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Pretend What You Like:
Literature Under Construction

Literature acquired its modern value as an object of study, in or around the Romantic period, when it was redefined as an alternative and antidote to the modern division of labor and the industrial fragmentation of communities, selves, and knowledges. Against the backdrop of industrialism, disinterested non-instrumental works of creative imagination could acquire a social interest, a paradoxical instrumentality; they could be invested with the value of (in Wordsworth's phrases) "bind[ing] together by passion and knowledge" a newly threatened "human society" that felt its need to salvage "things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed." Whether by the fact that literary texts were written in a pre-industrial era of organic community and were thus thought to look at life in a pre-industrial way, or by virtue of their formal unity and synthetic imagination, which reproduced and sustained that organic vision in otherwise unpropitious times, the post-Romantic concept of literature could be credited with the redeeming public value of affirming endangered species of wholeness and autonomy and evading mechanical division and specialization –specialization of just the sort that would go on to produce the modern professions, including the profession of literary criticism.

Though this organic view of literature has long ago gone out of fashion, the paradox it engendered remains familiar. We literary critics wish to see ourselves as professionals in the rigor of our interpretive procedures, the difficulty of our theoretical lexicon, the depth and breadth of our specialized knowledge. Yet we also resist professionalism as a self-description, in large part because we serve an object of knowledge that, though now more associated with indeterminacy than community, continues to be defined by a perpetual rebellion against the

necessary one-sidedness of professional perspective and the chastened orderliness of disciplinarity.

When Raymond Williams gave something like the above account of how the concept of literature was historically constructed, he did not underline the ironic state of self-contradiction to which that concept seemed to condemn the professional critic. Though Culture and Society furnished his profession with one of its most praised narratives of legitimation, a supremely powerful account of why literary studies was worth professing and, no less important, worth funding, Williams himself continued to use “professional” as a self-evident and unambiguous term of abuse and thus continued also to lament criticism’s putative decline into professionalization.¹ This inconsistency is probably one reason for his public persuasiveness. As a result of the friction between the anti-professional way in which literature is defined and the professional context in which literature is studied, teachers and students of literature tend, like Williams, to manifest a certain disquiet. And this disquiet, no matter how genuinely it is felt, also performs an unconscious social function. It serves to display both to critics themselves and to others how richly dissonant literature is, how refreshingly incompatible with the society around it, how indispensably critical of the status quo, hence how very valuable and needful. The unease at *how* literature is studied registers the need for literature to *be* studied. There can be no better evidence that the malady professional critics are called in to treat is serious than the symptoms of that malady they themselves cannot help but exhibit on their own persons. To be observed squirming with discomfort at one’s institutional surroundings is not just to flash a badge of professional membership; it is to offer the profession an unpaid advertisement, a useful if only subliminal rationale for its continued existence.

Like other self-contradictions, this one often takes the diachronic form of decline-and-fall narratives, where one pole of the contradiction represents an impossibly idealized starting point while the other becomes a fallen, unredeemed present which seems to invite uninhibited

¹ See my discussion of Williams in Secular Vocations (London, 1993).

effusions on a continuum from sarcasm to outrage. This is the case, for example, when the fallen present is represented not by professionalization per se but rather by, say, “theory” or “cultural studies.”² In “The Future of Cultural Studies,” a lecture he delivered in 1986, Williams lamented the field’s success in passing from a genuine vocation (Adult Education) to a mere discipline: “having got into the university, English studies had within twenty years converted itself into a fairly normal academic course, marginalizing those members of itself who were sustaining the original project.” It became “a professional discipline” (153). Then, in the 1960s, “a body of theory came through which rationalized the situation of this formation on its way to becoming bureaucratized and the home of specialist intellectuals . . . The whole project was then radically diverted” (157).³ This is similar to the reservation that George Levine notes in his overview of Victorian Studies over the past quarter century: “literary studies have become cultural studies” (144), Levine says, and they have done so on the basis of a body of theory, epitomized in the Foucaultian work of people like Mary Poovey and D.A. Miller, that “leads invariably to reading against the grain, and almost as invariably to professional advancement” (150).⁴

Levine is right, I think, that the new Foucaultian-style Victorianism “needs to be altered to take into account its own professional dominance and the potential incoherence of its own positioning” (150). And living as we do in what the Intellectual History Newsletter has called “the age of cultural studies,” when the term has broken loose from the Birmingham Center and

² The following two paragraphs are taken from my “Presentism, Pastism, Professionalism,” Victorian Literature and Culture, 27:2 (Summer 1999), pp. 457-463.

