

Freedoms and the institutional Americanism of literary study

To open the chapter with a quotation:

In Derrida's work an ambivalent and marginalised French-Jewish-Algerian voice, both coloniser and colonised, is absorbed into and reinflects the elitist eclecticism of Parisian intellectual culture, and this produces such paradoxically authoritarian pronouncements as '*what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself.*'¹

This sentence is a quotation from a hypothetical book. It forms a would-be demystifying account of the intellectual career of Jacques Derrida, offered in terms of the dominant cultural political paradigm. This kind of authoritative culture speak is often taken as the kind of thing any aspiring critic should aim for, with its combined effect of sweeping panorama, political astuteness and explanatory power. In fact, though, such a sentence is twaddle: for it misleadingly and at once asserts the basis of a thinking to lie wholly in social identity and cultural location (Derrida's specific background in this case).

This chapter will try to map out some things at stake in the poetics of singularity by setting it against some dominant features of contemporary literary and cultural theory, as exemplified by this hypothetical (I hope) book on Derrida. This is to argue that, for all the frequent dedication to progressive causes, the culture of criticism today often undercuts or compromises the freedom it seems to defend by promulgating only a specific, even a bourgeois Western model of it. Against this, my point is not, primarily, to offer some sort of alternative cultural-political line on the texts discussed here (though it may probably be read that way in any case, so deeply ingrained are the assumptions that this is the only way to read). Instead, the overall argument is what might be termed a post-existentialist one: that the thinkers covered here each contemplate the poetic and literary in terms of an uncomfortable freedom, one which will challenge the dogmatism in thinking in terms of cultural-political determinism.

Throughout, the topic of singularity is shown to feed into the distinctively post-existentialist thinking of the four thinkers, offering an alternative model of the challenge of the literary that is shown often to be ethically superior to the dominant culturalism. To treat something as singular is to move towards the idea of seeing it as irreplaceable, sole witness of what it says, an example only of itself, and thus 'free' in the sense of not being fully intelligible in the broadly deterministic categories of culturalism, which strives to explain all in terms of social location.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that 'absence of foundation is foundation for democracy'.² He is perhaps alluding to Claude Lefort's work on the distinctiveness of the modern idea of democracy, that of all the regimes known, it 'is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an empty place and to have maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real', that is to affirm that those who exercise power 'do not, indeed, embody it'.³ One danger for democracy lies in the very temptation to find foundations for it, for these may too soon serve to prescribe specific institutions or groups of people as a positive or even exclusive model of the democratic more generally. However, I believe this is exactly what has happened in much contemporary literary and cultural theory and that the idea of democratic freedom at work there is often an anachronistic and even damaging one. Against this, the poetics at issue here can be related to a notion of 'freedom' that Jean Luc Nancy and others work out from Heideggerian thinking, hermeneutics and deconstruction. The issue is less to disagree head-on with the dominant cultural studies paradigm, but to investigate the way it is often destructive of its usually worthy ideals. The political philosopher Wendy Brown argues 'how certain well-intentioned contemporary political projects and theoretical postures inadvertently redraw the very configurations and effects of power that they seek to vanquish'.⁴

So the basic argument of this chapter is to contrast two ideas of freedom. The dominant cultural politics paradigm rests on notions of freedom that look, implicitly or explicitly, to the traditional discourse of rights as it demarcates the claims of identities taken as already given. Opposed to this, however, is the more disconcerting but also less circumscribed idea of freedom inherent in Hannah Arendt's notion of 'beginning', a state of radical emptiness prior to or outside given determinations of identity and ethical and legislative norms. Another way of expressing this is through what the political philosopher Paul Patton terms 'critical freedom', 'critical' here referring not to the institution of criticism, but to the notion of a crisis or turning point, one 'at which some state or condition of things passes over into a different state or condition'. Patton contrasts 'critical freedom' with the other 'liberal' model:

Critical freedom differs from the standard liberal concepts of positive and negative freedom by its focus upon the conditions of change and transformation in the subject, and by its indifference to the individual or collective nature of the subject. By contrast, traditional liberal approaches tended to take as given the individual subject and to define freedom in terms of the capacity to act without hindrance in the pursuit of one's ends or in terms of the capacity to satisfy one's most significant desires.⁵

In so far as the poetics of singularity can be identified with any kind of cultural politics, it can be said to affirm critical freedom against the limits and assumptions of the liberal model.

Individual freedom

The association of literature and notions of freedom is all pervasive in Western poetics, so deeply ingrained that it is rarely made explicit. Ideas of freedom have been the central reference point for poetics since the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury, David Hume and others argued that civic freedom is both a condition for achievement in the arts and is sustained by them.⁶ Romanticism has often been defined as an intellectual movement dominated by reactions both for and against ideas of individual liberty associated with the American and the French revolutions. The promotion of individual or social freedom became in effect, after the decline of patronage, the dominant argument for the utility of literature. Defences of literature in the twentieth century repeatedly linked it to ideas of democracy, dissidence and democratic debate, the right of free speech. In an interview of 1992, for instance, Derrida defended literature as an institution peculiar to modern societies with a democratic element, those with conventions and laws which enable an institution of language within which anything can be said, and in any way (SIL). In 1948 Jean-Paul Sartre defended the literary as a supreme enactment of human freedom: 'The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it.'⁷ Sartre corroborated Kant's argument that the artwork is an end in itself but argues that this does not sufficiently 'account for the appeal which resounds at the basis of each painting, each statue, each book' (p. 34). For the work only exists if it is first seen or read. It must appeal to a reader as a condition of its effective existence. So 'the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist' (p. 36).

