

Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory

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Chapter 1 The Dialectics of Cultural Criticism Literary Theory: Exceeding the Boundaries

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to ... perplex the confines of distinction and burst the enclosures of regularity.

Dr Johnson

I suggest that real reading, when it occurs . . . is outside the institution, allergic to institutionalization, private, solitary.

J. Hillis Miller

Literature: a licentious and vagrant category, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint: a melange of poetry, novels, plays, sermons, political tracts, diaries, letters, books of philosophy and science once thought to be true but now read as fiction. It is hard to defend literature as a stable category: its sameness is

made up entirely of difference. What's apparently wrong with it, however, is also what's right with it: literature is flagrantly hybrid. It can be crossed with anything: the *Orlando* effect.

Inevitably, therefore, for literary criticism, which seeks to secure an object on which to build a discipline, the difficulty with literature always comes in defining its boundaries. Perhaps that was what the fuss about 'imagination' was always about. Literature is always taking the reader beyond itself: discussion of books about the world quickly turns into deliberations about the world which they represent. Critics perpetually find themselves looking through and beyond their window onto the world. It does not help much to look closely at the text instead: language too tends to exceed its limits at every level, whether of reference, representation, connotation, metaphor, symbolization. The haemorrhage is habitually stemmed with notions such as text and context, interacting realms that are also apparently discrete. Yet each seeps so easily into the margins of the other that literary criticism seems perennially uncertain about the borders that it is supposed to defend. The long tradition in which the task of the critic was to judge authors into 'major' and 'minor' literature, as if they were identically named pupils at an English public school, has given place to an uncertainty derived from a recognition of the ways in which literature is relentlessly entangled with other discourses. It is no longer possible to define or prescribe its confines. Hence the attraction of the term 'culture', which seems to have no boundaries, encompassing the context of all literary production, the social world that goes on around it, while at the same time including literature as well. But if culture is 'insatiable', as Adorno suggests, it is also a boundary

concept, or rather a concept about barriers, boundaries, frontiers and limits.¹ My culture, my literature, my race, my nation. Here theory's work in relation to culture operates as a kind of enforced nomadism, crossing frontiers, borders, raiding disciplines, plagiarizing, kidnapping, transgressing. Its illicit operations are carried out across front lines, often deep in the exclusive territory of others. This radical activism would be entirely reassuring if such dislocations did not also mimic the transgressive cultural formations and operations of capitalism itself.

The relation of literature to culture goes much deeper than any recent conversion of the first into the second. If criticism's fundamental task is to police the limits of literature, the history of criticism also demonstrates a constant desire on its part to overflow its own measure, to stray beyond the limits of the literary into the frontier territories of cultural criticism. In that sense it is also a hybrid, ambivalent institution, enacting an institutional anxiety which hinges on the relation of academic knowledge to the outside world, a socialized echo of the philosophical complexities of subject-object relations. Misgiving about the institution's own knowledge in relation to that of the world of everyday life is as old as the institution itself. An uneasiness about the relation of inside to outside is apparent, for example, in the whole history of thinking about institutions of higher education and their function from the very beginning.

In recent years there has been an insistent emphasis upon the relation of literature to the culture of which it forms a part. If New Historicism, Bakhtinian criticism, or Cultural Materialism, for example, all invoked or defined themselves via 'culture'—very often as

some form of the outside that was considered to transcend the formalism ascribed to the inside—this suggests that the contemporary movement from literature to cultural studies was not something that was going on outside the academy, but rather amounted to the academy turning itself inside out. The definition of its subject, its proper object of attention, simply shifted from its interior to its exterior, from the private to the public, from the immanent to the transcendent. New literary theories consistently alternated around the same division: seeking to cross the boundary to the social (hence Bakhtin's popularity), by using history (New Historicism) or culture (Cultural Materialism) or the history and culture of colonialism, or sexuality (which necessarily, according to this model, invoked the notion of 'transgression', the crossing of the law as the supremely human and therefore political act)—or, in the remarkable, if rare case of its inverse, attempting to refuse knowledge of the outside, or the racialized other (de Man). The seemingly endless proliferation and succession of new theoretical positions was not just a question of fashion and the increasing commodification of academic production, but also the mark of a repetition compulsion, the constant preoccupation of theory confined to a particular discursive dynamic from which it sought to break out to become something beyond itself, to achieve its own negation.

The Culture of Institutions

'Culture' has now deviated decisively from a category of

art to the category of the social, from the academy's own activities to its other, the outside world. In many ways, it may be too simplistic to describe the relation of the academic institution to society in such schematic inside-outside terms, for almost every such institution constitutes a complex economy of procedures that, far from being autonomous, interact at most levels with other social and economic processes. But at the same time, the operation of the institutional establishment as a determinate, separable entity has continued to dominate its conceptual thinking and its production of knowledge. This situation is reinforced by the long tradition in which the intellectual has regarded him or herself as separated from society in general, whether in a state of alienation from society or as its avant-garde. Indeed it is arguable that the popular image of the institution as a monolithic, isolated totality is itself simply a version of the academic subject writ large, itself a form of the typical Romantic reversal of knowledge from the social world of the public sphere into a secret, interior higher life within an individual consciousness. At this level, the pressure for the inside to turn itself into the outside, like an empty trouser pocket, betrays a fantasy of escape which, as in Shelley's *Alastor*, has nowhere to go but itself.