³ Raymond Williams, “The Future of Cultural Studies,” in Williams, The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists, ed. Tony Pinckney (London: Verso, 1989), 151-162.

⁴ George Levine, “Victorian Studies,” in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds., Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies (NY: Modern Language Association of America, 1992). Levine notes: “the founding of [the journal] Victorian Studies, in 1957, was almost exactly contemporary with the publication of Raymond Williams’ Culture and Society, one of the most influential books of the last half century” (136). For a brief but insightful discussion of continuities from Arnold to Williams and Cultural Studies, see Catherine Gallagher, “Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies,” Social Text, 30 (1992), 79-89.

come to designate a style of inquiry that pervades a wide range of fields and periods, we certainly have good motives for asking whether it has led us astray.⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that the word “professional” pops up in the conclusion of both critiques is a sign that the task of positioning literary criticism more accurately has once again been postponed. As the idealized “before” term, literature has once again been artificially protected from contamination by its professional “after.”

Refusing to consider criticism’s professional habitus as an unpleasant accident that has somehow befallen literature, and choosing instead to recognize the many insistent points of contact between the two, need not entail either accepting Foucault’s epistemology of the disciplines wholesale or, worse, offering a degraded sociological reprise of it. As Foucault argued, we cannot assume that disciplines investigate pre-existing objects that offer themselves up ready-made for investigation. We cannot help but consider the extent to which disciplines construct for themselves objects whose manifold mysteries—that is, whose combined invitation and resistance to being known—serve at least some disciplinary purpose. But this perspective is only as vulgar and reductive as one’s understanding of those disciplines or professions and the purposes they set for themselves. As I have argued elsewhere, these purposes necessarily include claims to social significance, hence a certain historical openness and even public-spiritedness that do not register either in references to the Ideological State Apparatus of education (literature as “what is taught”) or in the usual clichés about professionalism’s self-enclosed science-imitating specialization and guild-like conspiracies against the laity.⁶ If a book like Culture and Society does the work of professional legitimation, then professionalism would seem to be a larger and more generous thing than Williams himself was ready to acknowledge.

⁵ Symposium on “Intellectual History in the Age of Cultural Studies,” Intellectual History Newsletter, 18 (1996), 3-69. To watch another discipline wrestling with Cultural Studies, see Virginia R. Dominguez, “Disciplining Anthropology,” in Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, eds., Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies (NY and London: Routledge, 1996), 37-61.

⁶ This is the argument of Secular Vocations.

It should be possible to acknowledge in the same spirit, not as a sneer or a debater's point but as an unembarrassed given of academic discourse, that if literature is a professional construct, then so too (as Levine suggests) is the Foucaultian constructionism that calls it a construct.

To treat literature as a professional object of knowledge is to lower it, in the eyes of many, to an unseemly equality with other, baser sorts of knowledge. But this equality need not be taken as humbling if we can also admit that much of what fascinates us about literature, including its seemingly irreducible mystery, is to be found as well in those other sorts of knowledge. Consider Derek Attridge's eloquent account of the concept of literature in his book Peculiar Language. Writers since Wordsworth have always claimed, Attridge says, that literature "can engage with the language and thoughts of everyone who speaks the same tongue, and that it attains thereby the power to intervene in the ethical and political life of a community or a nation. To push this claim too far, however, is to endanger the existence of literature itself as a distinct entity, for if literature does not employ a special language, from what does it derive its appeal and its strength?"⁷ Hence there are "two mutually inconsistent demands--that the language of literature be recognizably different from the language we encounter in other contexts, and that it be recognizably the same" (3). Attridge's solution to this problem is in effect to define literature as this very impossibility of definition.

In at least one sense, it is a happy impossibility. For this is a paradox that literature can seemingly call its own, and to possess a paradox of your own is to possess a disciplinary distinctness of your own, hence a comfortable professional niche. The problem is that literature *cannot* call this paradox its own. The paradox is shared. As Attridge himself notes, in passing, "the word literature" is "a term like writing or law, capable of destabilizing the discourses and institutions within which it has its being" (17). If even "law," which is so clearly crucial to the grounding of social and political institutions, does the same subversive work as literature, then

⁷ Derek Attridge, Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce (London: Methuen, 1988), 1.

how can this subversive or destabilizing quantity be *opposed* to the "discourses and institutions" it inhabits? And how can it be centered in the literary? Those other institutions would themselves have to be intrinsically unstable; literature would have to surrender its claim to a unique power of subversiveness. And this would be all the more true of the objects of knowledge of other academic disciplines. Once we've started with law, why not go on to such disciplinary objects as, say, rhetoric (for composition), or society (for sociology), or culture (for anthropology), or politics (for political science), or space (for geography)? Geographers are often irate at the spatial allusions, fashionable in other disciplines, that treat their object as stable, uncontroversial, self-evident, available for metaphor. Space too, they remind us, is mysterious; it is anything but a firm grounding. Can any object of investigation afford to provide a firm grounding?