During the Cold War the association of literature with democratic values often focused on the writing of dissident authors behind the Iron Curtain. The association of the literary institution and freedom has if anything

intensified since then. This may be borne out by the growing tendency to categorise literature in terms of various 'minority' social groups whose 'voice' it is taken to be. The increasing diversification of criticism into competing camps attests further the centrality of ideals of freedom as what is at stake in each.

The dominant conception of freedom implicitly at work in the institution of literature for the past two hundred years has generally been the liberal one: it has frequently formed the idea, for author or reader, of a mode of self-discovery and self-realisation against whatever may be inauthentic in tradition, in received norms of thought and behaviour or overly conventional elements of the personality. Such underlying ideas of the utility of literature come to accompany its increasing association with, even absorption by, institutions of education. The idea of freedom at issue here intertwines negative and positive elements. It is negative in so far as it affirms the right of an individual or a group to be rid of oppressive force, falsifying dogmas or mere delusion: it is positive, correlative, in understanding this casting off as the assertion or realisation of an identity hitherto suppressed. Service to such a concept of freedom, usually too broadly assumed to be explicit, still functions as the dominant idea of what a modern writer is for.

Assumptions and aspirations about freedom have informed not only the dominant conception of the social function of the writer but also technical minutiae concerning genre, form and technique. One of the crucial arguments to inform this link between ideas of art and ideas of individual freedom was Immanuel Kant's notion of aesthetic 'disinterest', that a kind of detachment or 'disinterestedness' is the condition of the beautiful and of its true perception. This does not mean that the spectator of a painting or reader of a poem should adopt a kind of passive contemplativeness, rendering art some sort of escapist entertainment. The notion of 'interest' at issue here simply means that which is important for its relation to something else. So a 'disinterested' entity in this sense is just one valued for its own sake, as its own end and seeming purpose. Thus, for Kant, the relation to the beautiful is disinterested in the sense of being unconstrained. As such it is not merely a putting out of action of the will, a kind of apathetic stepping out of things (as in Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's misreadings of Kantian disinterestedness). It is a realisation or affirmation of its object, freed to exist in itself, apart from the need to be justified in relation to other things or ends.

Thus, for Kant, the aesthetic was a realm of freedom, defined in terms of autonomy or self-legislation – something realising its essence unconstrained by 'external' factors. Jay Bernstein writes:

In claiming that works of art are devoid of external ends, and hence products of actions done for their own sake, Kant is insisting that such production not only presupposes freedom in the weak sense but manifests freedom, instantiates it, aims at it, has freedom for its meaning. Such acts are the production of freedom through freedom.⁸

The claim of freedom extends, necessarily, to the disinterested nature of the person encountering a work of art, judging whether something is 'beautiful' or not. The judgements of taste as to beauty are 'free' in that they can hold up a specific work as an 'example' of successful art but never as a rule embodying principles to which *all* other supposedly beautiful objects must conform. The lack of a definite rule that could determine in advance whether something is 'beautiful' or not is no deficiency: it is crucial to the link between such judgements and Kant's ideal of freedom as autonomy. Aesthetic judgements may be general ones – not just expressions of personal preference – but they will only be *genuinely* aesthetic judgements if each person making them is following, without prejudice or interest, their own mind and really saying what they think. In this way, the claim of the aesthetic is also that of a liberation of ourselves from falsehood, from mere conformity or self-deception (e.g. saying that 'x is beautiful' because it is the fashion or the king approves it). In other words, the ideal of a universality founded on unconstrained judgements, of people deciding for themselves, correlated easily with emerging ideals of enlightened government. Any one judgement of taste, then, cannot be a rule, only an 'example' that others might follow or not. The would-be universality of the judgement that 'x is an excellent work of art' can exist only on the basis of such agreement freely achieved.

Kant's importance here is that his arguments enabled an assimilation of issues in aesthetics and poetics to the general political tendency of the post-Enlightenment, the 'liberal' one. 'Liberalism' can be described here, following K. A. Appiah, as the recognition of civil and political rights to freedom in the protection of the individual person against state power and space for self-development and self-creation:

What characterizes the beginnings of liberalism is, then, a combination of political institutions: constitutions, rights, elections, and protections for private property. In the twentieth century, in both Europe and North America, there was added to the recognition of these political rights a concern to guarantee certain minimum conditions of welfare for every citizen, what we call – even if the extension of the term *rights* in this way is a little controversial – economic and social rights.⁹

The Kantian ideal of aesthetic autonomy dovetails so neatly into thinking in terms of individual right that it became what surely remains the

most powerful principle of artistic form in Western art to this day. The repeated ideal is that the work not be shackled by inherited norms but rather achieve, from out of itself, the form appropriate to it, one that most expresses its distinctive nature. A rhetoric of innovation and liberation becomes standard in manifestos of artistic schools and poetic creeds. With some exceptions (the religious poetics of G. M. Hopkins for instance) the freedom of the artwork came to stand repeatedly for various images of human freedom. The liberated form of the modern artwork, in fields as diverse as, say, Naturalist fiction, 'free verse' or the aims of the surrealist movement, is held to enable or release topics or elements of the human psyche and perception previously suppressed. We see this in modernist ideals of achieving some pure essence of the poetic that might be opposed to more exploitative or commercialised facets of culture. It reappears in so-called postmodernism, whether this be in a work's use of pastiche and fragmentation to defamiliarise and free itself from inherited genres and modes, or in the now widespread notion of the act of writing as a kind of performance or 'construction' of 'the self'.¹⁰

Some basic assumptions of contemporary criticism

Literary culture has formed an indispensable pillar of democratic debate, offering an arena for suppressed voices or issues to incite public notice or controversy. Even critics who take a more suspicious view of the workings of power and 'ideology' in literature, as in its appropriation as a bastion of traditional values, still belong to and hence reaffirm the same public sphere of open debate. This broad allegiance also characterises the thinking I am schematising here under the rubric of the poetics of singularity. However, this school also challenges some inherent norms of this broadly liberal literary institution as it has existed for over two centuries, finding it still limited and oppressive in crucial respects.

