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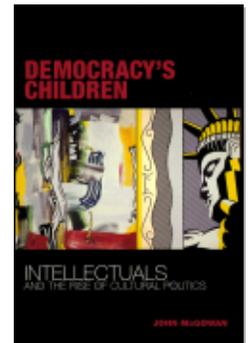
## Democracy's Children

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## INTRODUCTION

# *Literary Intellectuals in and for a Democratic Society*

I am an intellectual, not a scholar. The distinction is not meant to be invidious, nor to mark an absolute divide. My own work would be impossible without scholars, just as scholarly work always has some connection to current affairs. Still, a rough distinction is useful, if only to indicate various positions on a continuum that registers the relation of academic work to the attempt to have an influence on life in the polity right now. What interests me is the desire of many literature professors to address the general public, a desire hardly shared by the chemist who writes to a scientific community of the fifty people in the world able to understand his work, or by the Milton scholar who is tracing the sources of Milton's Latin poetry.

Tzvetan Todorov identifies two "conditions" that define an intellectual. "The first is that the individual in question is engaged in an activity of the mind resulting in the production of a work . . . . The second is that the individual is not content simply to produce a work but is also concerned about the state of society and participates in public debate. A poet shut off in an 'ivory tower' or a scientist in a laboratory is not an 'intellectual'" (1997, 1121). The term "intellectual" is often said to have originated during the Dreyfus affair in late nineteenth-century France. But Raymond Williams (1976, 140-41) places the term's origins in the early part of that century, citing a usage found in Byron in 1813. In the sociological literature on the subject (including Coser [1965] and Habermas [1991]), intellectuals as a recognizable social group are usually said to emerge in the

eighteenth century, with the French *philosophes* and English periodical writers as the first examples. My position (hardly unique) is that a pluralistic, secular society with freedom of speech and the press calls intellectuals into existence. The date of this emergence varies from place to place and is dependent on local conditions. This contextual dependence also insures that intellectuals' self-understandings and others' understanding of them are not stable. Thus, any characterization of intellectuals (like mine in this book) is also always a polemical attempt to influence intellectuals to be this rather than that. My efforts here are descriptive; I do try to characterize the current plight and goals of intellectuals in a way that "gets it right." And I certainly expect that I will only convince my readers if I am accurate about current conditions. But this work is also prescriptive; it argues for and models a certain way of doing intellectual work and certain commitments that claim to give that work meaning and value. I have no desire to disentangle the descriptive and prescriptive from one another in my work. So I agree with Todorov when he says "the intellectual cannot be replaced by the expert: the latter knows facts; the former discusses values. It is in their interest not to ignore each other, but there is a difference in their positions" (1997, 1122). I must also admit that I have no further definition of intellectuals to offer. I am certainly not interested in providing necessary and sufficient features for being a member of this group. Instead, this book discusses a number of institutional sites—the professional conference, the classroom, the university—and a number of key concepts—modernity, culture, democracy, pluralism—in or around which intellectual work is done. The plausibility and usefulness of the way I deploy the term "intellectual" will rest on how it focuses or illuminates discussion of these specific matters—and on the light these matters shed back on how we might understand the intellectual.

If this seems cavalier, even irresponsible, I had better 'fess up to another irresponsibility, while I'm at it. The political theorist John Dunn castigates writers who treat texts from the past or present "with varying degrees of attention and patience, simply as repositories of potential intellectual stimulation for a contemporary reader, and permitting themselves to respond, accordingly, just as fancy takes them" (1996, 19). I cheerfully accept that this description fits my own work. Except, of course, that Dunn rather overstates the freedom of the intellectual grasshopper as contrasted to the scholarly ant. The intellectual is rarely so footloose and fancy free. Responsibility is located elsewhere for the intellectual, not nowhere. Working from commitments to present programs and present constituencies,

the intellectual might very well envy the freedom of the scholar whose pursuits are less guided by immediate pressures or the desire to address audiences outside a particular specialist cohort. The intellectual articulates concepts, commitments, and visions that legitimate and/or contest the way that we live now.<sup>1</sup>

This work of articulation is eclectic. It requires, among other tasks, elucidation/elaboration/contestation of received and current ideas; the examination of prevailing practices, beliefs, and institutions in relation to stated principles and as indicators of unstated motivations; an engagement with the multiple traditions that traverse contemporary cultures and influence individual agents; and efforts to bring intellectual discourse to bear within a polity which features a plurality of discourses.

To embark on these tasks would be difficult if the intellectual could not name for himself or herself the fundamental commitments that underwrite the work. To what do I feel responsible, to whom do I hold myself answerable? There have been various answers to the “what” over the past two hundred years: art, economic justice, social equality, my ethnic group, my nation, my gender group. Intellectuals have been notoriously prone to opt for package deals that encompass a “what” to be committed to, an analysis of how that “what” has been maligned, and a program for correcting past and current wrongs. Think here of aestheticism, Marxism, nationalism, or whatever other -ism is your personal favorite or personal *bête noire*. Even where the intellectual eschews the rigidity of the Bergsonian clown which threatens the card-carrying adherent, intellectual positions are almost always charted by way of programmatic signposts. Such programs conveniently provide others with whom to converse and argue, thus offering an audience for the linguistic output that is the final product of almost all intellectual work.

But this audience only partly constitutes those to whom the intellectual feels answerable. There is almost always another group—a group often figured as oppressed—who is to benefit from the intellectual’s activities. This

1. Edward W. Said’s account of the intellectual starts from a similar place: “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.” But he then connects that articulation to “universal principles . . . concerning freedom and justice” that are often violated by “worldly powers or nations.” Thus, the intellectual is to be “someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (1996, 11). Said moves too quickly here, I think. Both universal principles and the intellectual’s relation to the neglected and to worldly powers are more problematic than he allows.

group isn't seen as directly connected (either through reading or other direct encounters) with the intellectual's work, but is to benefit nonetheless. At the very least, then, the intellectual's discourse is double-voiced, addressed to a peer audience which has similar concerns (and, very often, similar commitments) and to a more amorphous and often unlocatable public.