This point suggests a general hypothesis. All disciplinary objects seem obliged to stake out and defend a large degree of inscrutability, if only in order to guarantee continuing work for the discipline's practitioners. All disciplines resemble literary criticism in the sense that they too exist in an unstable and precarious relation to a shifty object of knowledge that they can never fully possess or master, an object of knowledge that, like literature, sustains their work only by perpetually threatening to escape from their possession and undermine that work. Though critics like to think that they are blessed or cursed— it hardly matters— by the uniquely recalcitrant nature of what they work with, a wandering, undefinable object of uncertain borders is not a deviation from some supposed disciplinary norm. Yet the wandering and the inscrutability can never be unlimited or uncontrolled. Like literature, the objects of other fields must also satisfy both of Attridge's exigencies— the open mystery of distinctness, but also the impulse toward clarity, closure, and constraint that accompanies the "power to intervene in the ethical and political life of a community," in other words, a discipline's social significance.⁸

⁸ One example is the inimitable, mysterious "bedside manner" which doctors began to emphasize more heavily when medical 'common sense' first came under attack from scientists wielding new discoveries.

If Attridge's incisive account of the peculiarity of literature can be taken as a proposal about disciplinary objects in general, then it is this second, "interventionary" impulse that most clearly requires more discussion. Literature's difference, its seemingly infinite potential to proliferate meanings, its autonomy vis-à-vis the demands of everyday accuracy and instrumentality, is obvious enough— as obvious as a profession's autonomy, its power to control the market for its labor, the number of accredited practitioners, the pace and standards of work. In both cases the *limits* to that autonomy are less obvious, but no less crucial. Taking off from Attridge and the premise that the impulse toward closure and constraint he discerns in literature necessarily accompanies all claims to social significance, we might translate this point into sociological terms: the professionalization of literature implies a sort of social compact by which society at large acknowledges literature's significance, as it acknowledges the significance of other bodies of expert knowledge. Yet this acknowledgment is never more than provisional, and it depends on a certain closing down of the potential infinity of interpretations in the direction of some criteria of urgency, ethical concern, usefulness, necessity to choose. Hence the professional need for narratives like that of Culture and Society which narrow the interpretation of literature in order to explain to society at large why literature matters. Hence too a certain understandable puzzlement as to the status of literature today.

If they would be willing to follow the argument this far, most critics would probably want to ask whether any social compact is still working in the case of literature, whether its significance is still acknowledged, and if not, why not. Looking at concrete matters like enrollments, doctorates, and jobs as well as vaguer issues of relative prestige, many recent observers have offered up titles like Andrew Delbanco's "The Decline and Fall of Literature."⁹ And the problem, they have suggested, is that the critics themselves have reneged on their part of the compact by no longer concerning themselves with literature at all, but instead drifting off into theory, cultural studies, and so on.

⁹ Andrew Delbanco, "The Decline and Fall of Literature," New York Review of Books, November 4, 1999.

As I've been suggesting, however, it is a mistake to believe that a discipline's health depends exclusively on its firm possession of an object of its own. Like professions, academic disciplines have to demonstrate not the distinctness of their object (it is perfectly possible to share an object with another discipline as long as the approach is different) but the significance or relevance of treating that object as they do, their answers to the question of why it should be studied in that way or studied at all. And these answers are notoriously vulnerable to historical contingency. Not long ago David Damrosch brought up the unsettling example of classics. Aside from some border skirmishes with anthropology and philosophy, classics has not lost its privileged hold over the distinctness of its object. What it has lost, since the days when it claimed preeminence among the humanities, is confidence that sufficient others sufficiently appreciate the significance of that object.¹⁰ Anyone who thinks literary criticism can correct its supposed slide by returning to a pure, restricted version of its object, without addressing the more delicate question of literature's contemporary public significance, should therefore contemplate the example. This argument is also pertinent to Richard Rorty's call for literary critics to forget about the interdisciplinary projects of recent years and return to literature itself. Rorty talks about English having succumbed to an attack of "knowingness," the bane of ordinary disciplines, thereby giving up on its unique, higher, indeed religious task of providing "inspiration."¹¹ This sounds great—who could be against inspiration? But is it really any different from what happens in disciplines like history, philosophy, or religion itself? How did literature come to claim a monopoly on inspiration? Surely it makes more sense to assume that all disciplinary objects are obligatorily "religious" at least in the sense that like religion, they must preserve an inspiring core of inscrutability. At a minimum, this is true for the simple reason that a core of inscrutability is required in order to ensure the possibility of further

