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POLITICS AS SUCH?

FRANCIS MULHERN IS, among his many other gifts, an astute analyst of style, of the little tics that give away an agenda at the level of the unconscious, the defensive retraction or qualification of what an argument appears to be specifying as its first order of affirmation. So the claim to ‘emancipatory change’ made by Cultural Studies—the object of Mulhern’s critique in his *Culture/Metaculture* and the topic of a series of recent exchanges in this journal—is for him signalled by its preference for versions of the descriptive-imperative phrase *no longer*.¹ Stuart Hall, who comes as close as anyone discussed in the book (but not quite close enough) to resisting an overvaluation of Cultural Studies, is prone to a ‘thickness of modification’ that does the opposite of what it seems to do: it is a way of ‘not coming to the point’ and is thereby ‘the deceptive figure of theoretical evasion’. He is given to ‘compulsive temporalization of logic, which grants to discursive shifters like *now* and *no longer* the status of truth-tests’ and indicates ‘a perspective in which novelty has become a value in itself and even an autonomous cultural force’.

Mulhern also astutely takes the measure of his interlocutor and critic Stefan Collini’s relentlessly well-mannered accumulation of subjunctive and subordinate clauses, recently offered in these pages as the voice of sweet persuasion: the rhetoric of accommodating man in his conviction that no one is immune to the appeal of conversation and good feeling. Collini’s somewhat unconvincing claim that he and Mulhern ‘both seem drawn to a similar tone or writerly stance in discussing these matters, including a taste for certain kinds of intellectual irony’, could not and did not fail to draw Mulhern into an articulation of some of their prominent differences.² Collini is for him the celebrant of ‘voice’, one for whom ‘utterance rather than statement’ is the priority of analysis, the devotee and practitioner of an essayistic style that eschews anything that might be

taken for an absolute and who uses biographical foundations to embed all positions in the complex and overdetermined conditions of real life. The model is conversational, 'favouring shared over contested values' and assuming the actual or potential existence of a 'company' of fellow spirits. For Collini, according to Mulhern, 'ideas count for less than the voices that circulate them and the sensibilities that vary their texture'.³

Practice and praxis

Next and predictably comes Collini's pointedly titled rejoinder which remarks, rather disingenuously, that 'something about my writing frustrates and irritates Mulhern', something that leads him to respond in a way that 'does not advance the argument'.⁴ Collini, modestly declaring himself 'less confident and less settled about the direction of my thinking than Mulhern seems to have been from a comparatively early age', then builds towards a resonant defence of conviviality and conversation as critical tactics that may risk 'apparent lack of focus or of theoretical force' but which finally do better justice to the rich texture of a world which is for him best reflected in 'a cluttered, medium-range zone of engagement in which serious public debate takes place' using 'all the resources at hand'. The mode is indeed one of conversation, and the enemy is—guess who—theory, acceptable to Collini as a team player on a large roster but not as a referee. Everyone is a player, nobody makes the rules, and the game never ends. This is what Collini calls a 'practice', a term that both absorbs and deflects the more confrontational *praxis* that lurks behind Mulhern's argument, in its ghosting of the prospect for more decisive interventions than can be contained in merely ongoing conversations.⁵

¹ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, London and New York 2000, pp. 162, 127, 118. On pp. 114–5 Mulhern discusses the context in which this aspect of Hall's work took shape—the 'New Times' debates in *Marxism Today*, which focused on the cultural shifts accompanying the move to a mode of production that was no longer Fordist. See also Stefan Collini, 'Culture Talk', NLR 7, January–February 2001; Francis Mulhern, 'Beyond Metaculture', NLR 16, July–August 2002; Collini, 'Defending Cultural Criticism', NLR 18, November–December 2002; Mulhern, 'What is Cultural Criticism?', NLR 23, September–October 2003; and Collini, 'On Variousness; and on Persuasion', NLR 27, May–June 2004.

² Collini, 'Defending Cultural Criticism', p. 90.

³ Mulhern, 'What is Cultural Criticism?', pp. 43–9.