It is allegiance to an -ism, I take it, that provides both the significance and the agonies of the intellectual's efforts. At the current time, when the intellectual and her peers almost invariably hold university posts, work addressed solely to a peer audience would be entirely academic. By way of the -ism, the intellectual holds onto the aspiration of doing work that extends beyond the academy—and is ever aware of what few resources she has for successfully breaking the barriers between the academy and other social locales. For the pure academic, a discipline serves as the substitute for an -ism; most intellectuals, however, strive to subordinate academic work and academic disciplines to the service of their "larger" commitments. The intellectual struggles to make the university serve his or her program, not *vice versa*. In short, the intellectual's self-understanding usually includes an ironic relationship to academic usages and disciplines, a determination to keep things in perspective, to balance continuously "petty" academic concerns against the needs of the "wider" world. She dreams of being a "public intellectual," of reaching that chimera "the general reading public."

Intellectuals, then, are vulnerable in their allegiance to a program and in their relationship to the university. Every time they make careerist moves or win academic accolades, they can be accused of hypocrisy, of striving strenuously for honors they claim to despise. More pointedly, intellectuals always harbor delusions of grandeur. They could not do their work if they didn't project consequences wildly out of proportion to what they actually accomplish. Modest and reasonable ambitions would render the work pointless. A certain willful blindness is required.

Called upon to explain how their work will effect the transformations it calls for, the intellectual has only comically feeble Rube Goldberg scenarios to offer, a voodoo politics replete with its own versions of "trickle down" influence. There are no palliatives for these vulnerabilities, certainly no *a priori* strategies that insure scaling the academic walls and making an impact elsewhere, anywhere but here. The intellectual is constantly bedeviled, no matter what she is doing, by the thought that she has undertaken the wrong work at the wrong time and in the wrong place. There is no salvation from double-voicedness and double consciousness ("optimism of the

will, pessimism of the intellect" in Gramsci's words), just as there is no escape from mixed motives, from writing manifestos with footnotes, from wanting to impress academic peers as we strive to better the world.

All I would ask is that we intellectuals avoid fetishizing and cherishing our dilemmas as we also eschew pronouncements of exceptional virtue, purity, and integrity. We are in the mix like everyone else, although in ways made distinctive by our specific institutional (academic) location. What I am trying to combat is the narcissism of intellectuals, their tendency to find their own ambiguous position in modern societies endlessly fascinating. "This is not about us," I want to scream. Yes, our own perplexities are analogous in ways to those bemusing other social agents. And our institutional positionings do locate us within networks of power relevant to, and sometimes significant impediments to, the larger concerns we strive to address. So we do need to articulate where we stand and what we are trying to accomplish. But to probe continually the difficulties of doing our work is, precisely, not to do the work. And I do not believe that the next (or any) probing will make the work less difficult.

I want to think about the intellectual as ideologue, as a public advocate for a particular set of arguments. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines "ideology" as "the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, or culture." Let's try, for a little while at least, to keep the definition neutral with respect to whether the ideology is true or false, conscious or unconscious, autonomously generated or reflective of some more fundamental set of interests/motives. The intellectual is someone who publicly articulates an ideology—and who makes no bones about his or her support of that ideology, support that often involves refutation of rival ideologies. Intellectual work involves struggling to articulate a position in such a way that I satisfy myself and think I might persuade others. Satisfying myself, from which much of the pleasure and interest of the work comes, entails feeling that I have figured something out, have increased my understanding, have gotten things "right" in both expression and accuracy, and have been faithful to my primary commitments. But achievement of these satisfactions depends on the pointedness my thoughts only assume when they are articulated for a public airing. Whether I persuade a single reader or not, the intended publication of my views is necessary to their being stated in a form capable of satisfying even my private investments in the work. That articulation is mine, but it is a part of me that can only come into existence in the public sphere of published writing.

Like many intellectuals today, I name my primary allegiance “democracy” and want my work to further the cause of democracy. Specifically, that aspiration entails elucidation of the term itself; advocating extension of democratic practices into social sites (the classroom, the workplace) where they are often deemed inappropriate; and considering how commitments to equality and autonomy can be negotiated in concrete situations involving differences and interdependencies (of various kinds) as well as complex, differentiated social structures/institutions.

There is good reason to believe that historically and logically the intellectual is a product of democracy—democracy’s child—and feels for democracy all the ambivalent love that ties a child to its parents. To thrive, intellectuals require freedom of speech and of the press; a public sphere in which ideas are aired and debated; tolerance of, even a taste for, multiple, dissenting opinions; the possibility of gaining authority, of winning the assent of others to one’s views, through speech alone; and a market that allows cultural capital to be translated into money (a salary). Democracy, especially in its demotion of all traditional established authorities, provides many of these conditions. The autonomy granted to individuals to choose their own course in life leads to an explosion of public speech both because individuals strive to justify their choices to others and because others strive to influence the individual’s choices. Of course, the Protestant Reformation with its elevation of individual conscience, the invention of the printing press, and the rise of capitalism all contribute to the appearance of intellectuals in the eighteenth-century, and historians debate how these factors are implicated in the slow (and still incomplete) movement toward democracy in the West from 1750 to the present. My point here is that the conditions that accompany democracy also enable the existence of intellectuals, even those intellectuals who rail against those conditions. The persistent downside of democracy for intellectuals of every persuasion is that their views rarely become authoritative. Economic necessity and interests, nationalism, religion, careerism, consumerism, and mass culture all seem to influence individual and societal choices more than intellectual articulations.

I am a left democrat. I am tempted, of course, to say that it is impossible to be a right democrat, because the right, with its concerns about order and excellence, believes in hierarchy. One fundamental difference between the left and the right is that leftists think that the most vulnerable in any society are those with the least economic resources and/or those who have historically been denied the full rights, benefits, and duties of

citizenship. Such leftist concerns are best captured by the term “justice” as in economic or social justice. It is not self-evident that justice and democracy go hand-in-hand, although much leftist writing on the subject nowadays appears to take the connection for granted. More democracy must lead to more justice, these writers assume. The link here is through the concept of equality. More democracy would require more political equality than we currently have, and more political equality would lead to more economic equality, which would be more just. All of these equivalences must be questioned. One task of the leftist intellectual committed to democracy is, as I see it, to think through the tangle of leftist allegiances and the possible synergies as well as the possible incompatibilities among them. Nothing guarantees that all these desired goods must function harmoniously together in some Hegelian fashion. It is much more likely that the opposite is true, that compromises and trade-offs will be required all the way down the line.