¹⁰ David Damrosch, 'Can Classics Die?,' *Lingua Franca* 5:6 (Spring 1995), pp. 61-66.

¹¹ R. Rorty, "The Necessity of Inspired Reading," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 9, 1996, p. A48.

interpretation, in other words further work for the discipline's practitioners. And that core must be inspiring for much the same reason; otherwise there will be no work. Indeed, interdisciplinary projects have succeeded in large part because they have been, precisely, inspiring.

Another reason for not leaping headlong into the decline-and-fall story is David Simpson's suggestion that literature has not after all been eclipsed. The problem with literariness, in this view, is its strength, not its weakness— the fact that it refuses to be kept dammed up within proper channels, but has overflowed the boundaries of the literary canon, becoming an aspect of “discourse” in general and a research program defining much of what happens in the humanities generally.¹² Like Simpson, other observers have located the real essence of literary studies over the past decades in the urge to see the entire social world, beginning with literature itself, as a set of constructs. For them, in other words, what Ian Hacking calls “social constructionism” is the imperial strategy by which literary studies has metamorphosed itself into cultural studies.¹³ This strategy, if it is one, is at least professionally coherent in that, while it sacrifices some of the distinctiveness of literature, hence also the assumption that literature is “valuable in itself” (to quote Terry Eagleton), it also preserves and extends the case for literature's significance: to put it crudely, the case that, if literariness is spread about more widely, then the artist's special freedom to create is likewise not so special, but a democratically accessible or at least pervasive freedom to remake the social world.¹⁴

¹² David Simpson, The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A report on Half-Knowledge (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹³ Ian Hacking, The Social Construction of What? (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999). Philosopher Naomi Scheman, cited by Hacking, takes the opposite position that “everything that is socially constructed is real . . . If something has in fact been socially constructed, then it does exist, and so is real!” Hacking disagrees, appealing to the example of satanic ritual abuse, for which “none of the charges was substantiated by any evidence whatsoever.” Hence Hacking concludes: “‘SRA (unlike child abuse) is not real’” (125-26).

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Oxford, 1983), p. 11.

Constructionism does not of course correspond to literariness in all of that term's many senses. It does not propose, say, aesthetic closure as (in Francis Mulhern's words) an anticipation of "a healed existence" or "a recovery of infantile pleasures" (21).¹⁵ In one of the definitive constructionist moments in one of the most influential constructionist books of the past quarter century, Volume One of the History of Sexuality, Foucault writes: "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct."¹⁶ The word translated here by "construct" is the French "dispositif." "Dispositif," which refers to arrangements of parts to form a purposeful whole, emerges from legal, military, and technological contexts, not aesthetic ones. (It shares this of course with the primarily architectural metaphor of construction.) As the editors of a recent symposium on the concept point out, "dispositif" begins in Foucault as a mediation between the symbolic and the technical, with emphasis arguably already on the latter, and since that time its usage has veered in an ever more technical, more instrumental direction.¹⁷

Still, it is no coincidence that Kant, who first articulated the concept of the aesthetic on which literary studies has since depended, also figures for Hacking as the "great pioneer" from whom "all schools" of constructionism seem to derive (41). And literature's intimate and paradoxical relations with constructionism are evident in Foucault himself. In an interview published in 1975, Foucault was asked about the status of literature in his work. He admitted that literature was "not something I analyzed, or reduced, or integrated into the very field of analysis." Rather, it was "a badge, a flag."¹⁸ More than "literary works or discourses within

¹⁵ Francis Mulhern, Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism (London, 1992), p. 21.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (Trans Robert Hurley), p. 105.

¹⁷ See Hugues Peeters and Philippe Charlier, "Introduction: Contributions à une théorie du dispositif" (15-23) in the special number of the journal Hermès: Cognition, Communication, Politique, 25 (1999) entitled "Le Dispositif: Entre usage et concept."