⁴ Collini, 'On Variousness', p. 77.

⁵ Collini, 'On Variousness', pp. 79, 95, 96–7.

Collini's defence of conversation as critical practice (and vice versa) ends a protracted exchange wherein the matter of style came more and more to the forefront, as not only a persistent area of friction but also a big part of the substance of the various disagreements on show. Both Mulhern and Collini are successful and persuasive practising intellectuals. They write books, reviews and high-end journalism for others like themselves. They are also teachers in university classrooms. Their style is their trademark, the personalized profile they project as the bearer of their meanings and intentions and as the substance of what it is that their students might choose to model themselves upon. Style, that is to say, figures as an important tool in their work, and embodies their image in their workplace. This is how it is for intellectuals. Arguments about style have been intense at least since the British reception of Kant and Hegel, and in the aggressive reaction to them adopted by the common-sense philosophers and, thereafter, though to different ends, the 'ordinary language' movement. Difficulty of style was famously, for Adorno, a weapon for demystifying a corrupted communications culture based on mass media and on ideology masquerading as common language. Some years ago, a brilliant essay by Terry Eagleton pinpointed Jameson's style as a purposive, dislocated medium 'estranging but not parodying its object' while 'refusing at once the chimera of a "degree zero" political discourse and the allures of the commodified "art sentence"'.⁶ More recently we have had the journal *Philosophy and Literature* berating Judith Butler as the high priestess of obscurity by giving her the fourth of their bad writing awards. This had the partial virtue of eliciting a very sensible response from a range of writers showing that there is a long history of debates about bad writing, and that obscurity is often at the heart of short sentences made up of words with few syllables.⁷

All of the previous winners of this absurd award have been theorists (Jameson, Roy Bhaskar, Homi Bhabha), all are of the left. The Mulhern–Collini exchange has a place in this story. Collini is of course much too knowing to accuse Mulhern of an infelicitous style, but his distrust of the final judgement to which much of Mulhern's argument aspires is palpable throughout. And in refusing the gratifications of conviviality

⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Fredric Jameson: The Politics of Style', in *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985*, London 1986, pp. 67, 69.

⁷ Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb, eds, *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, Stanford 2003. See especially the essays by Margaret Ferguson, Robin Valenza, John Bender and Culler himself.

Mulhern is true to a legacy most vividly embodied for English readers in the figure of Althusser in the 1970s and 1980s, an intimidating and uncompromising scientism that threatened to pinpoint ideological affiliations and political lapses with unforgiving clarity. This was for E. P. Thompson one among the poverties of theory, evident in his critique of Althusser's 'absurd syllogistic world' and in his own counterclaim that 'history knows no regular verbs'. Thompson's falsely modest embrace of an 'English idiom' allowing for, perhaps, 'too much sensibility mixed up with my thought' is in a long tradition of British reactions to French rational sense that begins at least with Descartes and takes on definitive form in Edmund Burke's infamous and formative denunciations of French theory after 1789. Thompson's case against 'the project of Grand Theory—to find a total systematized conceptualisation of all history and human occasions', which he takes to be 'the original heresy of metaphysics against knowledge' stands fully in the tradition of Burke, even though it is deployed in the service of more compassionate social and political ends. Like Burke on the British Jacobins, Thompson saw in the Althusserians the storm troops of an 'ideological police action' and thus mistook a fight within the left for a diagnosis of systemic political power: neither the Jacobins in the 1790s nor the Althusserians in the 1970s ever had any real prospect of policing Britain, and to accuse them of such was effectively to carry forward the work of the right-wing scaremongers.⁸

Dissolving the political

In revisiting this history, surely familiar to many as it is unrecalled by others, I do not mean to propose a seamless continuum of unacknowledged conflict over the political affiliations and consequences of style, nor to suggest that Collini–Mulhern is a simple rematch of Thompson–Althusser. Collini is much too unruffled an interlocutor to pass for Thompson, who was often a fiery polemicist, and Mulhern, with his appealing sense of humour, could only pass as a very urbane Althusserian. I do however want to make clear that there is a long durational identity to the strife between propositional and conversational languages in the attribution of any kind of politics to the work of intellectuals and teachers. This remains the case in Collini's carefully worded periphrases and deliberate digressions (the stuff of one kind of conversation), and in

⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London and New York 1978, pp. 28, 46, iii, III, 183. See also David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism and the Revolt Against Theory*, Chicago and London 1993.