To turn now to the far narrower field of the critical institution today: with the dominant cultural politics paradigm the liberal conception of freedom has become prominent almost to the point of self-caricature. Let us try to schematise those aspects of the current critical orthodoxy which are at issue here. The schematisation is broad, but should be very familiar to anyone in contact with the culture of the humanities academy.

At the basis of the cultural studies paradigm – often even when it does lip service to thinkers who implicitly differ in this respect – remains the ideal of freedom in the sense of the Kantian and modernist ideals of self-legislation. Countless critical arguments, reading the major issues in a text as some sort of struggle for economic independence and/or personal

fulfilment, often simply assume as a norm the model of autonomy or self-legislation. These readings enact, in other words, the notion of freedom as the realisation of a suppressed or distorted essence, affirmed against kinds of inhibition to it, whether these be the power of tradition, social oppression, the ideological connotations of the medium or systematic prejudice. That is to say, the text is seen in terms of the self-assertion or contestation of identities, understood as part of the impulse to self-realisation of a group, class or nation. In weaker critics, this has tended towards the stance that the only things in a text of final interest are those stateable in terms of such a model of contestation (so William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', for instance, is 'really' (as they say) a textual strategy expressing the stance of a disillusioned radical in the insecure context of England in 1798).

Why attack such thinking at all? Its democratic credentials at least seem generally clear. One problem is that the model of freedom that looks to notions of rights and individual autonomy is a long way from being neutral. The fundamental claim of this critical practice is that a notion of identity, either as given or striven for, can serve as an exhaustive principle of explanation for anything in or of the text at issue. That is, anything which a person of type *x* or of type *y* does or writes can be understood as a representation of that *x*-ness or *y*-ness. Identity, whether individual or collective, is held to be an agent whose every representation or act is at once an affirmation or assertion of itself. Hence, a writer who finds herself describable as, say, 'gay', 'Iranian' and 'Christian' will have critics striving to explain all she writes in terms of the self-making of that 'identity'. Cultural processes are seen as the labour of various and often competing representations, with the underlying issue a 'freedom' understood as an identity's self-realisation.

Here, though she never writes explicitly of literary criticism, the work of the political philosopher, Wendy Brown, is indispensable, especially her work on the ever-contentious meaning of 'right' or 'rights'. In contemporary cultural politics and criticism, the model of human agency as the striving towards self-possession/realisation draws implicitly on some deeply entrenched assumptions about 'rights'. 'Rights', as Brown argues, originated primarily as a social safeguard for an individual, free to enjoy his/her property apart from threats of arbitrary state power on the one hand and social disorder and theft on the other.¹¹ As they form part of such a general social framework, she argues that an appeal to rights in contemporary disputes often forms a double-edged sword. For 'rights' necessarily codify systems of power, ideas of property and of (constituted) identities even as they seek to protect those caught up in them. This is why Brown is uncomfortable with talk of striving for the 'rights' of minorities

– for such ‘rights’ also tend to entrench and confirm the disadvantaged identity they nominally protect. Likewise, she is wary of ‘the emergence of politicized identity rooted in disciplinary productions but oriented by liberal discourse toward protest against exclusion from a discursive formation of universal justice’ (p. 58). Such a set-up may reinforce an essential pillar of the domination it seemingly contests: ‘It reiterates the terms of liberal discourse insofar as it posits a sovereign and unified “I” that is disenfranchised by an exclusive “we”’ (pp. 64–5). In effect, work on kinds of contestation for cultural power and recognition is too often ‘tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure’ (p. 59). It reinforces the norm by its way of protestation of exclusion from it, an exclusion that allows its advocate only a moral superiority with a hidden investment in its own impotence (p. 73). Likewise, a focus on domination in politicised literary criticism too often shrinks in practice to the mere policing of inequalities. Brown argues that there is a need to find ways of contesting domination through a better vision of collective life, not through moral reproach (p. 47).

Brown’s point is not that such a model of cultural politics misses genuine grievances and deprivations, but that it gauges these in terms of an ideal taken from within the social framework being criticised (hence the stress on ‘exclusion’, ‘marginalisation’, etc. with their implicit, underhand valuation of the central as norm). In this way, instead of politics being a matter of aspirational ideals as to the nature of living together well, such thinking surreptitiously confirms as a human norm an ideal of personhood and self-conception which is that of the privileged.