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "The Functions of Literature," interview with Roger-Pol Droit (June 20,

literature,” the texts and authors he cared about served him because he could think of them as “discourses outside philosophy” (312). In short, literature had escaped the sort of treatment he was pioneering for other discourses, and escaped it precisely because literature, as a privileged point outside the framework of philosophy, was imaginatively necessary in order for the genealogical enterprise even to be conceived. There was no defensible reason why literature should be thought of as indeed freely transcending the weighty determinations to which all other discourse was subject, and others were quick to bring it back, as one discourse among others, within a Foucaultian perspective. Yet the freedom of literature was and is essential to the constructionist enterprise, which remains literary in the precise sense that its project of de-naturalizing involves showing to be products of human imagination, creativity, and discourse, in other words showing to be like literature, concepts in many fields that had been taken to be “natural givens” and therefore inalterable. At the heart of cultural studies lies, in John Guillory’s words, “a tacit analogy between the constructedness of the literary artifact and the constructedness of the identity categories supporting politically repressive social practices.”¹⁹ Constructionist de-naturalizing carries over directly from literature the alienating, strange-making impulses to “interrogate” and break down collective identities, to problematize the coherence of experience, to render fluid and indeterminate that which has seemed natural and oppressively fixed.

The extensive overlap between literature and constructionism will not come as much of a surprise to anyone who has watched the rise of cultural studies from the skeptical vantage point of some other discipline. That constructionism has been excessively, disablingly literary is for

1975), trans Alan Sheridan, in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984 (NY and London: Routledge, 1988), 307.

¹⁹ John Guillory, “The Spontaneous Philosophy of the Critics: Science Wars and Cultural Studies,” manuscript available from the author. The extent to which literature is felt to define one of those repressive categories, and thus to which a literary constructionism must also aim, however contradictorily, to liberate us from literature itself, remains a matter of lively dispute.

example the point of sociologist Michael Schudson's critique of cultural studies, published in Lingua Franca in 1997.²⁰ But this interdisciplinary debate is one subset of a much broader question: what is the social value of social constructionism? If constructionism is indeed continuous with literature, if what it means to be a construct depends on what it means to be a work of literature, then presumably the constructionist program too makes an appeal to society at large, enjoys a professional compact as to the public significance of its intellectual activities, though a compact whose staying power can as yet hardly have been proven. Moreover, its case for its own significance is presumably also continuous with the case for literature. One would expect a rather more complicated relation between the two than simple opposition. Rather than choosing between them, it's perhaps more interesting to ask about their common ground.

Let us suppose that, in Terry Eagleton's words, "the so-called 'literary canon,' the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature,' has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time."²¹ What would follow from this constructionist premise?

It would not follow that literature is unreal. As Hacking argues, "something can be both socially constructed and real" (29). Nor would it follow that literature "ought to be done away with." "One may realize," Hacking goes on, "that something, which seems inevitable in the present state of things, was not inevitable, and yet is not thereby a bad thing" (6-7). It seems unlikely for example that the classical Greeks applied a post-Romantic notion of literature in their thinking about tragedy and epic. In Aristotle's Politics, the word "catharsis" describes not the disinterested effect of an autonomous artwork but the utility of popular spectacles for keeping

²⁰ Michael Schudson, "Paper Tigers," Lingua Franca (August 1997), 49-56.

²¹ Eagleton, ibid., p. 11. This is not a difficult thing to suppose. It is no more than Raymond Williams argued in Keywords. According to Williams, it was only late in the eighteenth century that the word literature ceased to refer to any writing on any subject that met a certain standard of quality, and acquired something like its more specialized modern meaning of writing that was imaginative, creative, disinterested, non-instrumental. (R. Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society [London 1988], pp 183 ff.)

the lower orders in check. But doubting that there exists a single continuous concept of literature extending from Aristotle through Kant to the present should not stop us from affirming the historical fact that writers during the last two centuries have been influenced both consciously and unconsciously by the expectations attributed to literature in the post-Romantic sense. Nor need it stop us from exploring what may be gained by applying that set of expectations to the texts of earlier figures who did not even unconsciously write within it. One might well worry over the ideological implications of, say, teaching continuity-with-the-Greeks or disinterestedness-as-depoliticization or the artist-as-paradigm-of-the-heroically-autonomous-bourgeois-subject, while also insisting on literature's potential usefulness in various historical contexts and circulating as widely as possible its invitation to re-imagine and recreate the social world.