Mulhern's eye for the syntactic back of the net.⁹ Collini's style suggests an affiliation with the widely circulating company of Habermasian liberals who have argued for dialogic and conversational paradigms as the bearers of achievable consensus and the happy mechanisms of non-statist civil societies: a round-table model of self-governance that can only, in our given world, fulfil itself in small-group situations. When this model proposes to describe the whole, it is either utopian (as it often is for Habermas himself) or visibly ideological—a way of limiting discussion to a few qualified and polite persons. It is a talk shop, with unspoken limits on who gets to talk. This brings me to my title, which is a citation of one of Francis Mulhern's most persistent stylistic habits, an intensifying noun phrase that recurs at critical points in his argument and marks the limit of Cultural Studies and the crossover into something more respectable and desirable: *politics as such*.

'It is politics as such that is fundamentally in question here', we are told. The same 'politics as such' is what Leavis was crucially alienated from and what is denied by *Kulturkritik* (I will come back to this term). Along with politics as such comes 'political reason itself' and 'political reason proper'.¹⁰ These are the things Mulhern finds threatened or denied by Cultural Studies, in its shadow life as the modern agent of *Kulturkritik*. Both are guilty of a 'metacultural will to authority', which aims to 'dissolve the political as locus of general arbitration in social relations' and to 'mobilize "culture" as a principle' in its place.¹¹ One cannot but sympathize with Mulhern's case against the shoddy assumption that to celebrate the agency of popular or other culture as politically transformative in and of itself (one kind of Cultural Studies) is indeed to ascribe far too much power to a mere discipline in the circumscribed world of university teaching. (There is of course another kind which tends to the reverse position: that all popular culture is ideologically corrupt.) Mulhern is out to nail the assumption that culture is the most densely saturated vehicle of politics, that it matters more than any other form of politics, and that those who teach and study culture may therefore be the high priests of a brave new world. Here he is very much in line with, for example, Terry Eagleton in his recent *After Theory*, which berates a specifically American Cultural Studies for its narcissistic shrinkage of

⁹ A different address can be traced in Terry Eagleton's predilection for a Monty Pythonesque bestiary of wombats, weasels and the poisoned mongoose—like my football imagery, an attempt at the demotic.

¹⁰ Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. xix, 17 (Leavis), 148 (*Kulturkritik*), xxi, 67.

¹¹ 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 86.

politics to identity politics, and praxis to the college classroom; as if to intone the name of Toni Morrison were to disseminate revolution.

But what then *is* the politics of the classroom? Mulhern's 'politics as such' is explained as a practical engagement with local conditions and an attempt to 'determine the totality of social relations in a given space'; and as a 'theory and practice of synopsis' oriented to either 'maintenance or transformation'—conservative of the current order in the first case and revolutionary in the second. 'Culture is everywhere; politics can be anywhere' but is not necessarily so.¹² It is odd, then, to find so few specific examples of places where politics as such *is* connected with culture.¹³ Despite Mulhern's declaration that his analysis is purely 'formal in character', and does nothing to pre-empt particular identifications, his complete silence on the actual location of the university intellectual as some combination of public figure, teacher and writer leaves one feeling that the critique of culture imagining itself as wholly and always politics projects an alternative that has no flesh on it at all.¹⁴ The 'as such' thus registers as an abstraction, a theoretical opening that is never here filled. Once one begins to fill in the blanks, Mulhern's general dismissal of Cultural Studies (as such) seems to me troubling.