This inside-outside paradigm is not merely one among many, but is rather a structure that has dominated the intellectual history of the institution as such. The customary opposition which Derrida has highlighted between the desirable presence of speech and the dead letter of writing itself mirrors the division between the world and the university, or, in F.R. Leavis' extraordinary inversion, between the technologico-Benthamite mechanical world outside, and the 'life' preserved within the beleaguered, chalk dusted walls of university English

departments. In a similar way, the whole philosophical question of the same and the other which has dominated European philosophy for the past two centuries amounts to a long meditation upon the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge, the institution's inside and its outside, the private and the public sphere. Most recent theory has oscillated according to this dichotomy of self-reflexivity and critical distance: either theory has been caught within the prison house of language, apparently celebrating the limits of its self-reflexive status, and finessing Kant by arguing that it cannot be certain about the status of even its own knowledge of itself, or it has urged the necessity of a breaking through the mirror of self-reflexivity to the outside, to the real, the material, to history.

Self-reflexivity must be changed for critical distance, its apparent inverse. The critique of self-reflexivity has always been accompanied by an urge to the exterior, to history, culture. Against this empirical impulse, poststructuralists scorned the assumption that language was a transparent medium, that literature provided a window onto the world, while espousing the Kantian paradigms that warned of the breakdown of representation, of the inability to cross from the structures of language to knowledge of the world. The only sphere deemed knowable became the world as text, the structures of representations and the systems of signs through which uncertain meaning was created. Humanity was condemned to living (on) in this world of simulacra, where it saw not the world but the hyperreal world of created images of the world. There was no 'outside' to this text. No outside: nothing produced so strong a reaction in the whole business of post-structuralism as the claim that there was no outside to a

text. All reference, empirical reality, meaning itself, it was assumed, was denied. There was, apparently, only an inside, with the desired outside threatening to vanish altogether out of reach, thus dramatically highlighting the anxiety about the relation of academic knowledge to society at large.

Cultural theory's tendency to alternate between these inside-outside polarities opens up the possibility that culture is the institution's own name for this anxiety, an oscillating antagonism operating within itself, formulated as the split between aesthetics or high culture (the inside) and mass or popular culture (outside). In this connection psychoanalysis reveals itself as a theory of the anxieties not of the patient but of the analyst, theorizing the incompatibility of inside and outside and, therefore, the troubled relation of the institution's link to the world outside. The polar division on which cultural theory is based and on whose tension it thrives, thus reproduces simultaneously both theory's relation to its object of analysis and the institution's own inside-outside structure.

What has characterized modern theory therefore is the way in which all theories themselves have shared an anxiety about this exterior, and have sought to move beyond the barrier of representation, beyond the institution itself, to the remote and exotic other. Or, in a twist of the Cartesian paradigm, this is reversed: if we cannot ever know the other, then we turn back to the self—hence the increasing tendency of academics to base their politics on, and to work from, their own gendered and minoritarian identities, which provide a means through which the individual can establish access to the social world outside. The intimate revelations of the inquiring self stand in as a typical example of the wider

social structure. The dichotomy of the self and the other, the preoccupation with an otherness that remains other, the attempt to find a way of allowing the other to speak in its absolute alterity, or the self to speak in its unutterable sameness, are not only, as in Levinas, an ethical issue, nor even, as in anthropology, a paradox of the impossible knowledge on which a discipline is founded, but are also part of a deep misgiving about the limits and boundaries of institutionalized knowledge as such. The formulation of knowledge in general into the various, carefully demarcated disciplines of academic knowledge is a matter of remarkably recent history. The institution remains haunted by the spectre of what, in order to achieve that conversion, it had to eliminate or demonize. The tendency of institutions has always been either to incorporate and assimilate the other or to exclude it, repeating the very structures through which knowledge is created. This history repeats to haunt the conscience of those working in institutions today, who find themselves enforcing the same formation even as they argue against it.

A distinctive feature of the contemporary intellectual milieu in humanities departments can be found in the dissatisfaction with the idea of the university as the preserver and guardian of high culture, the medieval, pre-print image of the university that was resuscitated so effectively by Matthew Arnold. The university now seeks to renounce its own culture for another culture beyond itself, attempting to relate its erudition to the world outside which is reckoned to possess a knowledge of greater validity than the institution's own. But does it ever manage to partake of that other culture or does it rather produce its own representation of it? Does it succeed in participating in it

or does it rather create an oppositional virtual-reality within the institution? Can those in the institution achieve a genuinely alternative position, or do they tend to act out the antithetical impulse which already makes up the institutional account of culture? Can those inside renounce themselves for the outside?