Though "most people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some X they dislike in the established order of things" (7), Hacking goes on, there is an important difference between criticizing, changing, and destroying. Hacking aligns these three terms with reformist, rebellious, and revolutionary versions of constructionism respectively (8-9). As an example of the rebellious version, he takes Judith Butler's attitude toward the construction of gender— to be more precise, her deconstructive refusal of the sex/gender opposition, a refusal which should be understood as criticizing but also extending constructionism.²² Butler does not want merely to unmask the ideological interests behind gender constructions (this would be reformist), but she does not think it possible to abandon

²² Butler has of course been a critic of constructionism from the beginning of her career. Gender Trouble objected that to present gender as constructed was to preserve the notion of the sexual body as natural. Butler's critique of "customary notions of 'construction'" (in Bodies That Matter, pp. x-xi) describes them as "not quite adequate to the task at hand" (p. xi). She wishes, she says, to restore the sense of "constitutive constraint" (p. xi) in construction by insisting on construction as not a "singular or deliberate 'act'" but a "reiterative and citational practice" (p. 2). This means "'sex' becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access" (p. 5). See also Pheng Cheah, "Mattering," Diacritics 26:1 (Spring 1996).

gender entirely (the revolutionary option). Compare her with the more absolute refusals of gender expressed in the recent literature of transsexuality, and it's clear how solicitous Butler remains about valuing and preserving the object of her critique.²³

If Butler's rebellious but not revolutionary take on gender offers one answer to the question of what it might mean to think of literature as a construct, it also turns the tables on this question. That is, it again forces us to consider constructionism as an extension of literature. Butler's concept of "performativity," the self-consciously theatrical way of playing with identities and revealing their constructedness that Butler finds exemplified by drag, is of course famously associated with literature's freedom to re-imagine and recreate the social world. To think of gender as performative is "exhilarating," as Adam Phillips writes, and the deep public appeal of this position clearly has much to do with its insistence that the world is still "under construction," that biology is not destiny— in other words, that the Romantic program of creative imagination is still very much alive.²⁴ Indeed, this generalized, extra-canonical literariness is just what Phillips and other critics react against. Rather than the liberty to perform inventively, Phillips suggests, what Butler describes may be the compulsion to "act out." Take away Freud's sense of the heavy constraints on human identity, as revealed for example by the process of mourning, and you get an illusion of untrammelled freedom that does not stand up to scrutiny. "If the idea of performance frees identity into states of (sometimes willed) possibility," Phillips goes on, "mourning refers those same identities back to their unconscious histories, with their repetitions and their waste . . . without the idea of mourning, performance becomes an excessive demand—pretend there's no unconscious, then pretend what you like" (156).

Pretend what you like: these hard words offer to kick away the foundations of literary study, whether in its narrow canonical or its extended constructionist form. But in doing so, they

²³ Jay Prosser, Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality (NY, 1998).

²⁴ Adam Phillips, "Keeping It Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler," in Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 151-159. 153

also teach us something about those foundations. The phrase “pretend what you like” is very nearly unpronounceable for a literary critic, I would guess, and the reason is that it declares the exercise of imagination too easy, too frictionless, too free from impediment, and thus removes any possible reason why a rational person would want to spend time deciphering and interpreting the products of imagination. If literature were as easy as pretending what you like, then it could hardly be studied in a professional manner. There is something of substance to study only if the freedom to pretend is systematically constrained. And that something is *worth* studying only if the constraints on the imagination are representative of the constraints on life itself—biological, historical, political, or whatever. The social significance of literature is proportional to the *resistance* that the (unfree) imagination overcomes or at least recognizes and confronts. This is why Hélène Cixous “Laugh of the Medusa,” to take another influential interdisciplinary example, cannot content itself merely with telling women to write, but must add— whatever the risk of contradiction— that they must write *their own bodies*: must freely create, in other words, precisely that which has been imposed on them by nature.²⁵ The example underlines the general truth about professional objects of knowledge that I extrapolated above from Derek Attridge: literature, like other disciplinary objects, must somehow combine distinctness and autonomy, on the one hand, and on the other sameness, commonality, translatable significance: the realm of closure and constraint. The same holds for constructionism, whose literariness might be adduced as evidence for, rather than against, this rule.

Butler’s intellectual career could serve to illustrate this point, in particular her reaching out toward Freud (and his more determined, burdened, circumscribed model of identity) in self-critical response to objections like Phillips’s, but also and even more consistently her ambivalent engagement with Hegel. These engagements have not been factored into the lingering controversy over Butler’s literariness, a controversy in which more is at stake than Butler’s own work. Consider for example Martha Nussbaum’s angry broadside against Butler last year in The

²⁵ H. Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” Signs, 1 (1976).