Still, we can recognize the right’s opposing tendency to think that the exceptional person (whether the writer of genius or the highly successful entrepreneur) is prone to the envy of the mediocre and/or the efforts of the state to rein him in, to regulate his activities. The right worries about the tyranny of the majority and about leveling effects that hamper excellence (either its achievement and/or its receiving due appreciation/reward).

Because the right used the word “democracy” during the Cold War to name its moral superiority to its adversaries behind the Iron Curtain, the left lost the word for a time.<sup>2</sup> But a post-communist left (freed from a continually embarrassing alliance with the Soviet Union and China, an alliance stemming from the fact that their enemies on the international scene were our enemies on the domestic front) is now beginning to relearn the resources that democracy affords a critique of the current form taken by the soi-disant “Western democracies.”

At issue then is what relation intellectual activity can have to the project of left democracy. I think there is a form/content split here that is rarely acknowledged. Intellectuals of any stripe make substantive arguments, or content-laden interventions, on specific occasions. Such attempts at direct persuasion are published in various venues—and there is absolutely no way to measure what, if any, impact is made. When the goal is as diffuse as influencing people (as opposed to an appeal directly made to a

2. Compare with Todorov’s comment: “In the last quarter century, intellectuals seem to have reconciled with democracy, and when they criticize it, their criticism is founded on the ideal of democracy itself” (1997, 122).

specific few), we cannot know if the goal has been reached, or to what extent. This is as true for those relying on the indirect discourses of the arts as for those who employ a more direct, argumentative discourse. The ability of intellectual activity to generate further intellectual activity is palpable, but its ability to generate political conviction that results in political action is not.

Oddly enough, upon reflection most people with an allegiance to democracy wouldn't have it any other way. Despite postmodern critiques of autonomy and humanist individualism, most academics (even those who are, roughly speaking, postmodernist in their views) think it a fundamental violation of their students to tell them what to think and to require the regurgitation of that content on exams. A basic ethos of autonomy prevails. We can give people the materials for forming an opinion; we can expose them to strongly argued opinions on a topic; we can even express strongly our own opinion (although only carefully when our audience is subordinate to us in a hierarchical institution); but we cannot require others to adopt any particular opinion. Allowing individuals autonomy of belief seems fundamental to the very democracy we would cherish and nurture. Critiques of autonomy, then, usually aim at demonstrating that we shouldn't take the existence of autonomy for granted, that we are continually influenced by forces that are invisible to us; only rarely do such critiques argue that autonomy in opinion formation is not desirable. It is precisely the gap between enunciation of my belief (in whatever guise) and its adoption by my audience that I strive mightily to overcome and am relieved never to bridge successfully. The only thing worse than a world in which no one agreed with me about anything would be a world in which everyone agreed with me about everything.

This substantive failure to persuade all my readers is paired with a formal success. The view of democracy which I am trying to enunciate highlights not only the individual determination of belief, but also transformative interaction. As we strive for a substantive agreement we never fully achieve, we encounter others in a dialogic give-and-take that is potentially transformative. Admittedly, I am stressing (to the neglect of other elements for the moment) the rhetorical component of democracy. A democratic polity is marked by the continual effort of various citizens to persuade their fellow citizens of something. The relative failure of such efforts at persuasion makes democracy look like cacophony. My suggestion is that the cacophony is substantive, while the form of the polity is constituted by these dialogic interactions. The democratic polity is not de-

pendent on agreement; it depends on our continuing to talk to one another. A political community, a functioning public sphere, rests not on whom I agree with but on whom I keep talking to. Intellectual activity is precisely this continuing to talk. By the enunciation of my views, I contribute to the ongoing talk that is a crucial part of a democratic society.

To decenter the notion of substantive agreement in this way suggests that a polity does not possess one public sphere, but any number of smaller spheres, some of which overlap at times, some of which function entirely independently of each other.<sup>3</sup> Any citizen is inevitably indifferent to or ignorant of the existence of many of these spheres. Each person's activities only encompass a small fraction of actual and possible public interactions. Tolerance of multiple interactions allows for a rich public life that can reflect, stimulate, and serve the varied interests of the population. But it would be naïve to think that these mini-spheres do not (in at least some cases) strive to attain significance through claims to generality. Different communities will engage the polity as a whole through the insistence that their choices model the best way to live. Such communities often stress unanimity among members in these confrontations with outsiders. To model a way of life for others is a major form public speech takes in a democracy. Such modeling often calls forth hostility between groups and tighter internal policing within groups. The co-existence of mini-spheres that represent fundamentally different choices of how to live depends on respecting autonomy of choice for both insiders and outsiders of any particular sphere. The polity, in other words, is still recognizably one polity when crossings from one sphere to another are frequent and do not carry dire consequences. Nothing guarantees that such conditions will prevail. Secession and civil war are ever-present possibilities, as current events make all too clear. Yet employing strong measures to achieve political unity appears futile at best, counter-productive at worst. Thus, draconian attempts to sever groups from their inherited language rarely achieve the desired assimilation. Tolerance of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and other differences may degenerate into dissolution of the polity, but tolerance's track record in preserving polities is better than its opposite.

3. My thoughts here are strongly influenced by Nancy Fraser (1992), who is interested in locating "subaltern counter-publics" and thus stressing the possibilities for public action (and interaction) which exist for those who are not at the top levels of existing hierarchies. I want to register here my uneasiness with the metaphor of "spheres" and my embarrassment with the clunkiness of "mini-spheres." I am not committed to the image, only to the argument that there are many sites of interaction and that they are neither centralized nor coordinated.

Another way to phrase my form/content split for democracy, then, is to say that toleration of substantive disagreement actually increases the chances for lasting formal cohesion. Think of it like a marriage. All is well so long as arguments do not entail the possibility of divorce. And there is some reason to believe that arguments can be more vehement precisely when the marriage does not seem at stake. But, of course, divorce is always possible. Some substantive disagreements may just prove intolerable. Form and content cannot be totally insulated from one another and there is no recipe for insuring that one will not infect the other. But democratic polities appear dependent on an attempted disentanglement of the two.