Those theories which attempt to break into the real world of the social do not generally acknowledge the institutional factors which determine and contain them. This is partly because those conditions themselves define the structures of knowledge within the institution and the desire of knowledge itself. Aside from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, there has been comparatively little reflection on the institutional context of the cultural institution across a range of different disciplines, or of the extent to which 'culture' itself constitutes an historically determined, discursive construction. The very concepts of culture, as they are used today, are all institutional creations even if they are no longer, as they were for Burke, Coleridge or Arnold, embodied in institutions. The contemporary preoccupation with culture not only involves something that goes on outside the institution but is also a phenomenon of the institution which defines it and creates it through its own culture of theory. Culture may constitute a name for that outside, but in a profoundly dialectical way the outside is constituted from the inside. 'Culture' is the product of the culture of theory within contemporary academic institutions.²

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White offered a dynamic perspective on this inside-outside structure so characteristic of the academic institution.³ They recast Bakhtin's theory of carnival into a powerful model of 'symbolic inversion': a form of displacement which

operates through 'symbolic substitution from one domain to the other' (196). Stallybrass and White argued that a dualism of 'high' and 'low' structures a whole range of practices that have organized society since the rise of the bourgeoisie. While they themselves concentrated on high and low because of its association with differences of class, its polarization continually shifts in their analysis from determined class boundaries towards those of cultural difference, the polite and vulgar, the civilized and the savage, always towards the constitution of the inside by its exclusion of an outside. For Stallybrass and White, symbolic inversion comes to depend upon a pattern by which the 'high' attempts to exclude the 'low' in order to create and maintain itself, only to find that this makes it paradoxically dependent on this rejected other. Having shown the operation of this structure throughout the cultural history of bourgeois society (itself an example of 'low' and 'high': social history as opposed to political history), the authors end by considering the problem that their analysis applies equally well to their own book. They suggest that in the 'high' institution, the idealizing fascination of those on the left with the vulgar forms of everyday life betrays nothing less than the workings of their own bourgeois identity:

On the one hand, these sites have been singled out by some social historians in a nostalgic and privileged way as the ever-vanishing trace of 'real community'. But this precisely duplicates, at the level of academic discourse, the object of analysis. On the other hand, 'rigorous theory' has tended to look down upon 'mere content' as obvious, crude and vulgar, redeemable only through a process of abstraction and refinement. Here we find the opposite but equally characteristic gesture of 'the civilizing process'. In other words contemporary

analysis has tended either to fetishize or repress the *contents* of these domains. In so doing, academic work clearly reveals its discursive mirroring of the subject-formation of the middle classes. (191-2)

On the one hand, a high cultural aesthetic or formalism eschews the vulgarity of the outside, a means of establishing bourgeois identity and of identifying the institution with its values in opposition to the vulgar world outside. On the other hand, those on the left who challenge this, and regard the outside with fascination and nostalgia and seek to turn it into their object of study are, according to Stallybrass and White, merely indulging in a fetishization of the excluded other—a form of hysterical eroticization. This double bind with which they leave the radical institutional critic suggests that there is no easy turn from one domain to the other—whether the gesture be one of exclusion or incorporation.

Self-Reflexivity and Critical Distance

As long as criticism operates according to this polarity, then the possibility remains that what the academic institution sees in 'culture' as its other is nothing less than a mirror of itself. Must culture always be an institutional product even if—especially if—it is represented as in fact existing outside it? Such an argument would imply that there is no more an actual object corresponding to culture than, as Edward Said argues, a real Orient that corresponds to the projections of Orientalism. Orientalism is a discursive construction of the West that has no necessary relation to the actual although if Westerners want to say anything about that actuality then

they still have no option but to use Orientalist discourse. Nowhere is this kind of institutional construction of a new object for analysis more apparent than in the current postmodernism debate, a particularly obvious production of the culture of institutions. The theoretical shift of recent years from a preoccupation with poststructuralism to one with postmodernism itself constitutes another example of the pressure towards culture which has produced its own symptomatic dilemma. The construction of a discourse about postmodernism mimics the discursive construction of all knowledges: the only difference being that postmodernism is a theoretical practice and cultural discourse without an object as such, refusing to reveal whether it is describing a discernible historical event, or an intellectual condition which its own discourse is simultaneously bringing into being. This may well be because, as Baudrillard argues, postmodern theory has in effect reversed the order of things so that its discourse analyses not the object world but signs and representations with no necessary referent in the object world, which have therefore become the hyperreal, insurmountable limit of postmodern analysis.⁴ The sign has become the referent, the inside has become the outside, a further twist of the knife in the seemingly uncontrollable and unavoidable oscillation between inside and outside of modern theory. Whereas formerly those in the institution could paradoxically claim to see the outside from a privileged point of exteriority more or less unavailable to those who really were outside, the situation has now been reversed. If today's culture is marked by an institutional anxiety about the institution's outside, its effect is to position the latter in the place of knowledge. The history of the institution is made up of these two transcendent impulses: the speculative moment

in which the institution itself forms the point of exteriority through which it can comprehend and account for the world, and the empiricist counter-movement in which the institution's removal from the world is reversed so that it is posited as an inside which neglects the outside world, which now becomes the point of exteriority.