Even while this structure of thinking – the ideal of individual autonomy pitched against repressive authority or falsehood – is sometimes criticised, its basic contours continue to determine the vast majority of literary critical practice. ‘Culture’ itself is broadly understood as the antagonistic, multi-layered, heterogeneous interaction of different groups, each asserting and working their self-representations according to the same model. Hence the tendency to make all politics mean identity politics and to see a ‘radical’ stance as ‘a voluntarist politics of self-affirmation’.¹² Sometimes this may become an identity politics that can only continue to affirm itself and its insignia (its positive freedom) by re-enacting and even seeking out marks of past oppression against which to restage its efforts (its negative freedom), hence, in literary criticism, the sense that far too much work hinges about the reaffirmation of values which almost all readers will already have. Brown notes that

institutionalized freedom premised upon an already vanquished enemy keeps alive, in the manner of a melancholic logic, a threat that works as domination

in the form of an absorbing battle with the past. Institutionalised freedom arrayed against a particular image of unfreedom sustains that image, which dominates political life with its specter long after it has been vanquished and preempts appreciation of new dangers to freedom posed by institutions designed to hold the past in check. (p. 8)

Criticism of this kind can train its weaker students merely to an unscholarly complacency – the idea that to give a critical reading of a work means just to hunt out some features of prejudice in the characters or contexts, put markers on them and walk off in triumph.

The issue is exacerbated by the philosophical laxity of contemporary theory. A general vague acceptance of elements of anti-foundationalist arguments bolsters too quickly arguments that all things be seen in terms of a cultural politics that affirms modern notions of freedom as self-realisation on behalf of under-represented groups, without a sense of the specifically liberal model of subjectivity such notions depend on and reinforce. Hence the unthematized rhetoric that pervades so much criticism: ‘prison’ (‘prison house of language’), ‘imprisoned’, ‘escape’, ‘free ourselves from’, ‘chained to’, ‘hemmed in by’, ‘held captive by’, ‘hostage to’, ‘subverts power’, ‘challenges the authority of’, ‘defies’, ‘resists’. Transgressive’ or ‘subversive’ become ultimate terms of praise; to call a text ‘marginalised’ becomes to flag up its massive centrality, the non-canonical functions as a kind of canon, and so on.

After Kant, formal and rhetorical innovation and the supposed liberation of some facet of the human are continually correlated. The same dynamic plays itself out in the cultures of criticism and commentary. Jonathan Rée argues that much contemporary thought, however alert to issues of historicity, is itself hiddenly dominated by a form of historicism by virtue of what he terms its ‘modernist’ institutional culture:

For modernism is not so much a particular style, as a particular kind of historical self-consciousness about style. Its twin imperatives are to avoid being provincial and to avoid being out-of-date; or, to put it more positively, to conform with the norms which govern the up-and-coming epoch. It divides the world with a single fence, with its own brave modernity on this side and stupefied provincial traditions on the other. Modernism, one might say, is a streamlined historicism.¹³

Such modernism, reinforced by the basic institutional frameworks in which criticism and discussion take place (professional competitiveness and surveillance), perpetuates Enlightenment ideals of freedom as self-legitimation, of self-affirmation as the being liberated from ignorance or prejudice. What disturbs Rée is the kind of personal culture and self-image that too often emerges out of a broadly worthy Enlightenment tradition,

and which 'we' critics find it hard not to adopt. He writes, 'the ultimate rhetorical and dialectical device of modernism is the phrase "no longer" along with claims that x or y in some author is "astonishingly modern"' (pp. 974–5). The objects of such a modernist consciousness appear on a scale calibrated from 'radical' on one side through to 'progressive', 'traditional', 'conservative' and finally 'reactionary' on the other. It may become at worst 'an epochal self-consciousness that does nothing except chronicle its own timeliness' (p. 976). The under-acknowledged basis of modern criticism becomes a kind of academic imaginary that makes the critic into a hero or heroine of a progressive narrative of liberation through knowledge. In other words, assumptions that critics may well attack in texts they are studying still actively determine the culture of intellectual production for critical work (such as that surrounding this very book), and are built into its institutional requirements. Ethically, such a stance always threatens to be less genuinely 'engaged' than a simplifying striving to do away with politics altogether as a space of inherent moral entanglement, uncertainty and difficult decision.

Deconstruction 'modernised'

The institutionalised dominance of the (liberal!) model of agency may underlie the way the massive effect of thinking associated with deconstruction and the work of Derrida has played out in practice since the early 1980s. The liberating effect of such work was a defining feature of intellectual life in the last quarter of the twentieth century but it happened in large part through the assimilation of 'deconstructive' modes of thinking into the essentially 'modernist' ones built into professionalised criticism as an institution. This can be seen especially in the legacy (from the earlier Derrida) of a conception of 'the metaphysical' as a block mode of thought held to be definitive for the West and its history. Texts and people are continually subjected to kinds of trial procedure designed to either condemn or acquit them of degrees of complicity in metaphysical/colonial/patriarchal thinking. Herman Rapaport writes:

In postcolonialist studies we are told by many researchers that metaphysics is the reigning paradigm of colonial thinking; and, for some decades now, feminists have argued that patriarchal writing is inherently metaphysical and/or phallogocentric. In each case an antimetaphysical ideology has been extirpated from deconstruction, and its polemical force is that of a test that distinguishes between correct and incorrect thinking.¹⁴

In this way, in the modernist culture of criticism, supposedly superseded notions of progress, of subjectivity and freedom, have re-entrenched themselves in ways deeply antipathetic to the less aggressive understanding of deconstruction. One problem with the freedom as autonomy model that has re-emerged is its inherent violence in positing a central identity conceived as a striving against an antagonist in the form of tradition, prejudice, etc. In so far as the critic also tends to identify with the agent of this struggle, it produces an us/them polarisation that is conflictual, confrontational and often unhelpfully self-righteous.