New Republic, entitled “The Professor of Parody.”²⁶ “The idea of gender as performance,” Nussbaum writes, “is Butler’s most famous idea.” Indeed, it is ironic in the extreme that critics like Nussbaum should castigate Butler’s constructionism as elitist and esoteric, for the idea that gender is constructed is probably the largest public and political success of academic theory in recent memory, one of the few places where theory can be seen to have had unmistakable consequences outside the academy, anchoring itself firmly in the domain of common sense. Nussbaum is surely right to say that this idea has less to do with J. L. Austin’s performatives than with the example of the theater, and I think she is right again, and generous, to admit that the parodic performance of gender as Butler explains it does offer a genuine if limited degree of freedom. But for Nussbaum, Butler sees too much freedom, too little constraint. Theatricality will be available only to a small number of actors, not to mass movements and practical demands. Freedom does not exist without a “social agent behind or prior to social forces that produce the self” (p. 41). The body, for example, is limited by being part of nature; it’s “too simple to write [the body] off as culture” (p. 42). In short, Butler is again guilty of the literary sin of pretending what she likes.

That is certainly not what literature means to Nussbaum herself. In her book Poetic Justice, Nussbaum defends the literary imagination “because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (p. xvi). Hence “we can say of the mainstream realist novel what Aristotle said of tragic drama: that the very form constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the sufferings and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves” (66).²⁷ Literature must be studied because it’s a vehicle for preserving and transmitting the experience of those distant from us in space, time, or circumstances.

²⁶ M. Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody,” The New Republic (22 February 1999) pp. 37-45.

²⁷ M. Nussbaum, Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life (Boston, 1995).

For better or for worse, Nussbaum's top-down compassion-training may well be the best public case literary critics can currently make for the teaching of literature when challenged, as we recently have been, by the business-oriented counter-program of composition, which happily dismisses literature from the American high school curriculum in favor of technical "language skills." And yet to listen to Nussbaum is to understand once again that for Butler too literariness is not merely free self-creation. It is also—and this is just as representative of how the imagination works-- *repulsion* for some of those who are *closest* to us in space, time, and circumstance, and even a wish that suffering and bad luck may befall them. This repulsion, which fellow critics will recognize as a truth of the constrained, actually existing imagination, is something that tends to be forgotten by admirers of literature from outside the profession (here Nussbaum can be allied with Richard Rorty, who argues with unpersuasive idealism that literature need not be politicized because it is always already doing political work). Without repulsion, however, we could never understand why Kant's reason requires his aesthetics. Butler's repulsion is attractive, so to speak, because—like Kant's aesthetics— it makes a space for the recognition of freedom and difference, which we fear may be squeezed out by rational community and which we need to be reassured about before we will voluntarily enter into such a community.

Nussbaum castigates Butler both for allowing the imagination *too much* freedom— from the constraints of the body— and *not enough* freedom— from the constraints of discourse. By oscillating between the charges of voluntarism and determinism, Nussbaum at least recognizes, after her fashion, that much of Butler's career has in fact been devoted to complicating the model of "pretend what you like." Indeed, that devotion begins with her 1987 book on Hegel. Butler has always been a Hegelian in the sense that her project has been not merely de-naturalizing, but rather exploring the dialectic of freedom and constraint and its production of a sort of "second Nature" (Hegel's phrase). Subjects of Desire is the one book of Butler's that Nussbaum omits from her broadside in The New Republic. And it is perhaps a symptomatic omission, considering that Nussbaum's own allegiances are so obviously Kantian. Nussbaum's Kant is of

course not the Kant who sponsored the romantic imagination and with it contemporary social constructionism. He is the Kant of the categorical imperative (as yet unrescued from abstraction by the aesthetic). It's in the name of Kantian ethics that Nussbaum sums up her objections to Butler's literariness as an objection to Butler's avoidance of norms.²⁸