This account of public disagreements is so simple that it ought to make us suspicious. For one thing, it smacks of the kind of “invisible hand” reasoning found in Adam Smith. Each of us just has to keep earnestly trying to persuade others and, behind our backs, our individual efforts will create the democratic public sphere we desire. How convenient! Intellectuals just need to do what they are paid to do—read books, then talk (with students) and write (for other intellectuals) about them—and they will be doing democracy’s work.

What is missing if we simply celebrate existing public interactions (in the university or elsewhere) is any account of the risks, the costs, of dialogic involvement. For a start, the term democracy names a whole range of desires in the contemporary world; not all of those desires are inevitably compatible with the vision of enriching, transformative public interaction that I am gracing with the word democracy. Furthermore, democracy (even in the most broad uses of the term) hardly names the only desirable things in the world—and it is not compatible with many of those other desirable things. Finally, even functioning public spheres that do operate in the way I am celebrating are almost always parochial, that is, shielded from the power and resource inequities that afflict all but the smallest and most exclusive communities in the contemporary world. It is a pretty safe guess that anyone who has been privileged enough to experience democratic interaction is privileged in more obvious material ways as well.

The specific name for the privilege enjoyed by academic intellectuals is professionalization. George Bernard Shaw says somewhere that every profession is a conspiracy against the lay person, a statement true enough to bear repeating. Professions manage to create public spaces of dialogic interaction by gaining almost exclusive right to govern who can join the

dialogue and who cannot. Long apprenticeships, peer review, and self-policing are just three of the mechanisms a profession uses to control membership. Such control is only won when the profession manages to gain consent (most crucially from the government, but also from professionals in other defined fields and from the more general public that is the profession's clientele) to its right by virtue of expertise and competence to monopolize a certain service or labor. The profession's monopoly covers both its exclusive right to provide the service (or do the work) *and* its exclusive right to determine (through credentials or licenses) which individuals belong. Professions do not possess absolute autonomy; to varying degrees they do remain answerable to their clients and the government and the market. But they certainly enjoy a semi-autonomy that gives professionals a freedom in their work afforded no other laborers in today's economy.

That freedom, especially for academics, is intimately connected with job security. Tenure is a dinosaur. The kind of job security it provides has been lost by just about every other significant body of workers in contemporary society. When fighting to defend tenure, academics should recognize how privileged they are to still have that security. The argument for tenure should not rest on the uniqueness of what we do, but on the reasons that job security should be a basic right for all workers. The assault on tenure (especially the greatly expanded use of part-time or adjunct teachers where tenurable or tenured faculty previously were employed, but also various schemes to do away with tenure for full-time faculty) is, in some cases, connected to efforts to combat professional monopolies. But such assaults are much more frequently connected with the contemporary economy's maximizing of productivity through use of a modified piece-work system. Workers are only hired for the specific times and the specific tasks for which they are needed, and are not carried by the employer during slack times. This practice is not only cost-efficient and conducive to organizational "flexibility" in relation to demand and other economic fluctuations; it also drives down wages, since non-secure and temporary workers are much less able to hold out for decent pay. Contemporary assaults on tenure have very little to do with academic freedom, but are connected to new economic practices that have greatly lessened job security across the board in the United States (and elsewhere).

These questions of professional privilege and labor market practices are relevant to the left intellectual for reasons beyond the appalling job market for new PhDs in English and related fields. (I do not mean to suggest that

job market questions are unimportant; quite the contrary. But the specific factors involved in our particular job market would require an analysis that would supplement the more general discussion of academic professionalism being offered here.) In regards to the professions, the leftist academic is in a bad spot, somewhat similar to his position vis-à-vis the welfare state. Welfare does not work very well, if only because dignity and self-worth are so completely connected to having a job in our society. (Just ask any of our unemployed PhDs how they are doing, before you sneer at the work ethic or bemoan the complicity with capitalism of reform programs that focus on employment.) To defend welfare against its current abolishers is to argue for a flawed program against outright cruelty. Similarly, remembering Shaw, a full-scale justification of professionalism seems (to me at least) hardly the democratic route. But we should recognize that, at the present time, the work conditions afforded academic professionals much more closely approximate the kinds of work conditions that would accord with various democratic ideals. In other words, it does not seem particularly productive to destroy professional privilege because it is enjoyed by so few, when many features of that professional privilege enact the very practices we want to see more fully available and practiced in our society.

In arguing that intellectual work in the contemporary academy models the democratic interactions I want my work to promote, I do not want to be hopelessly Pollyannish about academics' work. The academy is also riven by inequities that are systematically produced and maintained. But I do believe that we have more autonomy than afforded most workers; that we participate in an agonistic give-and-take that both constitutes a public space of interaction and serves to influence the on-going formation of opinion by individual participants; and that such transformative interactions are a crucial component of the kind of democracy I hope my work can foster and that I wish to inhabit. I certainly believe that I have the best job going and that my ability to have this job depends on the labor of many people who do not get to work in conditions even remotely comparable to mine. Therefore, it seems incumbent upon me to think about how the freedom and security accorded me can stand as an example of the way work can be, taking into account that the translation of freedom and security into other spheres of activity would result in very different institutional arrangements. (I am not aiming for a world transformed into so many campuses. God forbid.) In sum, I think our professional privileges are justified partly by the work we do, but much more importantly by the example we provide of a democratic existence.

To think of myself as an example is to think of myself as a teacher. Many intellectuals today, and almost all literary intellectuals, teach. If I influence my students, it is to a certain extent directly due to the things I say and the material I give them to read. But I also influence them indirectly by my way of being in the world of the classroom. To me the classroom is to be, as much as possible, a utopian space. It is to be that democratic public space of transformative interaction I want to occupy. Certainly, as both a student and a teacher, the classroom has been a magical space for me, a place where I am often most fully the person I would wish to be. That self—and, indeed, the social space it inhabits—is created through the give-and-take with the others in the room. The classroom probably acquires its magic in large part through its immunities. Nothing momentous, nothing on which life hinges, is at stake in most class meetings. But before we hasten to declare such immunity inevitably trivializing, let's think about security one last time. We can be open to change, to influence, to letting ourselves follow a thought or a whim where it goes, precisely when nothing absolutely vital is at stake. And nothing absolutely vital is at stake when employment or other forms of security are not in play. All of which is a way of arguing that a democratic public sphere looks like it is dependent on a minimal material security that cannot be jeopardized by one's activities in that sphere. If this is true, it is no longer surprising that classrooms and other academic sites are our society's closest approximations to such a democratic public sphere. Where else are the stakes so carefully separated from economic consequences?<sup>4</sup>