This dialectic also impinges directly on the question of legitimation, a term today often associated with Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* of 1979: who, and by what criteria, has the authority to judge the knowledge of the university, and by what criteria can it be judged? The question centres on the prospect of the legitimation of the university's knowledge in terms other than its own. Ultimately, government has exercised political control over every other institution, but the university has traditionally resisted this on the grounds that politics are incommensurable with true, objective knowledge. Its objectivity is jealously guarded, though hard to demonstrate historically. At the same time, some of its own practitioners are happy to bring political arguments to bear whose authority is derived from the outside, and this has been a major mechanism of institutional change. This problem of legitimating the university's knowledge correlates with an inside-outside dichotomy that recurs at the heart of its own account of knowledge as such.

Lyotard's book is best known for its argument that postmodernism involves the substitutions of *petits récits*, singularities, for the grand narratives of the Enlightenment, particularly that of Marxism (though not apparently that of postmodernism itself). The post-modern condition, Lyotard argues, is one in which it has become impossible for any theory to legitimate itself in

the way in which Marxism, in particular, once claimed to be a science.⁵ The demise of Althusserian theory in this respect marks the historic last attempt of Marxism to accede to a scientific moment, and thus a uniquely privileged status. With the end of Althusserianism, the major theoretical problem for Marxism in the cultural sphere became the maintenance of critical distance and the grounds for the claim to objectivity. Inevitably this merged into the larger related question of the breakdown of representation, the common-sense division between the sign and its referent, which led to the problematics explored in Deleuze's simulacra, or Baudrillard's escape from the reflexivity of simulacra through a principle of reversibility. Baudrillard's methodological technique of reversal constituted a cunning way to allow him a form of ideology critique without having to use the metaphor of (critical) distance. Avoiding the spatial method of the appearance-essence model, Baudrillard achieved a certain difference through seduction: by leading astray, inverting or reversing any form of thought. However, this left it entirely ungrounded, and without political principle or direction.

Baudrillard's move was made in response to the technical but significant political difficulty characteristic of the culture of postmodernism, and it is in relation to this problem of the loss of critical distance and the threat of self-reflexivity that the theoretical attractions of cultural studies and cultural theory in humanities departments becomes apparent. If 'culture' stands in for 'the social', the investigation of culture acts as a substitute for the former analysis of ideology and its reassuring dichotomy—when consciousness of the world could be divided into the true and the false, and all was well with the world. The current shift towards cultural theory

marks not so much a disciplinary change as a shift in the theorization of ideology: culture is another way of talking about ideology, the so-called lived relationship of men to their world, without having to invoke the disgraced category of consciousness or to contemplate any dangerous association of Marxism with psychoanalysis. A major attraction of culture is that it seems to avoid the whole problem of distance, of the relation of ideology to science (knowledge). However, as Lévi-Strauss has shown, culture is equally beset by the problem of how the anthropologist, or critic, steps outside.⁶ Transposed into Habermasian terms, the issue becomes the competing claims of universalist and relativist theories.

This urge to exteriority also fashioned the attraction of the New Historicist identification of an analogical model between textual representation and forms of symbolic practices 'outside'. In one move, the critic could glide effortlessly on the wings of homology to the exterior world, untroubled by the epistemological difficulties so painfully explored in the past fifty years. A comparable solution was to substitute the distance of time rather than space. This move reproduced the paradoxical situation of all historiography which repeats in a different form the inside/outside structure of cultural criticism. Just as the critic has to be both inside and outside the culture at the same time, so historians seeks to be inside the past time that he or she is outside, and outside the present time which he or she is inside. Historiography, therefore, can only proceed through a dialectic of impossibilities—which is not to say that it is impossible, only that the historian, like the cultural critic, has to be the same and different at once. In the same way, if history involves an analysis of a culture of the past, it can also be a way of using the past to provide a critical

perspective upon the present. The return to history, therefore, characteristic of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, could be seen as having made a constructive response to the dilemma produced by the spatial model of theoretical analysis, even if its version of the inside-outside dialectic did not manage to demarcate clear-cut boundaries between the two.

The question of critical distance articulated the theoretical consequence of the polarity between the institution's inside and its outside, the sustained resistance to the alleged threat of formalism (from whom, though?) and the collapse into self-reflexivity. This was the reason for the importance of Jameson's early understanding of the problem and his sustained theoretical resistance to the implications of its consequences. It also provides the context for understanding the significance of his sudden abandonment in *Postmodernism* of the claims to critical distance, asserted so forcefully in *The Political Unconscious*. For Jameson postmodernism means, above all, the loss of critical distance, based on 'a certain minimal aesthetic distance', and the acceptance of the very world of representation and self-reflexivity that had hitherto been so forcefully resisted.⁷ It thus heralds the end of the doubled system according to which thought could be split in two, and science (knowledge) be set against ideology and the world understood in its proper meaning: in other words, postmodernism means the end of the possibility of critique as such. The point outside the dominant culture for so long adopted by the Marxist critic as the basis for a critical perspective is thus no longer available. Postmodernism has apparently broken down the inside-outside dichotomy on which institutional knowledge is based. This comprises the

epistemological basis of the ethical pursuit of the other and forms of alterity so characteristic of postmodernist work. When science could set its knowledge against ideology, there was a noticeable lack of interest in the otherness of the other. Now that we have become inextricably caught within the culture of postmodernism, then the alterity of the other becomes the last trace of a ghostly knowledge.