Classroom struggles

The pages of a journal, a book or a newspaper are a workplace; so too is a classroom. Each impinges on and reproduces a set of finite social relations with unpredictable social outcomes. Lately much of the state-of-the-art reflection on this predicament has played up either a realism/pessimism (take your pick), loosely derived from Bourdieu, pointing out that all of these functions, especially those of the classroom, tend to the reproductive rather than the revolutionary. John Guillory's powerful case in *Cultural Capital* was that it is a misdirection of effort and merely a simulacrum of political action to spend time fighting over the content of the canon that is taught to students of literature. The major function of literary studies in the university is one of accreditation—sorting out the As from the Bs and Cs, the firsts from the upper and lower seconds—and of modelling a certain limited and limiting version of literacy in the domain of

¹² Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 170; 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 101–2.

¹³ The *tute bianchi* and the women's movement are among the few he musters. 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 103.

¹⁴ Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 173.

writing.¹⁵ To this end, it matters little whether students read Shakespeare or Toni Morrison (whose novel *Beloved* is currently one of the most commonly taught books in us universities); the point is rather to discriminate between the good, not-so-good and poor essays written about them. As 'high' culture and complex language, moreover, such texts are equally remote from the day-to-day exchanges of modern students. Because cultural capital is flowing (according to Guillory) from traditional literary readings to other sectors of the higher education system (most dramatically, to the pre-professional majors that lead directly to careers), one might surmise that Cultural Studies (when conceived as the study of popular culture) is proliferating as part of a mission to save something of the humanities from a tidal wave of indifference. The old clerisy, founded in and committed to traditional standards of literature-based literacy, is being replaced by a novel 'new class', whose lexicon derives from the keyboard and the demotic grammars of hitherto-unauthorized speech; a medium that Cultural Studies is often compelled to incorporate in its effort to appear current and cutting edge.

Guillory offered a stringent rebuke of naive identity-based pedagogy, a challenge to those who think that teaching a certain kind of literary *content* (e.g. novels about slavery) is either effective or sufficient to constitute politics as such. His book has had a big effect on humanities teachers, and been widely celebrated. One can see why. To those (like Francis Mulhern) who are exasperated by the claims made by some exponents of Cultural Studies, it has been a welcome setting of limits, a reminder that effective politics lies elsewhere. To others it has surely been a release from certain kinds of responsibility, freeing them from guilt at continuing to teach Shakespeare, Tennyson and other dead white males. But the inquiry into political affiliation and effect can be pursued in any item of culture, past or present; as Mulhern says, politics can be anywhere. As a principle of historical-analytic method, I would say that *all* culture leads to politics, and in two distinct ways. First, there is no item of exemplary expression (a.k.a. culture), whether Tennyson or Toni Morrison, that cannot be shown to have or have had some describable relation to a history of what we call, in shorthand, class conflict, and to a descriptive totalization (one of Mulhern's definitions of what political reason does).

¹⁵ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago and London 1993.

It may be that we are beyond the point where anyone can usefully theorize what culture *is*, as opposed to offering another history of what anthropologists, sociologists and literary critics have taken it to be. Culture now describes not only works of art, highbrow or popular, but the dynamics of all social exchange: working, eating, sleeping. Adorno saw this as cause for epistemological despair: 'in the open-air prison that the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what; such is the extent to which everything is one'. In these conditions, 'the question of the causal dependence of culture', he concluded, 'takes on a backwoods ring'.¹⁶ Perhaps this despair, reincarnated as celebration, is one of the motives behind the overestimation of the adequacy of culture as politics that Mulhern attacks: if causes and effects can no longer be posited, then everything has to be embodied in the cultural object (as such), which becomes an expressive totality in itself. Nothing need then be said about mediation and there is no need for any re-examination of the base–superstructure problematic (still rarely explored in its original and often ambiguous forms, despite its centrality to the English debate); nor of the Althusserian case against the *coupe d'essence* which directly refutes any prospect of finding in a cultural object the reflective whole of its social-historical moment (past or present). Cultural items still require analytical specification in these terms.