Nussbaum accuses Butler of taking for granted "an audience of like-minded readers, who agree (sort of) about what the bad things are—discrimination against gays and lesbians, the unequal and hierarchical treatment of women—and who even agree (sort of) about why they are bad. . . . But take that assumption away, and the absence of a normative dimension becomes a severe problem" (42). "There is a void, then, at the heart of Butler's notion of politics. This void can look liberating, because the reader fills it implicitly with a normative theory of human equality or dignity. But let there be no mistake: . . . we have to articulate those norms—and this Butler refuses to do" (43). But *why* do we have to articulate our norms? If we must be normative, aren't there other, perhaps more effective ways of performing our normative commitments? Lacking a sense of the performative, Nussbaum cannot judge the off-putting effect of her own absolutist articulations of norms, which perversely seem to make those norms more questionable rather than more self-evident. Her case for the compassionate imagination in Hard Times sounds a lot like Gradgrind's notion of a circus. Butler, on the other hand, for all the hoopla about her difficult prose style, offers a more compelling aesthetic spectacle. She says she is against norms, and yet she performs the normativity that she denies— and that professional objects of knowledge must possess.²⁹ The paradox is familiar. The in-group rhetoric about

²⁸ When Nussbaum objects to Butler's assumption that "there is no agent behind or prior to the social forces that produce the self" (41), her objection to constructionism, or to a literariness-without-the-Author, is really an objection to the absence of norms. For the Author, in her view, is where normativity is necessarily located. No author, no norms. From this perspective, Butler might be seen not as avoiding normativity so much as trying to relocate it outside the author, and thus render it more effective.

²⁹ To put this another way: the Gramscian struggle for common sense is better fought not by declaring norms, but by performing them.

which Nussbaum is so snide works in fact not to exclude but to include. For it makes the reader *want* to belong, and it sets the price of belonging as tacit, instinctive, “naturalized” acceptance of just those unacknowledged norms that Butler’s desired alternative community would require. Its seemingly unintended literariness aims not at de-naturalizing for its own sake, or simply pretending what you like, but at inducing us to embrace a freshly imagined “second Nature.”

My interpretation of Butler is a recognizably literary one in the sense that it does not allow itself to be put off or shut down by the declared intentions of the author under consideration. But this is not to say that it can avoid the question of authorial authority altogether. Indeed, another way of putting my point would be to say that “What Is an Author?” translates as “What Is Nature?” A de-naturalizing constructionism like Butler’s (again I stress that this is not her own self-description) can only be said to postpone this double question, not to transcend it. Like literary studies, constructionism problematizes the usual answers, but there is no way it can avoid offering some. It is by now notorious that to exchange “the creative artist” for more impersonal or collective terms like, say, “the text” or “language” or “discourse” is not necessarily to avoid the difficulties of interpretation to which critics objected in the earlier case. The same is true for constructionism. To say that the world is under construction is merely to switch attention to the agents, brokers, bankers, planners, architects, contractors, government officials, union officials, and many others whose colliding wills will decide when, where and whether ground is broken, foundations are laid, and beams and girders begin to rise. If X is socially or culturally constructed, what precisely is that “society” or “culture” that is supposed to do the constructing? It is these terms that function as a “second Nature.” Constructionism’s freedom— if this was constructed, it can be constructed otherwise— cannot free itself from constructionism’s constraint: whatever constructed X also imposed its nature on or invested its meaning in the construction. The regress is potentially infinite; one can always ask what constructs the constructors. The proximity of this regress, which delays the subject- or nature-effect, cannot eradicate it. And yet the delay, which can be described either as the difference between a first and a second nature or, more demagogically, as a (qualified) freedom of self-

invention, is nonetheless real and significant.

Literary critics have always been tempted to identify this delay, this defiant floating of all final knowledge, with literature itself. I have been arguing that we must share our claim to virtuous irresolution with constructionism, which generalizes it outside the canon, as well as with other more unlikely, more narrowly disciplinary objects and paradigms of knowledge. This is not an argument in favor of constructionism, a gross term for a collective public self-presentation and one that sounds as alien and unpalatable to me as it does, no doubt, to most academics who might be suspected of working within it. Nor is it to say that there are no variations from discipline to discipline or from discipline to interdisciplinarity. My point is merely that the dominant or most successful mode of scholarly knowing today is “professional” in the specific sense I have extrapolated from Attridge’s account of literature: asserting at once its inimitable mystery and its translatability into the language of common concern, obliged at once to put knowledge at a distance and to identify knowledge with the ultimate crossing of that distance. In each case the first term makes a claim to autonomy, the second a claim to social significance. In proposing that even Butler cannot escape this double imperative of the professional compact, and indeed offers a stylistically creative response to it, I have been suggesting that she, like Raymond Williams, does valuable work of self-legitimation for her fellow academics even as she apparently refuses the legitimacy of the collective project, and perhaps collectivity and legitimacy as such. It is because we critics and constructionists have never been free to pretend what we like that we need not feel impelled to narrate our present predicament, for all its dangers and inconveniences, as a fall into unfreedom.

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