What was particularly telling in this context was Jameson's celebrated use of the Bonaventure Hotel as a metaphor of the postmodern condition of an irresolvable oscillation between totalization and fragmentation.⁸ The Bonaventure Hotel, a postmodern building well known to academics as the place where the Los Angeles meeting of the Modern Language Association was held, was cited by Jameson as an illustration of the extent to which the individual is deprived of all coordinates in the postmodern world, literally finding it impossible to find his or her way around or out of the building in which the inside and outside have apparently become indistinguishable. The experience of the hotel breaks down the division between the two in an image of the critic's inability to distinguish science from ideology; and yet at the same time it also reinforces the division of outside from inside, for the postmodern academic remains in fact trapped inside. Nothing could be a more graphic illustration of the fact that what is at stake here is an institutional anxiety, in which the academics in the hotel are cut off from the surrounding city, and, to the extent that the hotel's exterior mirrored surface reflects only the city that it faces, have indeed themselves become invisible. The institution no longer works as the speculative moment for culture, but rather the reverse whereby the institution can only reflect the totality of

culture outside.

The tables have been turned. It is no longer the intellectual who has established a critical distance from the society around him or her, but society which encompasses the intellectual. Society no longer depends on the institution to guard and preserve the treasures of its culture, but instead uses the institution as a form of self-reflection. The cultural critic appears to be remorselessly trapped inside, trying to get out.

Cultural Criticism and Society: Adorno's Torn Halves

The dilemmas of this inside-outside dichotomy have found themselves endlessly perpetuated while critics have continued to validate one against the other. But in a typically postmodern inversion, by which before comes after, Adorno had already offered a particularly acute and productive analysis of the problems involved. Writing to Walter Benjamin from London in 1936 (the year in which he was writing under the pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler), Adorno made what was to become his most famous statement about the relation of high art to popular culture.⁹ Discussing Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Adorno criticizes his friend's tendency to lament the loss of the aura of high (or autonomous) art even as he celebrates the introduction of populist mechanical arts such as the cinema. Adorno argues that it is a mistake to see the one as a substitute for, or alternative to, the other, for they are both marked by a common dialectic:

Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change.... Both are torn halves of an

integral freedom, to which however they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other....¹⁰

The essential point about culture under capitalism, according to Adorno, can be found in its dialectic structure of perpetual antagonism in which the different kinds of art never add up to a totality, truth or freedom. This schismatic formation of irreconcilable torn halves has resulted from the institution of the division of labour, whose effect has been to produce a culture perpetually set against itself, its products simultaneously producing both ideology and truth. For Adorno, the critic can only hold on to this understanding by maintaining the two sides of the impossible dialectic simultaneously together, not by affirming the one against the other. The conflictual structure of culture is the product of the divisions instituted by capitalism, and bears the stigmata of its agony; but the repetition of those scars is also a sign of divine favour, whereby the irreconcilable antagonisms of capitalism provide the fissure that facilitates a critical perspective upon society.¹¹ The split between consciousness and social life-processes which Marx saw as a deleterious effect of capitalism also paradoxically empowers a singularly positive form of political critique, even if it is predicated on the eventual obliteration of the conditions which make it possible. So the reduction of the labourer to 'mere spectatorship, to mere *contemplation* of his own estranged activity and that of his fellows', for example, which is considered to be such a negative reifying effect of capitalism, is repeated in a more positive form in the critical distance which for the contemplative critic provides the basis for his or her analysis of capitalist society.¹² Thus alienation can be transformed into a

determinate irreconcilability that provides the dissonant basis for critique.

The Complicity of the Cultural Critic

Adorno argues that we must carefully distinguish dialectical from conventional cultural criticism. His most substantial analysis of the differences between the two is to be found in the short but difficult essay, 'Cultural Criticism and Society'.¹³ Here Adorno unravels the difficult paradoxes of cultural criticism, beginning with the fact that cultural criticism in itself involves a 'flagrant contradiction':

The cultural critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent. He speaks as if he represented either unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior.
(19)

The whole of Adorno's argument depends on, and develops, the implications of this situation in which the critic claims difference, but must necessarily also be the same as that from which he or she differs.