In Derrida the recognition that there are 'identifications' rather than identities, or that identities are constitutively non-identical, pushes his later work towards an affirmation of universal exceptionalism and singularity (that 'Every other (one) is every (bit) other' [*tout autre est tout autre*]).¹⁵ In culturalist work that nominally looks to Derrida, on the other hand, recognition of division within identities was often assimilated to the modernist liberal model. It produced a certain structure of thought that now underlies perhaps the majority of new critical interpretations of literary works.

The argument of deconstruction on the impossibility of any unitary identity and the irreducibility of the singular has been assimilated as something that is only superficially similar. The decisive step is taken when this impossibility is taken to determine a psychology. A good example here is William Connolly's formulation: 'Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.'¹⁶ In other words, a constitutive lack is held to underlie a drive towards 'identity', so that denial of the lack or otherness within the would-be unitary self is argued to manifest itself in a rejection or suppression of real others outside. This produces a seemingly neat formula for sketching the workings of structures of domination and prejudice: the would-be secure identity (say of a masculinist self-image as hero) lives in a state of denial of its own lack which may lead to immediate social-political effects (e.g. casting the other as 'the native' and inferior). At the same time, the 'marginalised' other retains, in this set-up, a pivotal position that is immediately ready to be celebrated as its 'subversive' potential. In other words the deconstructive argument has become transformed into a kind of all-explanatory first cause in cultural politics, a pseudo-explanatory and ubiquitous psychological drive whose generality enables it to embrace almost any kind of human activity in terms of categories of identity/otherness and inclusion/exclusion. Take, for instance, the famous mid-Victorian sensation novel by Mary E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). In this novel the central figure initially corresponds to an idealized female stereotype

of youth, beauty and demure deference. In fact, Lady Audley emerges as both a bigamist and a determined would-be murderer. In the modern reception of this book, critics argue that she comes to be vilified in the narrative because she held the place, especially in the minds of women readers, of that angry 'otherness' whose denial is at the basis of a socially sanctioned identity, even as, at the same time, her actions supposedly enact the attractions of that 'otherness'. So, Lady Audley's condemnation and final incarceration as 'mad' are thus, it is argued, 'necessary' to the socially sanctioned standard of sane normality in Victorian life.¹⁷ However crudely workable this reading, its basic underlying assumption is that of a universal drive for (a certain idea of) identity which is itself never examined. Such a mechanism for social explanation is now almost ubiquitous in the reading of literature and culture. It is widely adaptable: such otherness/within (exclusion as inclusion) structures of supposed self-assertion can be made to work for almost any cultural context, as in the suppositious account of Derrida with which this chapter opened. It can be applied equally to individual psychology and to the self-definition of large cultural groups. For instance, Henry Yu mars an interesting essay on Tiger Woods and multiculturalism by drawing on the same question-begging formula in a seemingly succinct summary of the joint origins of American nationalism and racialism: 'Trying to prove their worth in a transatlantic world dominated by British culture, postcolonial Americans created definitions of whiteness that both celebrated and denigrated what was perceived to be native to the United States.'¹⁸ Was it really so neatly simple? This model's breadth of application, however, also suggests its vacuousness. Such readings drive an all-flattening highway through the real complexity and multiplicity of human events. They are insidiously reductive in that they always pivot around one unexpressed but all-determining norm, that of a supposedly natural drive towards self-assertion in self-definition. An entity, whether single or collective, is held to be striving for or asserting a unitary identity, one whose self-realisation is assertion against others. This is the 'ideal' whose seemingly built-in desirability shapes the contours of everything in a text being discussed: the contestation of various kinds of identity interacting with and 'constructing' each other in this aggressive drive towards self-legislation. Although critics may refer on the surface to pseudo-deconstructive or psychoanalytic arguments, it is most often this hidden liberal and even neo-Darwinian model that determines the reading.

When a critical essay refers to the 'construction' of identity it is most often this implacable norm that is working itself out.¹⁹ In other words, the supposedly anti-essentialist gesture (identity is made or is a project, not a given) is not what it seems at all, for an assumed norm as to what

identity *is* in the first place (made or given) is already decisive. It determines what Peggy Kamuf satirises as a critic's working out of someone's "raceclassgender" coefficient'.²⁰ Derrida's insight is turned into a methodological tool for describing once more the interaction of various competing groups striving for autonomy. Deconstruction is absorbed as a move or moment in what is basically the same old set-up.

Notions of identity as a 'social construction' – for all their seeming endorsement of anti-essentialist arguments against identities being seen as 'given', still in fact draw upon the very notions of subjectivity that are nominally at issue. For although such counter-cultural constructions may be argued by critics to be 'subversive' of the dominant order, this very way of thinking surreptitiously reinforces its aggressive norms. It does not change the basic conceptual function or structure of a term to put inverted commas around the use of it, especially when that use is still pivotal to the whole argument.

Institutional Americanism

Wendy Brown writes that 'contemporary political moralism tends to conflate persons with beliefs in completely nonvolunteristic fashion: persons are equated with subject positions, which are equated with identities, which are equated with certain perspectives and values. To be a white woman is thus equated with speaking or thinking *as* a white woman. . .'²¹ What Brown does not see perhaps, and which is conceivably more difficult to think from within the United States than across the ocean, is a further dynamic that may govern the stance occupied by that critic who sets out to explain the features of a text in terms of the workings of such 'subject positions' (e.g. *x* does *x* because she is a woman, another does *y* because she is white, while *z* affirms the view of an Inuit man etc.). This intellectual stance also works to define the person who takes it. In other words, it expresses a drive to position oneself as the embodiment of a supposedly fully enlightened eye to whom all these supposed subject positions and identities are visible and morally mappable. The progressivist culture of professionalised criticism makes this stance extremely hard to avoid. In addition, the old ideals of detachment and objectivity in a critical writing inevitably acquire a moralistic tinge with this particular model of cultural mapping. Even writers who affirm their own ethnic or other particularity often really do so from the position in which freedom is inherently embodied in the overview of the critic.