Second, as a principle of pedagogic performance in the present, the location of teaching is itself always embedded in a site that can even more readily be made the object of totalization. Thus to teach a certain set of literary or other works to a specific group of students in a definite place and time (Oxbridge, community college, big state university, adult education group) is to participate in a clerisy and/or sector of the service economy whose structure is often perfectly transparent: tenured or untenured, full or part time, teaching 4 or 30 hours a week, having one or more jobs, unionized or not, supported by a range of staff positions, and so forth.¹⁷ One of the most visible and fractious distinctions in the US higher educational system is the relation between teachers of 'literature' and teachers of writing ('composition'), about which a great deal has been and is being written. There is a debate about the content of education at stake here: how much should students write, about what, and under what conditions? But there is alongside this a competition for workplace

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in Rolf Tiedemann, ed., *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford 2003, p. 161.

¹⁷ See for example Evan Watkins, *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, Stanford 1989.

recognition embedded in conditions of employment and reward. The politics of the second impinges upon the articulation of the first.

Culture's workers

In other words, both at the level of the standard academic analysis of an artefact (book, film, song) as socially or historically embedded, and in the performance of that analysis for pay (with a certain style of delivery, as I've already noted), it is hard to deny that something of Mulhern's 'politics as such' is at work, presuming some adequate self-consciousness on the part of the teacher/writer (without which there is only ideology, as there is everywhere else). What is it then, in Mulhern's view, that has worked against this possibility in the teaching of and writing about Cultural Studies? How many of those self-identified as professing it assume that culture in the first sense (historical-analytic) is the *whole* of politics, everything that matters, as opposed to being always traceable to a political moment in the past, and/or deployed in certain directions in the present? Mulhern reasonably wants to dissuade us from taking at face value the arguments of an Arnold or a Leavis, and the implicit assumptions of even the best of our sort—Williams and Hall—about the politically formative force of culture as such: a version of what has been called culturalism.

These were historically located arguments, expressions of a fear of economism as well as of the threat to humanities education posed by the new technologies, and can be explained as such without being justified or fetishized. They can also be understood as responsive to the general demise of what Perry Anderson described as a western Marxism prone to overestimating the cultural sector as either a last revolutionary medium (the purity or exemplarity of the aesthetic) or an articulate index of political failure.¹⁸ But do these foundational texts still function, apart from their place and time, as the core of a comprehensive methodology for Cultural Studies? Stuart Hall himself offered a history of the Birmingham School as an institution fully caught up in the stresses of feminism and race, even to the point of its own dissolution; one which ends with the claim that 'there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics'.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London 1976.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds, *Cultural Studies*, London 1992, p. 286.

Mulhern allows that his model of the discipline is a 'British case' and that the Birmingham paradigm has been replaced by a 'fractious international network conventionally resistant to all claims of origin, especially when they concern an old colonial heartland'.²⁰ But what is the force of 'fractious' if the origin was already so, and how convincing is the origin itself? *Metaculture* seems to suggest a covert coherence to the Cultural Studies enterprise that is actively disavowed by its practitioners, who have always resisted any limits on what they do and how they do it, in the cause of understanding 'a whole way of life' whose analysis cannot permit methodological constraints or prior 'guarantees'.²¹ In this way they are merely the limit case of a methodological eclecticism that affects (some might say afflicts) all the humanities and social sciences: the displacement of politics would then be a generic tendency in university culture, not a limited instance governing Cultural Studies. Is there really a core of Kulturkritik at work throughout this messy assemblage of objects and attitudes?

At the very least, if we are to account for the current profile of Cultural Studies there are a lot of names and places left out of Mulhern's diagnosis (start with Spivak, Said, Žižek, Butler, Bakhtin, Ahmad, Baudrillard) or merely mentioned without discussion (Bhabha, Bourdieu, Eagleton, Jameson, Lyotard). Strikingly undiscussed are above all the gurus of post-68: Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, without whom Cultural Studies (as such?) in much of the world is simply unimaginable. What of feminism? Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig, Haraway? Surely it is not only literary versions of Cultural Studies that foreground these and other figures as essential reading? Going back to exemplary origins, and picking up Stallybrass and White's widely influential *The Politics and Poetry of Transgression*, a prototype for one kind of cultural study, we read an opening declaration of the influence of four bodies of work, only one of them (Mary Douglas's) originally in English: the others are Bakhtin, Elias and Bourdieu.²² Or take Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), with its acknowledgment of the formative power of Barthes's *Mythologies*. I wonder whether this model of a movement founded in Williams and Hall and only peripherally influenced by others ever really existed. Mulhern would respond that his aim is to pinpoint a tendency,

²⁰ *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. xviii, 133.