The cultural critic is a part of that which he or she speaks against: the very project of cultural criticism involves an impossible contradiction in which the critic places him or herself simultaneously inside and outside the culture. Here we find the basis for the interminable dialectic between inside and outside so characteristic of critical thinking. In general, individuals are inclined to endorse one side or the other, and much of Adorno's

essay is addressed to the tendency of cultural criticism to hypostatize alternative positions rather than to address the paradoxical situation which produces them. The result is that the options remain entirely within the culture's own terms, and thus either repeat it uncritically (Adorno describes this as 'total immanence', 26), or take up a transcendent position outside it and dismiss it in its entirety, with the critic implicitly claiming that he or she possesses the true knowledge (or the true culture) which the culture itself lacks. We can compare the tendency of criticism to seek to move from the formalist inside to a culture outside, with the dialectic that Adorno here describes.

The Dialectic of Immanent and Transcendent Criticism

The answer to the quandary of the choice between them, according to Adorno, is not to choose between the two at all but to practice both at the same time dialectically:

Criticism retains its mobility in regard to culture by recognizing the latter's position within the whole. Without such freedom, without consciousness transcending the immanence of culture, immanent criticism itself would be inconceivable: the spontaneous movement of the object can only be followed by someone who is not entirely engulfed by it. (29)

The most important section of Adorno's essay is to be found in the development of this distinction between transcendent and immanent critique. Asserting that 'the traditional transcendent critique of ideology is obsolete' (33), he argues that it must now be historicized, for it was

conceived against a dominant idealism, a bourgeois subjectivism and concomitant fetishization of culture, which no longer exists. In a situation where ideology has become the practice of everyday life, the standard alternatives of cultural criticism, 'either calling culture as a whole into question from outside under the general notion of ideology, or confronting it with the norms which it itself has crystallized', are no longer acceptable.

Whereas the immanent method 'presupposes the questionable whole', the transcendent method, has inevitably seemed the more radical alternative, because it 'aims at totality'. Marxism has traditionally positioned itself vis-a-vis its object of analysis by establishing a critical distance, in the form of what Adorno calls 'transcendent critique'. It is necessary to get outside culture in order to criticize it objectively, according to terms other than its own. The transcendent critic therefore assumes an 'Archimedean position above culture and the blindness of society, from which consciousness can bring the totality, no matter how massive, into flux' (31). But such a position has to take out culture *en bloc*, and this produces a theoretical and a moral dilemma. In the first place it means that there is no point left on which the Archimedean lever can be placed. 'The choice of a standpoint outside the sway of existence is as fictitious as only the construction of abstract utopias can be' (31). At the same time for Adorno the necessity to get outside involves the danger that such external critique will tend to totalize the object and therefore necessarily involve complete rejection of it. 'In wishing to wipe away the whole as if with a sponge', Adorno comments, such critics 'develop an affinity to barbarism' (32). A good example of this throwing of the baby out with the bath water would be his own analysis of the culture industry.

Such fundamental critique may be all very well for certain forms of political analysis, but in the case of cultural analysis, the demonstration of the complicity of culture with a dominant ideology only allows its rejection: in a form of paranoia, the whole world is divided into black and white, and prepared for a new form of domination. In this example we encounter a problem which resurfaces with Adorno's later tendency increasingly to validate high art against all forms of popular culture. The issue here is that his criterion of culture is itself set up in a dialectic with barbarism, and thus reproduces most faithfully the dialectic upon which the Western notion of culture is formed. A further complicit moment of Adorno's own over-immanence within his own culture can be detected in his unguarded comment that 'Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy' (30), which invokes the racialized language of nineteenth-century accounts of culture and which finds its echo in his hostility towards jazz. He fails to see that this dialectic of culture and barbarism operates as another set of torn halves, another tension within the concept of culture itself.

Against the blanket rejection of culture which tends to be the outcome of the transcendent position, Adorno opposes the 'immanent procedure' which he regards as 'the more essentially dialectical':

It takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality. Immanent criticism of intellectual and artistic phenomena seeks to grasp through the analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension. It names what the consistency or inconsistency of the

work itself expresses of the structure of the existent. Such criticism does not stop at a general recognition of the servitude of the objective mind, but seeks rather to transform this knowledge into a heightened perception of the thing itself. (32)

This form of criticism produces insight into the negativity of culture from within culture. It thus avoids the other major problem of transcendent critique, namely the question of how does such a critic achieve the position of distance from his or her own culture and history? We are, necessarily, a part of the culture which we wish to criticize. We cannot wash away the traces of our own history. From this point of view, immanent critique has the advantage that it looks not at the totality of a culture, but at a fragment of it, which, Adorno claims, will have a micrological relation to the totality. Art is privileged in that a detailed analysis can demonstrate the operation of the antagonisms which constitute society as a whole. Immanent criticism reveals how the individual work of art repeats, rather than resolves, the antinomies of its culture; this open-endedness forces a negative cognitive relation to its own cultural milieu. Where it finds inadequacies, it does not merely ascribe them to the failure of the individual artist, but seeks to understand how they are derived instead from the irreconcilability of the object's own cultural moment:

It pursues the logic of its aporias, the insolubility of the task itself. In such antinomies criticism perceives those of society. A successful work, according to immanent criticism, is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and

uncompromised, in its innermost structure. Confronted with this kind of work, the verdict 'mere ideology' loses its meaning. (32)

Here there seem to be two possibilities for criticism: one in which the work of art is seen as incorporating and therefore potentially revealing the antagonistic structures of society, the other in which its drive towards harmony itself highlights the difference between the ideal and existent reality.