I appear committed to a very aestheticist notion of the classroom here, finding in its separation from the "real world" its ability to foster some freedom of imaginative play, , some fairly uncensored dialogic interactions. I might even go further and think of the models enacted in the classroom as "hypothetical," thus linking up to theories of art that stress its fictional, creative, or "as if" qualities. Northrop Frye (1957) offers a good example of this view for my purposes because he connects it to the "task" of the intellectual. "Literature," Frye writes, "in its descriptive content is a body of hypothetical verbal structures. The latter stand between the verbal structures that describe or arrange actual events, or histories, and those that describe or arrange actual ideas or represent physical objects, like the verbal structures of philosophy and science" (125). Freed from any constraining tie to

4. Thanks to Susan Bickford and Donald Hall for sharpening my thoughts here by strongly disagreeing with my notion that nothing vital is at stake in the classroom.

reality, poetry produces “the universal creative word which is all words” (125). Frye then links poetry to “the autonomy of culture, which may be provisionally defined as the total body of imaginative hypotheses in a society and its tradition. To defend the autonomy of culture in this sense seems to me the social task of the ‘intellectual’ in the modern world” (127).

On the level of practice, I fully admit that the classroom is hardly untainted by power inequities or by the economic pressures that send many students to college against their own inclinations. It is not autonomous in the way that Frye wishes to claim for the all-creating poetic word. But I do want (foolishly?) to believe that the practical concerns of jobs and credentials are not utterly determining in the final instance. (I tackle these issues more fully in chapters 2 and 4.)

On the level of theory, I am even more conflicted. To what extent am I committed to the positive effects of a semi-autonomy for the aesthetic or for the university? I don’t know—and think that my indecision is pretty common among literary intellectuals of my generation and my (leftist) stripe. My unwillingness to simply abandon a hankering for separate spaces is grounded on my intuition that democratic interaction is crippled where basic necessities, like enough money to live, are at stake in all interactions. Without some job and income security, democracy is a non-starter. But I think we lose much—way too much—if we make existing economic inequalities trump in every instance. Such radical reductionism recalls the original use of the term PC to refer to a joyless inability to affirm pleasure in the here and now. We need to lighten up somewhere, somehow, if only to model the world we hope will exist as a more generally available reality in the future. Yet we have to retain our awareness in 2001 that it’s a privilege to have fun, to conduct thought experiments. That awareness and the freedom to slough off burdens sometimes have to find a way to co-exist productively. It’s the brave aestheticist who goes the totally hedonistic route: all that matters is my pleasure and I will pursue it full bore. Almost all aestheticist versions of art’s unique and separate identity offer a redeeming social value in the end. For Frye, nothing less than human freedom is at stake. I can’t follow Frye, partly because of the grandiloquence of his claims for art, partly because the argument seems circular: define art as unconstrained by ties to either reality or any other human endeavor/need and then find that art is where humans experience freedom and so art must be preserved in order to preserve freedom. I prefer Kenneth Burke’s (1973) view that literature lets us try out hypothetical attitudes and provides “equipment for living,” an account that

still needs to defend art's relative autonomy. Burke's view puts art into a more direct give-and-take with the world we inhabit everyday, but still insists on a crucial gap between art and that world.

We can approach this problem of the classroom as an experimental space from another angle: to what extent is the intellectual (or anyone else for that matter) required to "live" his ideas. "Intellectual" was a term of abuse when first used: it designated someone who was disconnected from daily realities and thus believed all sorts of foolish nonsense.<sup>5</sup> For Lionel Trilling (1955), "the characteristic error of the middle-class intellectual of modern times is his tendency to abstractness and absoluteness, his reluctance to connect idea with fact (163)"<sup>6</sup> This fear of abstraction, of an abiding unreality, finds its most extreme form in the assertion (which usually, but not always, comes from the right) that it was intellectuals, those with ideas and programs for the world's improvement, who did the most harm in the horribly bloody twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> According to Trilling, this suspicion led Orwell "to respect the old bourgeois virtues because they were stupid—that is, because they resisted the power of abstract ideas. . . . [H]e began to fear that the commitment to abstract ideas could be far more maleficent than the commitment to the gross materiality of property had ever been. The very stupidity of things has something human about it, something even liberating" (166). Floating free of material realities, the classroom can seem a dangerous space—and precisely the kind of space that intellectuals would create and cherish. All kinds of unreal ideas can be entertained and elaborated there.

5. Williams (1976) writes: "Until mC20 [middle twentieth-century] unfavourable uses of *intellectuals*, *intellectualism*, and *intelligentsia* were dominant in English, and it is clear that such uses persist. But *intellectuals*, at least, is now often used neutrally, and even at times favourably, to describe people who do certain kinds of *intellectual* work and especially the most general kinds" (142).

6. It is worth quoting more of the passage: "[T]he prototypical act of the modern intellectual is his abstracting himself from the life of the family. It is an act that has something about it of ritual thaumaturgy—at the beginning of our intellectual careers we are like nothing so much as those young members of Indian tribes who have a vision or a dream which gives them power on condition that they withdraw from the ordinary life of the tribe. By intellectuality we are freed from the thralldom to the familial commonplace, from the materiality and concreteness by which it exists, the hardness of cash and the hardness of getting it, the inelegance and intractability of family things" (163). Richard Rorty (1998) offers a similar critique of intellectuals' neglect of the material realities of most citizen's lives. Rorty, however, focuses on the abstraction from one's country (or nation), not family.

7. Paul Johnson (1988) provides a particularly expansive version of the right-wing scorn of intellectuals.

Such worries reflexively call forth solemn statements about the “responsibility” of intellectuals. I am tempted to see the residual tension between abstraction and commitment as constitutive in the case of intellectuals. The constant swing from celebrating the intellectual’s critical distance and autonomy to exhibiting the intellectual’s commitment to the welfare of others and the noblest ideals replays the same uneasiness that leads apologists for art’s autonomy to find, at the very end, an explanation of that autonomy’s social utility. I have stressed so far the intellectual’s allegiance to an –ism, but Ralf Dahrendorf (1969) insists that “all intellectuals have the duty to doubt everything that is obvious, to make relative all authority, to ask all those questions that no one else dares to ask” (51).