From a genuinely international perspective there is yet another striking aspect of the cultural politics paradigm in criticism. Its generally

'modernist' culture matches exactly one of the most familiar and insidious traits of American nationalism, its aggressively self-idealising exceptionalism.²² This is not so much a matter of what the criticism says, but the performative effect at work every time a critical text in English implicitly posits its author and implied reader as embodiments of some supposedly fully enlightened humanity against whom other people, in the present or the past, can be gauged and rendered transparent in terms of unredeemed tradition, a merely limiting particularity and various modes of supposedly all-explanatory prejudice. Given the latently moralistic nature of such a stance, together with the general domination of the humanities by people employed by American universities, the result is what may be termed the 'institutional Americanism' of critical debate.²³ This names both the pervasive identification of the critical arena in general with the norms and assumptions of an American institutional context, and the insidious presence in criticism of what is effectively, and sometimes explicitly, an American nationalism. This is meant, necessarily, not as the assertion of a nationality taken as given but in terms of the dominant forms of identification that lead people to suppress the recalcitrance of their singularity, or as Derrida put it, to suppress the 'Marranos that we are, Marranos in any case, whether we want to be or not, whether we know or not' (the Marranos were Spanish and Portuguese Jews forced to conform outwardly to Catholicism, but practising Judaism in secret).²⁴

It would surely be unsurprising if the criticism to become dominant since the late 1980s should be one later thinkers might label as a post-Cold War triumphalist movement (just as the formalism of the 1950s is sometimes related to the Cold War conservatism of those times). In fact it would be surprising if it were not. However, if the institutional Americanism of critical thinking is almost never an issue as such, this is because its dominance is such as to render it frequently invisible.

To attend an international conference is always to be reminded how far nationalism as such remains as deeply pervasive as it is disavowed among critics, a vast but tacit determinant of so much intellectual work. However, institutional Americanism in the sense proposed need not mean simply the overt or hidden assertion of an assumed 'American' identity (often couched in terms of spuriously ahistorical ideals). It is a force of identification (in fact, many of the ugliest cases of 'institutional Americanism' I have met have been in Britain and Australia). One thing at issue is the widespread use of the first person plural ('we') to describe a community of critics and scholars presumed to be following, albeit contentiously, a continuously unfolding and broadly progressive project of communal labour (e.g. 'we no longer give credence to the argument that

...’, ‘what we need now is . . .’ etc.). The problem with this ubiquitous practice is not only its obviously modernist culture (in Rée’s sense), but also, given their numerical weight, the way voices within the US academy drown out others to the extent that this ‘we’ is frequently simply taken to mean no one else. Thus the editors of a large critical anthology, *Feminisms* (1997), write in their introduction, in what seems to take itself as a gesture of openness, ‘We conceive “literary theory and criticism” as the realm of what is taught today in American departments of English’!²⁵ Likewise, innumerable essays assume their reader to be simply a colleague at another American institution, so that many British and other non-US critics have, unwittingly it seems, adopted the habit of writing as if they were in the US. There are also more obvious effects of power and numbers. For instance, a critic publishing work in any English-speaking country will almost always have that work assessed by a reader whose specific job is to gauge it against a possible US readership, so giving that market an effective veto and helping perpetuate a US-centric view of the world.

‘[W]hat is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself.’ The antagonist of Derrida’s remark is any form of nationalism, namely the identification of a singular people or peoples as the privileged embodiment of supposedly universal values. Nationalism affirms the particularity or even ethnicity of a specific people as examples, the best examples, of values with a more general claim, implicitly denigrating others. Analogously, the ‘we’ of professionalised criticism, for all its supposed diversity, recruits its members to a culture of the ‘good conscience’.²⁶ It slides towards being a predominantly American kind of exceptionalism,²⁷ a practitioner of that peculiarly modern kind of bigotry which consists in being too keen to attribute prejudice or moral fault to others as a principle for interpreting their actions or words.

Institutional Americanism often vitiates what ought to have been the generally globalising scope of modern criticism and thought. While recent thinkers in postcolonial theory, for instance, are coming to recognise the tension between its sweeping cultural categories (coloniser, subaltern, marginalised, etc.) and the particularity of literary texts, a culture of the good conscience still lingers. Thus, on one side, for instance, Deepika Bahri’s *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (2003) is sceptical of some effects of the way some postcolonial theory has hardened into a routinised disciplinary space:

A disciplined and predictable form of postcoloniality enters the academic and social arena, confounding any deep understanding of the economic and political realities of a postcolonial world whose sheer size, if not its internal

diversities, complexities, and saving grays, ought to have rendered it immune from such violently formulaic reductions.²⁸

This institutionalised complacency grates against what Bahri shows to be a 'text's singular and miniaturised interface with the general' (p. 8). At the same time, however, some oppressive effects of the modernist culture of criticism itself soon become evident in her own argument, as Bahri goes on to illustrate the reductiveness of some postcolonial typecasting in a specific case. Bahri attacks what has become postcolonial stereotyping by unpacking the way what she warily terms the 'Irish case' disrupts some of the dominant categories. However, the terms in which this argument deploys itself still remain so crudely generalising and appropriative as to suggest that even Bahri's own criticisms remain on the wrong ground.