In Adorno's account of immanent criticism it becomes evident that the autonomous work of art in effect repeats the autonomous mind of the critic. In the later *Aesthetic Theory*, the critical role would be fully assumed by the work of art.¹⁴ Here it is through a parallel autonomy that both achieve a sort of internalized externality to culture, encrypted within its unconscious like a double agent. Inevitably, however, immanent critique will always suffer from its own immanence, that is, the fact that the critic will be caught up within his or her own culture and be an unavoidable accomplice in its ideological structuring of reality. Immanent criticism remains under the spell of the object which it analyses, and cannot itself resolve the contradictions which it finds. It can therefore only reflect the conditions of existence, without altering them, and will always threaten to revert to idealism. At this point immanent criticism needs the perspective of transcendent criticism, but the opposite will always also hold true:

the abstract categorizing and, as it were, administrative thinking of the former corresponds in the latter to the fetishism of an object blind to its genesis, which has become the prerogative of the expert. But if stubbornly immanent contemplation threatens to revert to

idealism, to the illusion of the self-sufficient mind in command of both itself and of reality, transcendent contemplation threatens to forget the effort of conceptualization required and content itself instead with the prescribed label, the petrified invective, most often 'petty bourgeois', the ukase dispatched from above. (33)

The practitioner of a dialectical cultural criticism must guard equally against this tendency as against enthrallment in the cultural object.

The deficiencies readily apparent in both methods led Adorno to propose that the practice of criticism must sustain an antimony between them, a critical dissonant doubling which parallels the fissure within the individual work of art or in culture itself. He argues that cultural criticism must operate through an incompatible logic of transcendent and immanent critique, even if that removes the finality associated with either and substitutes unresolved contradiction. Dialectical criticism must sustain a duality, which means a continuous mobility between contesting positions:

It must relate the knowledge of society as a totality and of the mind's involvement in it to the claim inherent in the specific content of the object that it be apprehended as such. Dialectics cannot, therefore, permit any insistence on logical neatness to encroach on its right to go from one *genus* to another, to shed light on an object in itself hermetic by casting a glance at society, to present society with the bill which the object does not redeem. (33)

Criticism thus makes connections which the object avoids, and demands that society honours the unpaid

bills which culture leaves behind. At the same time, in the constant self-criticism of critical procedures, the very dialectic between knowledge which comes from without and from within must itself become suspect, for it is itself a symptom of the reification which dialectics must accuse. The conflict between the two repeats the antagonistic structure that is the product of capitalist society. In that sense, dialectical criticism could be said to always be coopted, merely repeating rather than challenging the structures of capitalism. But the cultural critic has one resourceful turn left: in mimicking it, he or she can reverse this dialectic against itself, 'give it a turn towards nonidentity', so that it becomes a hinge that is both negative and positive at once:

The dialectical critique of culture must both participate in culture and not participate. Only then does he do justice to his object and to himself.¹⁵

If culture consists of torn halves that do not add up, then so too must the practice of cultural criticism be one of sameness and difference. As Todorov puts it, 'being outside is an advantage only if one is at the same time completely inside'.¹⁶ For the cultural critic, as opposed to the anthropologist, it is imperative to maintain a critical edge while performing this impossible feat of a negative dialectics: the torn halves should be left in tatters, expressly because they are the immanent conditions of an untotalizable capitalism. At the same time they must be put together, mended in an enabling transcendent gesture to the utopic future towards whose ideal criticism must be directed.

Contrary to this difficult, paradoxical injunction, which Fredric Jameson describes as 'how to do

something which is impossible, yet indispensable, and in any case inevitable', Adorno himself in his own practice increasingly emphasized immanence over transcendence.¹⁷ The reason for this lay in what he regarded as the ever-increasing forces of totalization and reification of the culture industry which had begun to threaten civilization itself. Adorno therefore tended to reject popular culture *in toto*, his transcendent position being achieved primarily from the 'high' cultural position of the autonomous work of art. Thus high and low, the apparently torn halves of culture, themselves became the antimonies which provided the perspectives from which his cultural critique was conducted. As Adorno anticipated in his critique of Benjamin, today's emphasis on popular culture against high culture could be said to reverse these terms, but without altering them. In making this move into cultural pessimism, adopting one half against the other, Adorno repressed his own greatest insight, namely that the two concepts of culture, high and low, intellectual and aesthetic achievements versus everyday social practices, themselves offer a dialectic through which critique of that culture can be achieved. The critique is lost if one half of that dialectical encounter is simply validated against the other. Although each seems to offer a transcendent position of sorts, neither can escape qualification by the other. For the Adorno of the essay, a dialectical critique of culture has to be constructed through the perennially uneasy synthesis of immanent and transcendent critique.