Both Edward Said’s career and his various pronouncements on intellectuals seem particularly locked into this recurrent *pas de deux* between commitment (responsibility) and skepticism. Said continually celebrates “exile,” the “distance” of the intellectual from the prevailing idols of the tribe. “[I]t has often been the intellectual . . . who has stood for values, ideas, and activities that transcend and deliberately interfere with the collective weight imposed by the nation-state and the national culture” (1983, 10). For Said, the urge to belong must be fought at every step; it is the worst temptation to which an intellectual could succumb. Yet the very specter of irresponsibility that such non-belonging evokes requires repeated statements of fidelity to the most exalted ideals. Thus he must connect being an outsider with a privileged relation to salutary virtues. “The strength of the Canaanite, that is the exile position, is that being defeated and ‘outside,’ you can perhaps more easily feel compassion, more easily call injustice injustice, more easily speak directly and plainly of all oppression, and with less difficulty try to understand (rather than mystify or occlude) history and equality” (1988, 178).<sup>8</sup> Said takes here the polar opposite view from Orwell’s. Abstraction from the blinding loyalties and compromised affiliations of daily life enable a less mystified vision of the grand ideals that daily realities continually travesty. I think neither position supportable. Nothing about the positioning of the intellectual in relation to others or social institutions proves a very reliable

8. Said (1996) makes essentially the same point, in even stronger and more sweeping terms. “Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation . . . . Intellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counter-posed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light: from that juxtaposition one gets a better, perhaps even more universal idea of how to think, say, about a human rights issue in one situation by comparison to another” (60).

predictor of his or her virtue or the trustworthiness of opinions. The romance of the exiled truth-teller is intimately connected to the romance of art's autonomy—with its claim of superiority to sullied bourgeois commercial culture. The varied views enunciated by high modernist aestheticists from Flaubert to T. S. Eliot should make it clear that "distance" can produce many opinions, some of which would hardly qualify as virtuous.

I do not mean to discredit Said, a figure I admire greatly. I just want to separate the merit of his positions from any causal link to a condition of exile. And I want to suggest that the absoluteness of his ban on belonging necessitates the absoluteness of his claims to virtue. "The attempt to hold to a universal and single standard as a theme plays an important role in my account of the intellectual," he writes. "Universality means taking a risk in order to go beyond the easy certainties provided us by our backgrounds, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others. It also means looking for and trying to uphold a single standard for human behavior when it comes to such matters as foreign and social policy" (1996, xiii–xiv). If he gave a little bit on the one front, he'd be less defensive and less self-righteous on the other. Thus it is not just coincidence that his call for an "oppositional" criticism, one that finds "its identity in its difference from other cultural activities," is immediately followed by the solemn assertion that "criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse" (1983, 29). Said misses the emptiness of this pronouncement—who would claim criticism should support tyranny?—because his extreme valorization of alienation from the culture the critic inhabits has put him on the defensive about the question of responsibility. I think John Michael (2000) gets it right when he says that "the transcendent, however contingent and conflicted it may be, remains a necessary part of, and grounding for, any politics and any political position at all. Universality and transcendence are not philosophical absolutes; they are contested terms in political disputes" (11). Neither exile nor an appeal to universal standards of justice or truth secures the intellectual's virtue. The intellectual is in the mix just like every one else; he or she does not occupy some privileged place called either exile or the dwelling of the universal, even as appeals to specific locations and to universal values are made—and will inevitably be made.

This brings me to the difficult topic of irony, a topic that recurs again and again in this book as the site of an anxiety I can never put to rest. Said

writes: "'Ironic' is not a bad word to use along with 'oppositional' (1983, 29). Abstraction can be tied easily to persistent irony, and then such irony can be taken as a positive or a negative attribute. Understood in a Kierkegaardian way, irony signals dissociation, the intellectual's less than full endorsement of the words he or she speaks. Irony may result from the "as if" quality of the intellectual's pronouncements, divorced from the "worldly powers" that actually translate words into policies and deeds. Or irony can reflect a self-conscious recognition that the intellectual deals in universals that are, in fact, contestable. Richard Rorty (1989) has championed this kind of irony as one of two essential virtues (along with a hatred of cruelty) for a liberal polity. Said tackles it as a question of "how to keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the part of an alert, skeptical irony (preferably also self-irony)" (1996, 120).

Such irony can function in the classroom in several ways. At times, the teacher will enunciate positions he or she does not endorse in order to inform students or to challenge them. Irony can also be a playful way to signal dissent from prevailing orthodoxies. Or the teacher may be ironic as a way of undercutting the authority of the institution within which both teachers and students are located. Crucial to my meditations here is the extent to which irony is enabled by the semi-autonomy, the tenuous irreality, of the classroom—and the extent to which irony is a major feature of intellectual work. Intellectual activity may require some play-acting, some trying on of ideas for size.

I have no firm conclusions to offer here. I am as uneasy with celebrations of irony as I am with claims for art's autonomy. What I am groping toward is some sense that irony and commitment are entangled in complicated ways in the intellectual, just as I sense that the classroom is both complicitous with and yet somehow distinct from an economic order that extracts work from one and all. Intellectuals, like artists, get to play, but are continually defensive about that play and therefore offer accounts of the important "work" that their play does. Yet they can also do that play in ways that signal a delight in getting away with something, in escaping the general drudgery. Similarly, the work done in a classroom can be exhilarating at times and seem to shadow forth a different way of existing with others. But the nagging worry is the issue of loyalty. Intellectuals can appear less consistently or reliably loyal than non-intellectuals because intellectuals occupy hypothetical spaces, are abstracted from concrete entanglements like home and country, and are adept at ironic dissociation. Since such abstraction can appear irresponsible and an outrageous priv-

ilege, intellectuals often compensate with pronouncements of allegiance (like mine to democracy).