As follows: the Irish, Bahri writes, have undoubtedly been at times an object of ethnic vilification, yet, contrary to the usual scheme, they are white. Geographically, they are European, not 'third world'. The Irish have had to resist projects of colonial acculturation and assimilation to British norms on the one hand, but, on the other, many of them were active partners in the military and commercial business of the British Empire. And again, on one side, Irish critics have seen parallels between their own literature and writing from India, Africa, etc., but, on the other, Irish nationalism has its own strain of white triumphalism. There is also 'Ireland's own recent history of protectionism against the third world and its poor record of aid' (p. 68), and so on. In fact, such 'protectionism' would be a European Union matter, not a specifically Irish one, but the fact that Bahri still needs to make her case by this kind of moral points-scoring view of history is itself, ironically, already a vindication of it: the danger of a 'glib reduction of the complex circumstances of colonialism to a disciplinarily intramural drama with a cast of characters comprised of usual suspects and predictable victims'. Even with Bahri's chapter, a certain goodies-and-baddies-thinking is evident in the way 'the English' (seeming often to mean 'the British') are assumed, cartoon-like, to constitute a homogenous body to be immediately and unproblematically identified with imperialism. In fact, Bahri's history is inaccurate library cramming: Ireland is called 'the oldest of England's colonies' (p. 60), overlooking the contentious cases of Wales and Scotland, as well the inept anachronism of terms such as 'colonies' and even 'England' in relation to what was a Norman kingdom that also included much of France; the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle (more than six centuries later) is quoted as an instance of 'English' perceptions of the Irish (p. 59). The ambition to complicate the basic tools of some postcolonial theory seems timely, but that even this should result in work so simplistic is troubling when

the issue is scenes of historical and contemporary violence for which ‘denial of the singularity of each person’ could be one description. Bahri’s ‘Irish case’ chapter both argues against and yet still instatiates the intellectual crudity and unhelpful moralism of using sweeping labels of cultural identity as a principle of interpretation, as against the scrutiny of always singular cases and the accompanying ethics of scholarly accuracy. The detailed strength of Bahri’s other chapters, which, unlike the ‘Irish case’ chapter, engage detailed and specific readings of Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie, supports the same point – that merely fine-tuning the stereotypes in postcolonial theory is insufficient basis for a responsible criticism.²⁹

Bahri’s odd blend of caricature and attention to the singular case bears out Wendy Brown’s observation that, while historiography based on notions of progress has been discredited, no obvious political substitute has emerged for ‘progressive understandings of where we have come from and where we are going’.³⁰ In practice a kind of lax pragmatism has meant that even work attentive to the claims of subaltern and minority groups still tends to beg many questions by employing as its aspirational norm the autonomous, willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject, liberated from the last feudal shackles of prejudice and supposedly free to possess itself as itself. Even as it acknowledges that ‘the Irish’ and ‘the British’ are often not so easily opposable, Bahri’s chapter on ‘the Irish case’ still pivots on the undiscussed liberal norm, even as her book must query its (overwhelmingly American) institutional context. In this way, much so-called ‘postcolonial’ criticism often deploys a moralistic criticism of one empire in terms that effectively bolster the ideological underpinnings of its successor. It is striking to observe that if the terms of the inclusion/exclusion or other-within model were to be employed in turn on much of the criticism that uses it, this would only produce, as it surely does in Bahri’s chapter, a cultural political reading underlining the present role of the United Kingdom as a client state of the US.

Conclusion

To return then to Jean-Luc Nancy’s claim that the danger for democracy lies in the temptation to find foundations for it. The pervasive implicit discourse of individual rights in the resistance vs. exclusion models of the dominant culturalism is precisely such a foundationalism. It prescribes specific notions of individualism and ‘free’ agency’ which perpetuate the intertwining of democracy with capitalism, and closes off the force of debate and contestation inherent to the literary space.³¹

This study argues that the thinkers presented here offer a more fruitful – a more just – ideal for reading literary texts; that even the controversial Heidegger of the Hölderlin readings is more genuinely thought-provoking than the American ‘infringed-citizens’-rights’ model. Each thinker, in different ways, elaborates what is a simply logical consequence of the idea that something or someone is ‘singular’: that the attempt to understand is going to reach a point at which its object can no longer be situated in terms of given concepts or explained in relation to known contexts or causes. Likewise, this means an acute sensitivity to the violence of stereotyping in others, in any issue, text or mode of research. To drive towards acknowledgement of the singular has often been an essential element in the ethics of scholarship and intellectual life. It must, of course, finally be cut short at some point, if conceptualisation and understanding are to be possible at all. But what is distinctive in the thinkers covered here is the challenging degree to which this point is held off. Each is intensely wary of the reductive violence that always lurks in the need to categorise or to conclude.

If one contrasts such thinking to the dominant culturalism of much contemporary work, the latter’s crudity is striking. Perhaps, as a counterweight, there is a need to recognise the extent to which all over-general schemas and machines of interpretation (with categories imagined to apply across the globe in some cases) can act as a kind of evasion. For the contemporary critic, an ethics of singularity may also be a safeguard against all the institutional pressures to assume in one’s own writing the mantle of an unjustified exceptionalism.