A dialectical cultural criticism of this kind offers a much more powerful method than the reification which accompanied Adorno's own increasing pessimism, and which inevitably made it impossible to sustain the balance between antimonies in his own work. The

challenge of reading the earlier Adorno is that he develops the operation of this technique to a refined degree in his own style, so that he is constantly oscillating between antithetical, contrary positions. The power of his account of culture derives from its being both positive and negative at the same time. Take the question of the way in which culture is described as originating from the divorce between mental and manual labour. Inevitably Adorno presents this both as a good and a bad thing—bad because it forms the basis of exploitation and alienation, but good because it produces culture as such, which cannot be all bad. Similarly, the cultural critic remains in the impossible but necessary position of fighting against the very conditions which make his or her own critique possible. Whilst positing the prospect of an ideal social harmony, he or she must not fall into the trap of endorsing the resolutions offered by the ideology of culture. Whilst attacking the contradictory situation of the torn halves, the critic must also emphasize them. Totalization and anti-totalization, inside and outside, must not be set against each other but sustained simultaneously in their incompatibility.

Just as it is not the choice between different forms of culture, high or low, in themselves but their estranged division that represents the critical potential for cultural criticism, so too it is not totalization or detotalization in itself that holds radical potential but the opening of an incompatible division between the two. It is in the split itself, the hinge between these two dissonant movements that the cultural critic needs to be located. Cultural criticism would consist of the critical practice of this dissonant compatible dualism. Its first move would be to recognize that the close imbrication of culture and cultural criticism means that the open-ended dialectical

conflicts that Adorno found operating in the work of art as in society can also be detected in contemporary theory and in many forms of critique. His own strategy was to transpose this into an enabling form of dialectical criticism which articulated immanent and transcendent critiques in a 'negative dialectics' articulated, according to Adorno, most effectively through the contemporary realm of the aesthetic. Though the dialectic is rarely to be found already enunciated self-consciously as a form of negative cognition, it can be shown to be at work in the inclusion of the nonconceptual within the conceptual, remorselessly repeating the antagonisms that construct and decompose the culture of everyday life. The very scission within culture, between cultural forms, allows not a transcendent point for the critic but a differential reversible fulcrum from which critique can be constructed.

Adorno and the Loss of Critical Distance

The question that follows is whether Adorno's analysis also applies to the particular situation characteristic of postmodernism. Clearly, the loss of critical distance which Jameson laments can be identified as the failure of what Adorno calls transcendent critique. To claim that this implies the end of critique as such, in the first instance seems to neglect the possibilities offered by immanent critique. However, since according to Adorno transcendent and immanent critique operate dialectically, then the loss of one would always involve the loss of the other.

Adorno's argument suggests that if critical distance was founded on a clean break between science

and ideology, then the whole idea operated on a premise which identified with a single polarity of the critical antinomies of culture. Far from being such a position of absolutism therefore, as proponents of the science/ideology distinction assumed, it was always inevitably subject to the qualifications and limitations which Adorno so shrewdly analyses. The recognition of these need not therefore mean a descent into the totalization of a dominant culture, or even the unanchored relativisms associated with postmodernism. The transcendent position was always achieved, as Adorno points out, through a 'delusion of being absolute'. What has happened in the postmodern situation is simply that this insight into its necessary error has been generally acknowledged. At the same time, however, transcendence has been displaced into the 'absolute reification' which Adorno was to claim for the culture industry, and which is now being invoked to describe the one-dimensional dominance of postmodern culture. But as Adorno himself shows, even this need not mean that critique has to be abandoned altogether. It rather suggests the need to utilize the more complex antinomies that deploy in a productive way the paradoxical, impossible position of the cultural critic in society. The story of theory over the past two decades has consisted of a slow coming to terms with the requirements and demands of that difficult aporetic place.

Notes

1. Adorno, *Prisms*, 19.
2. Cf. Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* and *Modernity and Self-Identity*; Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture*.
3. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Further references will be cited in the text.
4. Baudrillard, *Seduction*. Cf. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 107-10.
5. Cf. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*.
6. Lévi-Strauss, 'Race and History', in *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. II, 323-62.
7. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.
8. Cf. my discussion of Jameson in *White Mythologies*, especially 111, and 203 n. 48.
9. Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 307.
10. Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936, in Bloch, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 123.
11. Cf. Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *Negations*, 88-133.
12. Arato, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 195.

13. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *Prisms*, 19-34. Further references will be cited in the text. Despite the range of recent critical work on Adorno, few commentators consider this essay; the most useful discussion for an understanding of Adorno's comparable argument in the *Aesthetic Theory* is Peter Osborne's 'Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism'; for other discussions of related issues in Adorno's work, see Bernstein, 'Introduction' to Adorno, *The Culture Industry*; Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*; Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*; Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*; Jameson, *Late Marxism*; and Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*.

14. Cf. in particular, the irreconcilable but necessary dialectic of mimesis and rationality in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

15. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 12; 'Cultural Criticism and Society', 33.

16. Todorov, *Nous et les autres*, 104. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 145; Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, 30-1.

17. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 205; cf. 185. Adorno's move is signalled already in the discussion in the last page of 'Cultural Criticism and Society'.

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