Perhaps this analogy between the abstraction of art and the abstraction of the intellectuals explains the literary sensibility common to so many of the major intellectuals of the past two hundred years. Certainly Theodor Adorno (1978) thought so; he continually associates the "negativity" of art, its irreality in relation to empirical fact, with a similar "non-identity" (127) of thought with the material that it engages. There are nonliterary intellectuals to be sure. But a surprising number of intellectuals have a literary background before they begin to attend to other issues. From the Romantics on, literary intellectuals who have attempted to influence the polity have generally done so through the lens of "culture." As Raymond Williams (1983) has taught us to recognize, "culture" proves such a productive term because it accords (in one of its senses) a privilege to the arts, while (in another of its senses) its generality of reference enables discussion of the social whole. Finally, "culture" is both immanent to a society, but not directly identical to its political institutions or social relations. It provides a standpoint from which to criticize.

The cultural critic, almost always drawn from literary ranks, calls society to account. The evolution of this figure (which is the evolution of one prominent type of intellectual) can be tracked from Swift, Samuel Johnson, and Coleridge through to Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold and beyond. This path is marked by uneven development, but the direct appeal to religion wanes (even as the prophetic style is retained), steadily replaced by standards drawn from national heritage and cultural traditions. This English line differs significantly from its nineteenth-century counterparts in France, Germany, and the United States. I cannot trace all those differences here. What I want to highlight is a certain style of intellectual activity in which the intellectual stands above or apart from the specific conflicts of day-to-day politics, but exhorts the polity as a whole to act in accordance with more general norms that the intellectual claims it is neglecting. Very often, the exact connection of allegiance to those norms and specification of the issues of the day is left unstated, either because the connection is deemed too obvious to spell out or because attention to the specific might blunt the focus on wider principles. There is a tendency to want to stay above the fray, along with a desire to be conciliatory, to articulate common allegiances that will bring contending parties together.

These intellectuals proceed by interpreting particular actions (political or social), artifacts (plays, novels, paintings, buildings), and institutions

in light of the unspoken ideals and motives they reveal. (Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" and Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" are exemplary in this regard.) They then contrast these implicit ideals and motives with a set of explicit norms the society is called to honor. The aim is directly moral; the mode of discourse is analysis (or interpretation) followed by exhortation.

I believe that contemporary cultural politics is a direct descendant of this nineteenth-century practice (an argument made more fully in chapter 5). What justifies, then, my title's reference to "the rise of cultural politics"? I am playing a bit fast and loose here. Just as I link the emergence of intellectuals to democratization from 1750 on, so I believe that cultural politics can be recognized as a distinctive mode (not the sole mode, but a new and distinct one) of these emergent intellectuals. If we need to name founding figures, Diderot, Coleridge, and Schiller will serve.

But I also believe there has been a decided up-swing in cultural politics over the past forty years (roughly since 1965), an up-swing that explains the complaints of Richard Rorty (1998), Todd Gitlin (1997), and others against the current dominance of this one mode of intellectual activity. Cultural politics in its contemporary manifestation attempts to intervene in cultural processes of representation, categorization, reflexive understanding, ideological production, and creation of/adherence to values in such a way as to change current hierarchies, divisions of labor, prejudices, and (in general) the conscious and unconscious taken-for-granted of a society that consistently mistreats various social groups. Because late nineteenth-century figures (most notably Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) stress the unconscious elements of behavior so strongly, the diagnostic moment in cultural politics has expanded greatly since the days of Coleridge. Criticism or "critique" is required to uncover the bases of actions and social behaviors. But unconsciousness also makes it difficult to see to whom the cultural criticism is addressed or where the site of transformation is located.

Elizabeth Grosz's account of attitudes toward the body is emblematic; she calls for the transformation of the attitudes, but also places such transformation beyond the capacity of individuals. "The investments and significances attributed to the different regions of the body image . . . are never self-determined, voluntarily adopted, or easily shaken off, for they are to a large extent a function of socially shared significances. No matter how much the individual may wish or will it, male and female genitals have a particular meaning in Western patriarchal cultures that the individual alone—or even in groups—is unable to transform insofar as these

meanings have been so deeply etched into and lived as part of the body image. The reinscription of sexual morphology in terms more conducive to women's corporeal and sexual autonomy . . . would entail a thoroughgoing transformation of the social meanings of sexual difference, and consequently of different body images for the two sexes" (1994, 82). We have here an appeal to a norm ("corporeal and sexual autonomy") and an analysis of society's failure to honor the norm; what we don't have is an account of how to effect the desired transformation. Hence interpretation of society's "deeply etched" practices occupies the lion's share of the critic's attention.

Why the contemporary rise of cultural politics? And is that rise to be lamented? A number of historical transitions are involved. Note that the nineteenth-century practitioners of cultural politics often wrote poetry or novels as well. True, Carlyle and Ruskin are already specialists in criticism. But the absolute divide between critic and "creative writers" dates from the 1920s at the earliest and, arguably, from the 1950s. Standard anthologies of literary criticism include very few non-creative writers prior to 1920 and very few creative writers after that date. The proliferation of criticism by specialists is partly caused by professionalization. But here we need to distinguish cultural criticism from other kinds—including philology, literary history, and close reading. In Germany and America especially, professionalization from 1870 to 1960 primarily worked to banish cultural criticism from the academy. The cultural critic—examples are T. S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and H. L. Mencken—was still seen as a "man of letters" and was not an academic. Professional criticism was scientific and apolitical, aimed at the production of knowledge, not the expression of opinion. Professionalism set its face against the cherished "amateurism" of the English tradition. The only real exceptions to the studied apoliticism of American academic literary criticism prior to 1965 were the humanists led by Irving Babbitt in the 1920s and the New York intellectuals of the 1940s and 50s. Things were rather different in England, where F. R. Leavis moved the cultural criticism of the literary tradition that Williams would later celebrate into the university in the 1930s. It took the upheavals of the 1960s, with the attack on notions of "objectivity" and the desire to make university work more "relevant" to social developments, to bring cultural criticism dramatically to the fore in American literary studies. Institutional coincidences, such as the arrival of French theory and the increased pressure to publish, then contributed to the forms that cultural criticism took (as I discuss in chapter 3).