Also inherent in the idea of the singularity is the possibility of a radical break or rupture from the past. To be singular is, by definition, to refuse to be fully intelligible through heritage or environment. Nancy pushes the received idea of freedom as autonomy to a point at which it reveals its own conditions in a deeper and necessarily ungrounded notion of the free:

Auto-nomy, which has always represented the very regime of freedom, must be understood on this basis: as a legislation by the *self* in which the *self* does not preexist, since its very existence is what is prescribed by the law, and this law itself is not based on any *right*, since it founds with its own *juris-diction* the possibility of a ‘right’ in general. Freedom is not a right, it is the right of what is ‘by rights’ without right: with this radicality it must be understood as *fact*, as initial and revolutionary.³²

The ‘law’ here prescribes something that is not subordinated to anything prior: ‘Freedom cannot but precede itself in its own command.’³³ Hannah Arendt writes:

The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.

This frustration has the closest affinity with the well-known philosophic impossibility to arrive at a definition of man, all definitions being determinations or interpretations of *what* man is, of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other living beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a 'who' he is.³⁴

While the title of Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom* (1988) suggests that study as the obvious reference here, my preference in the following chapters will be to deploy analogies between work in the four thinkers covered there and Arendt's notion of 'natality'. As against Nancy's powerful but rather abstract formulations, Arendt's argument affirms a capacity for becoming other – for starting anew – that makes explicit how the notion of discontinuity inherent in singularity can relate, for example, to notions of reconciliation and invention. It helps map the details of specific literary readings to an alternative thinking of literature based on non-aggressive norms, a jump out of economies of justice-as-retribution or the use of cultural identity as a principle of explanation.³⁵

Natality is inseparable from singularity in referring to the absolute uniqueness of each person: 'With each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.'³⁶ 'Natality' also recommends itself as a concept that feeds, directly and powerfully, into thinking about the nature of education, offering a sense of what a scene of teaching and reading may look like that fully engages the issue of human freedom. Natality underlies human freedom as the capacity 'to establish relations and create new realities.'³⁷ Natality is thus 'the essence of education'³⁸ and of the art of teaching. For every student, facing what for a teacher may be the oldest exercise or the most familiar text, it is still a first time. Natasha Levinson writes of what she calls 'the paradox of natality':

Each newcomer brings with him/her the possibility that the world might be reinvigorated. However, this continual influx of newcomers means that these attempts to rejuvenate the world are constantly interrupted and set off course. Herein lies both the promise and the pathos of the new: each of us has the capacity to renew a world that seems to each generation 'out of joint,' yet this process is never completed. The world is never set right once and for all . . . It is constantly in need of the renewal that natality makes possible.³⁹

The dominant thinking in criticism for the past decade and more has been deterministic in its basic arguments. And it is surely right that readers and students be exposed to a sense of how the past, with its bewildering mix of achievements and wrongs, determines their present contexts, even down to elements of themselves they may previously simply have taken as given. To find oneself responsible for a world one did not make is a crucial experience of education or of coming to adulthood anywhere. Derrida observes that 'We inherit a language, conditions of life, a culture which is, which carries the memory of what has been done, and the responsibility, so then we are responsible for things we have not done ourselves, and that is part of the concept of heritage.'⁴⁰ However, there is also a danger that criticism which inculcates a strong sense of how cultural identity (in terms of ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc.) determines how a person will be perceived or treated may actually reinforce past oppressions. Levinson argues:

If students feel trapped by their social positioning, they are unlikely to act. Instead, they become resigned to their social positioning or, worse, they become resentful of others. Depending on the social positioning of the student, this resentment may manifest itself in anger or at being forced into the category of oppressor, or in anger that results from a history of victimization, marginalization, or oppression that is simultaneously denied and reinforced by the broader culture.⁴¹

In the seminar room, few things are more hurtful than for a person to find herself or himself treated or addressed as a type, or be taken solely as a member of a certain group or supposed category of person – a teacher can even be disciplined for it. Yet everyone, knowing herself or himself to be unique, continually encounters strangers as types in just this way and a great deal of criticism now even depends on this kind of thinking. Arendt concedes that the chances that tomorrow will repeat today are almost overwhelming, but the mere fact of natality means that the chance of invention and novelty is never extinguished. Those thinkers I have categorised under the rubric of a 'poetics of singularity' offer an understanding of the reading of the literary as a space in which natality is preserved.

Natality can correspond to moments when we become social actors, taking responsibility upon ourselves for our words or acts and refusing passively to fulfil a role, obey conventional expectations or to behave as 'normal' or 'expected' for the type of the person society may cast us as. The feature that defines an agent in Arendt's sense is the capacity for a kind of existential jump, to initiate something unexpected. 'To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin . . . Because they

are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.⁴² The four thinkers covered here, while not using Arendt's own term and with related but differing agenda, can be said to engage in the literary or poetic in relation to just this possibility of beginning, in both its elusiveness and excitement.

So the topic of singularity engages the force of a crucial 'post-existentialist' strain in each of the thinkers treated here. This is something that has come increasingly to the fore in Derrida's work of the past dozen years or so (the terminology of 'singular', 'absolute', 'universal' and 'paradox/paradoxical' recalling that of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843)).⁴³ Each offers, in relation to literature and beyond, a meditation on the irreducible singularity of each human life, so that, contrary to deterministic models of culture, the possibility of the completely new is always at work. As Kierkegaard writes, in relation to the crucial commitments, each generation starts again and can learn only very little from its predecessors. The non-liberal notion of freedom is decisive here – the 'dizziness of freedom' (Kierkegaard).⁴⁴