil’, in This Particular Web, ed. by
formulation ‘middle-class poverty’ to describe the Garths, who are financially precarious but not members of the peasantry or dependent poor. Middlemarch attempts to inspire sympathy primarily for ‘ordinary’ middle-class characters. But the pressing claims of the poor are felt along the borders of the story—heard in the fields, along the ground laid for the railway, in Lydgate’s medical visits, and in the dilapidated cottages on Mr. Brooke’s property.

There is an odd disjunction between Middlemarch’s status as the alleged pinnacle of Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy and the narrow social range of the sympathetic encounters the novel describes. The triumphs and failures of sympathy Eliot charts in Middlemarch occur mostly between well-off people in social proximity, often partners in a marriage. Think of Dorothea’s attempt to pass her hand through Casaubon’s arm, while he, struggling with the knowledge that his life will soon end, holds his hands rigid behind his back, or Rosamond failing to adjust her view of Lydgate as always ‘a being apart’, or the moment of compassionate silence between Harriet and Nicholas Bulstrode. Sympathy for the poor finds less intimate expression, although it had been an explicit theme in much of Eliot’s earlier writing—so much so that Henry James in 1866 described her as a chronicler of the ‘solid lower classes’. ‘[O]ur author’s sympathies are with common people’, James wrote, remarking on her habit of drawing protagonists from the working classes: Silas Marner the linen-weaver, Adam Bede the carpenter, Felix Holt the watchmaker, Hetty Sorrel the dairy maid.

One of the strategies Eliot uses in Middlemarch to evoke sympathy for her characters, but also to scrutinize the relationship between sympathy and distance, is complication of perspective. At pivotal moments Eliot shifts between degrees and varieties of distance, zooming out to aestheticize the object of sympathy at hand or to show how a character stands, typologically, for other people and other forms of suffering. Because of the complex visual staging Eliot employs, we cannot simply assert that an external depiction of a character is less sympathetic, or more distant, than an internal view. Let us consider a sequence in which the novel shows us Dorothea twice in quick succession: first via an external, aestheticizing view, and then a private, ostensibly psychological view.

We see Dorothea in Rome first through the eyes of Will Ladislaw and his German companion Adolf Naumann. She stands by the statue of Ariadne in dreamy repose, becoming, Naumann thinks, an art object in her own right—a breathing, blooming statue that complements

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12Henry James, Views and Reviews, ed. by LeRoy Phillips (Boston: Ball Publishing Company, 1908) <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/jamesh/eliot.html> [accessed 21 March 2016].
the Ariadne’s ‘marble voluptuousness’:

[..] one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward
the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply
braided dark-brown hair. She was not looking at the sculpture, probably not think-
ing of it: her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across
the floor.\textsuperscript{13}

Eliot tells us that “they” (Will and Naumann) see her. The narration, however, does not allow
us to decide whose gaze has priority: Will’s stare of recognition inflected with longing, or Nau-
mann’s more detached look of aesthetic approval. The description is highly pictorial, billowing
with adjectives and exact in its identification of color, gesture, and texture. This verbal portrait
evokes sympathy in part by aestheticizing Dorothea in a way that renders her momentarily unfa-
miliar. We are led to contemplate her because she is beautiful: her bonnet makes a ‘halo’, giving
her exquisiteness a moral or spiritual valence; her hand rests ‘beautiful’ in its bareness. This de-
scription is also sensitive to Dorothea’s psychological state, though the content of her thoughts
remains vague. She is ‘probably not thinking’ of the sculpture, but we do not know what she
is thinking of. Her thoughts seem vacant and distracted, her ‘large eyes […] fixed dreamily on
a streak of sunlight.’ That she is preoccupied amid Rome’s splendor may be enough to awaken
our concern.

We see Dorothea again a few pages later, in an image neither precise nor aestheticized:
‘Two hours later, Dorothea was seated in an inner room or boudoir of a handsome apartment in
the Via Sistina’.\textsuperscript{14} All we learn now about her pose is that she is seated; we hear that the apartment
is ‘handsome’, suggesting some outlay of expense on Casaubon’s part, but we learn nothing about
the qualities that make it so. Eliot leaves Dorothea’s location physically indeterminate—‘an in-
ner room or boudoir’—while making clear the space’s psychological implications: here, Dorothea
can find privacy. The sentence hangs suspended—as does Dorothea, who in our imagination re-
mains motionless—until the image clicks into focus with the adjustment: ‘I am sorry to add that
she was sobbing bitterly’. The narrator’s first-person formal statement of regret leavens a poten-
tially sentimental scene, the implication being as much ‘we could have predicted this’ as ‘how sad’.