²¹ Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, pp. 2–3, 14.

²² Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetry of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY 1986, p. ix.

a discursive form within Cultural Studies, rather than provide an aerial view. Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether this reconstruction, albeit in the interests of a merely formal articulation, may be a reification. One can sympathize with the critique of the easy rush to assumptions of political effect while wondering whether Mulhern might not be offering a reduced and partial model of what is a much more diverse history—one that arguably includes, in its knowledge of ‘1968’ as well as in the contemporary academic workplace, various versions of politics as such. A specific history of the Birmingham School would be one thing, but that is not what Mulhern seems to be proposing. Such a history would surely have to admit that the imperative, after 68, behind what would become departmentalized as Cultural Studies, was a democratic and demographic one: an insistence that the forms of unofficial ‘culture’ were worth attention as symptomatic of political-historical relations. This may have come with a residual taint of *Kulturkritik* in its occasional claims for the *quality* of the common culture, but that was not the main point.

Locating Kulturkritik

Mulhern’s follow-up essay ‘Beyond Metaculture’ does go some way toward modifying the implicit anglocentrism of *Culture/Metaculture*’s account of the study of culture, offering a reckoning with Adorno and Marcuse. But they too are found wanting, unwittingly interpellated by the ghosts of *Kulturkritik*. Mulhern is of course no xenophobe or defender of an anglophone supremacy, but an unintended consequence of his staging of the Hoggart–Williams–Hall triad as exemplary is the bypassing of alternative inputs as something more than just additives. To say that Barthes and Derrida and Althusser and others were there from the first is to offer a different construction of the core method itself, and to render it perhaps a method already dispersed and certainly not completely in the spirit of *Kulturkritik*.

There’s that word again. It is one of Mulhern’s organizing concepts, and one under which almost all of Cultural Studies is deemed to reside. It begins, as readers will know by now, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a melancholy ‘single discursive formation’ imagining culture as the sole (and lost) social authority now swallowed by modernization and the masses.²³ Latter-day assertions of the primacy of popular

²³ *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 19.

culture, originally despised by *Kulturkritik*, unwittingly inherit its idea of culture as the 'sovereign social authority' and thus its 'deep form': hence the subsumption and displacement of politics as such.²⁴

First, I want to register the positioning of this term, even without the italics denoting foreignness (a decision Mulhern explains in the book's first few pages), as still residually strange, and always foreign. Can the specification of *Kulturkritik* as the fatal flaw in Cultural Studies ever cease to suggest an invocation of *Kulturkritik* and therefore of a particularly German infection? *Caesar non est supra grammaticum*. If I were to propose that Mulhern's 'politics as such' were to be nominated 'politics an und fur sich', without italics or umlaut, how would I not be marking him as a Hegelian, however carefully I argued for the naturalization of the term as describing a grand discursive narrative of European thought, or as called forth by the lack of an adequate English term for what I mean? We are back to style, and to the styling of the foreign. The incubus sitting upon the body of Cultural Studies emanates from Germany and, more pointedly, its affiliation remains German: what inhibits politics as such is German ideology. 1968 et al. never had a chance. Could this stylistic tic, this urge toward the making foreign of the essential corrupting agency, perhaps be read (against Mulhern's declared intentions and his record as a solid internationalist) as another echo of Edmund Burke's suspicion of the foreign? (In his case French theory and German Illuminati?) Mulhern might respond by saying that it is merely a formal category appearing everywhere and not blamed on anyone.²⁵ But if we do not have in English an adequate term for this, because the literal translation means something else (as he claims), then are we not indeed in the business of attributing it to the foreign, and not simply as descriptor but as origin?