Both depictions of Dorothea—her blank gaze in the gallery and her tears in the boudoir—
admit and even encourage sympathy. The first invites us to feel for her through an appeal to
the aesthetic, accompanied by a sense of salient psychological detail withheld. That Dorothea’s
thoughts seem inscrutable casts her beauty in a somber light. The second relies on the narrator’s
commentary to make Dorothea’s inner feelings legible. The image of Dorothea in the gallery
casts her as importantly atypical: so exceptional in her beauty that she rivals Ariadne. The de-

\textsuperscript{13}Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 180.
scription of Dorothea in the boudoir portrays her as wounded in a manner all too common, her luxurious surroundings notwithstanding. In the boudoir the space of narration is ostensibly intimate, but the narrator is scrupulously generalizing. Eliot's narrator invites the reader to consider how 'a girl' would respond to the 'vast wreck of ambitious ideals' that Rome presents. Here, rather than entering into Dorothea's mind, the narrator reflects upon the 'many souls in their young nudity' who find themselves in similar straits. The direct address to the reader that follows prompts us to ask ourselves whether we sympathize with Dorothea despite (or because of) her situation's typicality:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual.

The narrator claims to suppose that the scene will fail to inspire sympathy because of its ordinariness. Moreover, the narrator describes Dorothea's circumstances in terms so general that they could apply to nearly anyone: a 'faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary' is not a response that belongs exclusively to marital distress. Where we expect to see Dorothea at her most distinct and particular, we in fact see her at her most typological.

We do not know exactly why Dorothea is crying, then. But neither does she: Dorothea has 'no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself'. Despite this vagueness, many critics have read a particular grievance into this scene—a grievance that typically turns on Casaubon's sexual inadequacy. This symptomatic reading may help insofar as it alerts us to an implication possibly plainer to an adult Victorian reader than to us. But positing a specific cause behind Dorothea's tears loses sight of the ethical and aesthetic implications of Eliot's generalizing turn in this scene. Eliot eschews reference to a particular cause of Dorothea's distress (such as Casaubon's implied impotence, or his unsatisfactoriness as a lover) to make Dorothea a participant in a vaguer and hence more commonplace form of suffering shared by many people.

That Dorothea's suffering has no clear remedy matters for any larger claims we might want to make about the novel's cultivation of sympathy. Dorothea has, naively, married badly. It is not clear what a bystander could do to alleviate her pain. Nor can readers (Victorian or contemporary) do anything, beyond considering the social norms and arrangements that could produce the distress Dorothea feels, and asking ourselves whether such arrangements might be

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16 Ibid., p. 182.
17 Ibid., p. 182.
18 Ibid., p. 180.
improved. Our sympathy, it seems, is largely unusable. We receive here an education in sympathy that is less intimate than we might expect. Even in Dorothea’s inner room, the narrator holds us at a remove, gestures at a space that we cannot know (Dorothea’s mind), and brings us to feel a sympathy we cannot use, for a suffering we can neither name nor address.

The novel’s representations of Dorothea evoke sympathy for a character socially proximate to the ‘middling’ reader. Sympathy for the poor, unlike sympathy for Dorothea in this moment, would seem to lead more easily to remedial action. Whereas no bystander could repair Dorothea’s unhappy marriage, the least well-off have material needs that ‘middling’ or affluent readers, Victorian or contemporary, could perhaps meet. Yet *Middlemarch*’s depictions of the poor manifest an awareness of other shortcomings the experience of readerly sympathy might possess. The novel suggests that sympathy may be a fundamentally inadequate response to poverty, an insufficient basis for the broader political and historical understanding required for poor people to attain lives of better quality.

In *Adam Bede*, Eliot demands the following of the reader:

> [...] do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands ... those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world.\(^{20}\)

Dorothea echoes this aesthetic principle to her uncle, criticizing the idyllic pictures of rural life that hang in his drawing room.\(^{21}\) Yet rounded backs and weather-beaten faces make few appearances in *Middlemarch*, not because the novel engages in misrepresentation, but because the poor remain on the peripheries of the novel’s action. Often, Eliot alludes to the conditions of the poor not to draw attention directly to their suffering but to shed comparative light on the needs of the novel’s major characters. The novel introduces Dorothea as a ‘young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles’.\(^{22}\) The narrator’s ironic tone pulls our attention towards the oddness and performativity in Dorothea’s show of sympathy. Later, we see Dorothea’s desire to aid the poor tinged with greater self-awareness. Upon her move to Casaubon’s parish, she feels ‘disappointment, of which she was ashamed, that there was nothing for her to do in Lowick’, a parish of relative abundance with few poor tenants in need of help.\(^{23}\) Dorothea’s shame shows that on some level, she acknowledges that she is using the poor in order to make herself feel useful—that her reform efforts derive strength from not just

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\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 9.

\(^{23}\)Ibid., pp. 71-72.
compassion but also a somewhat egoistic longing ‘to make her life greatly effective’. Dorothea’s sympathy is in this sense self-serving.

The narrator casts a skeptical eye on Dorothea’s instrumental use of the poor here. But the novel itself might be thought vulnerable to the same charge. Both Dorothea and the novel use the sick laborer instrumentally in the first scene just cited. The glimpse of Dorothea praying by a laborer’s bedside is part of a narrative effort to establish Dorothea’s character and to show how others in Middlemarch view her. Dorothea seizes upon the laborer’s pain as an opportunity to exercise sympathy; the novel uses the unnamed laborer to illustrate Dorothea’s odd fervor. In both cases, the focus is not on the poor man but on Dorothea. The same narrative privileging of the socially advantaged occurs in other acts of characterization. Of Will, we learn that ‘in Rome he was given to ramble among the poor people, and the taste did not quit him in Middlemarch’. Again, ‘poor people’ are left vaguely defined and abstract—a symbolic index of suffering that the well-off protagonists might address rather than a potential source of fully formed characters. And again, Eliot uses a protagonist’s engagement with the poor to flag an aspect of his personality: Will’s ramblings with the poor indicate his offbeat, nonconformist sensibility. Similarly, Lydgate’s habit of ‘constantly visiting the homes of the poor’ functions mainly as a way of indicating his reformist bent: the novel does not linger on the visits.

An important exception to this oblique narrative treatment of the poor is the sequence in which Brooke visits Dagley’s homestead. Eliot represents Dagley’s home in unsentimental terms, in deliberate contrast to the ‘picturesque’ depictions of poverty on Brooke’s drawing-room wall. Her portrait of Dagley establishes him as a distinct character. He wears a beaver milking-hat and his best coat and breeches, intoxicated with rum-and-water and ‘muddy political talk’. Eliot’s particularizing gaze sets Dagley apart from the anonymous poor described elsewhere: she records his speech and sketches his home, family, and dog. A later sequence, in which laborers with hayforks confront the railway agents and argue with Caleb Garth, is a similar exception. Old Timothy Cooper, ‘who had his savings in a stocking-foot’, emerges briefly, like Dagley, as a character with a name and a history. Yet even in these two scenes, Eliot reverts quickly to generalization. Poor people here offer a way for Eliot to track the effects of historical change on multiple sectors of society. Dagley tells Brooke that ‘there’s to be a Rinform’, a reform that will send Brooke ‘a-scuttlin’.

Because of his age, Timothy Cooper is an even more authoritative witness to social change: ‘I’n seen lots o’ things turn up sin’ I war a young un,’ he tells Garth;
‘the war an’ the pe-ace and the canells [...] an’ it’s been all aloike to the poor mon’. The railway is simply the next upheaval that old Cooper will see.

Dagley and Cooper are stand-ins for the masses of poor people that for most of the novel go unseen; they are Eliot’s way of hinting at the spirit of the age. By positioning the poor as voices of historical change, Eliot is able to allude to broader structural shifts in technology, politics, and the economy that increase the suffering of the poor in some cases and diminish it in others—patterns of change too overarching to be much affected by an extension of sympathy from one person to another. In her fleeting representations of the poor, Eliot confronts the limits of sympathy both as a descriptor for the kinds of feeling literature evokes in us and as a prompt to action in the world. In earlier novels such as *Adam Bede*, Eliot elicits sympathy for the poor much in the way she evokes sympathy for Dorothea—by leading the reader to apprehend a character’s ‘equivalent centre of self’ while reminding the reader of the commonplace nature of the events depicted. Here, Eliot’s generalizing places us beyond the steady drumbeat of ordinary life and into a larger historical timescale.

Near the end of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea rises from a night spent sobbing on the floor.

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in the view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.

Dorothea at the window, Bruce Robbins suggests in a provocative contribution to the debate about sympathy and proximity in today’s global political scene, can be read as a ‘figure for the academic study of culture tout court’. Gazing at the laborers on the road and in the field, Dorothea momentarily comprehends the social whole in which she is embedded. She and the laborers, she recognizes, belong to the same world, the same ‘involuntary, palpitating life’. Her distance from them, their smallness in her (literally shortsighted) field of vision, does not impede sympathy but instead aids the compassionate solidarity she feels with them. The workers are specks in her

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31 Ibid., p. 526.  
32 Ibid., p. 198.  
33 Ibid., p. 741.  
vision: ‘perhaps’ one is the shepherd with his dog. Because of the distance between her and the people she observes, her gaze is necessarily a generalizing gaze. Rather than projecting herself into sympathetic identification with a particular shepherd or a particular laborer, she abstracts from specific yet vaguely glimpsed workers to consider a larger social system.