A parochial tradition?

Which brings me to the 'what is to be done' section of my argument. Many of those held to account by Mulhern for their unashamed embrace of the despised *Kulturkritik*—and I am not denying that they did embrace something of it—were also explicit advocates of a knowledge of the foreign. T. S. Eliot was an aggressive cosmopolitan committed to the

²⁴ *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 22, xix.

²⁵ And the editors of this journal, whose careful and considered responses have been a great help to me, would agree with him.

parity of the major European and classical languages and literatures with English. Leavis (on whom Mulhern has done brilliant work) was, for all his provincialisms, prepared to argue for both Dante and French literature as having an important place in an English literature curriculum. True, there is no democratic instinct at work in either of these cases. Leavis for instance turns to Dante for a ‘standing place’ outside the ‘modern scene’, and his taste for French is not unmarked by a conventional class identification with the language of polite exchange and diplomacy even if it is supported by its obvious relevance to Modernist poetry.²⁶ Behind both there is indeed Matthew Arnold, conventionally disparaged for his snooty worship of ‘the best that is known and thought in the world’ but less often remembered for his conviction that much of the best that has been known and thought was not known or thought in English.²⁷ For all of the elitisms enshrined in each of these educational polemicists they preserved what we must recognize as the *form* of the foreign, and a substantial element of its content, as something to be desired and disseminated. They did not speak for Edmund Burke’s England. As we exhume them for their various limitations—and most histories of the discipline of English studies do this regularly, as Mulhern does too—we should not gloss over the parts of their agendas that reflect on our own generational failures.

There may then be a coherence to the silence or oversight holding together Mulhern’s invocation of the negative functions of Kulturkritik, the partial reading of its deceased anglophone exponents (Arnold, Eliot, Leavis), and the complete or relative ignoring of French and other theory (and its historical occasions) in his genesis of a normative Cultural Studies discipline by way of three male writers: Hoggart, Hall and Williams. These writers are produced as much or more for what they lack as for what they offer, in order to create a space for a ‘cultural politics’ yet to come, or yet to be specified as other than formal; and always to be founded in the discrepancy between culture and politics.²⁸ My own sense of the discrepancy would include that between anglophone and other societies, and the pedagogical aporia represented by translation (always to be attempted, never to be completed, and above all always to be made self-conscious in its failures and limits). Cultural Studies,

²⁶ F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an English School*, new edition, London 1948, p. 62–3.

²⁷ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, London 1869, p. 36.

²⁸ *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 171.

it is true, has for most of its career focused on the exhibits of its own homelands. That is one way in which it has not followed the direction of the Kulturkritikers, whose internationalism should not be replicated as it was, but whose formal drive toward the exogamous should be honoured and adapted to the present. The opaque areas of the world are not just sentimentalized repositories of resistance to International Business English and the anglophone world novel: one of their names, for example, is Arabic.

The resistance of Cultural Studies to the foreign (as that which almost by definition it cannot study) is far more worrying than any residual investment in a preference for *Kultur* over mass culture and for both over politics. The methodological preference of Cultural Studies will almost always be for some narrowly national archive, since the thick description that it pursues almost demands that we stick to what we think we know best. And if it is indeed true, as it seems to be, that the institutionalizing of Cultural Studies is a specifically anglophone event, then it will not remain free from suspicion as performing a marketing effort for the new global order even in its critical attentions to the lineaments of a popular Anglo (but mostly American) lifestyle already deeply implicated in commodity fetishisms at every level. At the same time, there has not for some time been (if there ever was) a traditionally 'national' culture in any of the sites where the disciplinary formation (hardly a discipline) exists, so that ethnicity, globality, hybridity (cult words, but they lead to and overlie, for example, the conditions of the transnational movement of labour) have already registered as among its required terms of analysis. To resist the omission of the foreign as part of the national culture, within or beyond its borders, might well be, these days, a form of politics as such, and it can surely lead or be directed to such politics. Who sews our footballs?