The Stoics visualized our sympathetic attachments not as radiating ‘centres of self’ but as a series of concentric circles, the first around the self, the next including the immediate family, and subsequent circles extending to people more socially and physically remote. Peter Singer has reframed this image into a single ‘circle of altruism’ that we must expand. Eliot, while recognizing our bias towards people who are socially, geographically, and temporally proximate, relates sympathy and distance in a less straightforward way. Her favored metaphor for society is not a smooth circle but a ‘tangled web’, filled with irregular, overlapping elements that make distance from one point to another less easy to determine.

Dorothea’s contemplation at the window reminds us of the necessity of recognizing the distance from others at which we operate: a critical distance that can be a precondition for acknowledging the sufferings and strivings, both “ordinary” and extraordinary, that animate the lives of other people. Our capacity as literary critics to claim an ethical purpose for literature might not be bound up in elucidating literature’s power to help us apprehend the consciousness that flickers behind the closed exteriors of other human shapes. Or at least, literature’s ethical potential might not involve that task only. Middlemarch celebrates sympathy, but it also reminds us of the moments in which sympathy is transformed, in Raymond Williams’s words, ‘not into action, but into withdrawal’. That sympathy does not cure all ills, and that there exists suffering that we cannot fully enter into or understand: these truths, in the end, might be precisely what Middlemarch can tell us.

Works cited

Primary works:

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38Ibid., p. 109.
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Early-career researcher profile: an interview with Justine McConnell

Callum Seddon

In this section of ORE, we usually profile the research of an early career researcher who works within the disciplines of English Literature or Critical Theory, broadly conceived. For the present issue, however, we spoke to Justine McConnell, a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Classics. We met up with McConnell in Oxford’s Missing Bean café to talk about her research interests and activities.

McConnell may work within a classics department, but her research is by no means confined to the ancient world. Her research is focused on the reception of classical texts from the nineteenth century to the present day, especially from the perspective of African diaspora literature and performance. Her publications include a monograph entitled *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939* (2013), besides the co-edited collections of essays *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood* (2011), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (2015) and *Ancient Greek Myth in World Fiction since 1989* (2015). Part of her research has been structured around working with the ‘Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama’ (APGRD), based here in Oxford. The APGRD is a research centre for studies of Greek and Roman drama in performance, ‘from antiquity to the present, on stage, screen and radio, in opera and dance’, but also a means to preserve records of performance, and a source for further creativity, including the commissioning of new plays, and hosting rehearsed readings.

As McConnell puts it, she looks at ‘a chain of reception’, examining how such writers as Wilson Harris, Yäel Farber, and Derek Walcott adapt and re-interpret the classics. To illustrate this relationship between the ancient and contemporary, McConnell mentions texts that may be familiar to those of us in an English department, such as Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), and the poetry of Tony Harrison and Simon Armitage. But she also more recent productions, such as Yäel Farber’s *Molora* (2008), a South African re-telling of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*.

This approach to classics – thinking about the destinations of texts, their uses and appropriations, rather than simply contextualizing them in their own age – has in McConnell’s words ‘been a big thing in the last twenty years’. And in its insistence on the contemporary, rather than simply the past, but also in its capacious subject matter, I imagine it certainly raises a few dusty eyebrows in classics departments (McConnell is tactfully reserved on that front). But it is surely an important way of demonstrating the connections not just between the past and present, but between different areas of research expertise. Describing research as ‘interdisciplinary’ has become something of a tired and overused cliché in recent years, and may even be read as a symptom of the ever more pressing requirement for humanities academics to justify
the value of their work to the widest possible audience. But in McConnell's case, this label is truly warranted. As she puts it, her work may even be said to ‘fall between different disciplines’ but also transcend them; English and comparative literature, theatre studies, film studies, theory.

Yet another important issue raised by McConnell's approach to her subject is that of accessibility. It would be difficult for classicists to make the case that their subject is in any way accessible to those who have not been exposed to a certain kind of education (a recurring theme in the poetry of Tony Harrison, one of the figures McConnell repeatedly mentions). McConnell explains that her research questions enable her to think about classics from the perspective of how most people actually encounter it. That is, through an adaptation and probably not in the original language of ancient Greek or Latin.

Our conversation turns to McConnell's experiences of early career academia and any advice she may have for the younger generation of PhD students, and those hoping to make the transition from doctoral study, to post-doctoral life. Her three, concise suggestions are familiar to anyone in this position, but still useful: ‘always write, don’t be timid and take criticism on the chin’.