It is commonly alleged that cultural politics, especially as practiced by “tenured radicals” is a reaction (despairing, cynical, resigned, or appropriate, depending on the commentator) to the “failures” of the sixties’ more direct political goals. This argument relies on accepting that cultural politics is an indirect, tortuously circuitous, route to social transformation as contrasted to direct political action. At the crudest level, this divide between direct and indirect action replays the sixties debate between changing the system through the available political means of voting, civil disobedience, and staged protests versus changing people’s heads, a debate famously enacted by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. Again, once the unconscious is invoked, changing people’s heads becomes awfully complex, and an ongoing frustration with cultural politics is its continual vagueness about the means to be adopted and the pathway toward (or even the markers of) success. Another complaint is that adherents of cultural politics often claim direct and more traditional political action is ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst, which can make such adherents appear callous toward current suffering while dreaming of transformations to come.

But the political experiences of the sixties offer three more compelling ways to characterize the appeal of cultural politics. The first takes into account the student movement’s inability to make a connection with a wider popular political base. In Richard Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country* (1998), he calls for the revival of a “reformist left” (as opposed to the “cultural left”) that works for “piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy” (105). By making common cause with those whom that economy slights, the left “can forge a winning majority in national elections” (101). The left, in denigrating America as racist and capitalism as unredeemable evil, has alienated its potential allies among the less prosperous. “The public, sensibly, has no interest in getting rid of capitalism until it is offered details about the alternatives” (104) and the cultural left has no such details to offer. The problem with Rorty’s prescription is that it ignores everything that has happened in American politics since 1964 (or since 1948, when Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond carried four Southern states in response to Truman’s integration of the military).<sup>9</sup> Cultural divides—over race, religion, and lifestyles (for want of a better term)—have consistently trumped economic solidarity in the United States. The dif-

9. For a wonderful and extremely instructive history of the fortunes of the Democratic Party specifically and the left more generally in American electoral politics of the twentieth century, see George Packer (2000).

ference between intellectuals in the 1930s (including Rorty's hero, John Dewey, who had no truck with Roosevelt's Democratic Party) and intellectuals, coming out of the 1960s, is that there existed in the earlier period something like a mass movement of the Democrats to the left, a workers' movement with which many intellectuals were proud to align themselves. The sad story of how the Communist Party as well as racism and rabid anti-Communism combined to destroy that movement cannot detain us here. But the point is that the 1960s left was in the position of trying to create a mass movement from scratch; there wasn't one that it could connect to. And the traditional formulas of the "old Left" about how to create such a movement simply did not work. That no one has figured out what will work is one of the rationales for cultural politics—as exemplified in the work of Stuart Hall (1988).

Hall's project, framed in response to Margaret Thatcher's victories in Britain (which mirror Nixon's and Reagan's victories in America), emphasizes the rhetorical work required to forge social "blocs" in a political landscape in which allegiances and votes are in flux, depend on multiple factors, and often coalesce around powerful symbols. His claim that the right's success resulted in large part from the work of its ideologues makes cultural politics central, albeit not all-determining, in electoral politics. It is not enough to have a platform (who pays any attention to it?). There must be ways to articulate, to represent, to symbolize the party's goals that capture people's imaginations and create a sense of participation in the program and fellow-feeling with other adherents to it. Cultural politics, in other words, begins to look like, if not a necessary preliminary to successful direct political action, at least a crucial concomitant step. It is about casting around for the new formulas that will help create the popular base for a leftist politics. The intellectuals who practice leftist cultural politics are "out of touch" with the people; but, *pace* Rorty, there is not any group already existing out there, ready-made, for them to get into touch with. That group—or coalition of groups—needs to be made, to be forged, through the performatives of cultural politics. (I take up this notion of the performative in chapters 5 and 6.)

Second, I think cultural politics must be seen as a response to the civil rights movement, surely the most successful work of direct political action on the American left during the twentieth century. Its very success in ending legal segregation revealed the limits of political transformation unaccompanied by cultural changes. Of course, the movement also produced tremendous cultural changes. But its great promise has been

thwarted by the intractable persistence of racism throughout the culture. Legal and institutional reform meets its limits when it runs up against deep-rooted cultural habits. A different kind of work seems called on to address these cultural obstacles to full racial equality and harmony. Again, it is not that cultural politics has solved this problem. But its efforts are driven by it. Direct political action, even where successful, is not enough.

Finally, there is the rise of the "new social movements." Coming out of the civil rights movement and the sixties, feminism, gay liberation groups, environmental groups and the like introduced a new set of political concerns, ones that, like racism, pointed toward economic inequities suffered by oppressed groups, but also highlighted noneconomic indignities and harms as well. When recognition and respect from one's fellow citizens is at stake along with more tangible goods and protection from more physical harms, direct political action cannot achieve all that is desired. Since what is left of the left as a popular mass movement resides in these "new social movements," it is no surprise that intellectuals have taken up their themes. More accurately—in all these feminist, racial, ethnic, gay and environmental groups—there has been an "organic" (to use Gramsci's metaphor) connection between the intellectual and these movements that is unprecedented in American politics and belies the claims about the decline of "public intellectuals." The interaction between academic work (including highly theoretical work) and the new social movements is obvious, from appeals to "difference," "identity," and "hybridity," to empirical work that documents the "feminization of poverty" and historical work that recovers the lost voices of various groups. Finally, we can see with the rise of the new social movements and the alliances of many intellectuals with them, the shift on the left from some version of socialism to some version of democracy as the most often stated political ideal.

In sum, there are good political and intellectual reasons for the rise of cultural politics over the past forty years. There were also identifiable institutional causes as well. Intellectuals, especially literary intellectuals, have been moving into the academy since the 1850s ( I consider this history and some of its consequences in chapters 3 and 4). The American university in particular grew tremendously during the 1960s to accommodate the baby-boomers (many of whom were hiding out from the draft), among whom were some students who represented groups previously absent from American campuses: women especially, but also some non-

whites and/or from poorer families. The new students often wanted different things from education than their predecessors. And the new professors hired to teach these students, working under new conditions as the boom sixties yielded to the economic hard times of the seventies, challenged prevailing intellectual paradigms, using "theory" in all its guises to disrupt settled assumptions.

A primary assumption, of course, had been that academic work was apolitical. The new style no doubt went overboard in declaring that *everything* was political. But I fully intend in this book to honor the aspirations that motivate that insistence. Intellectual work, it seems to me, is pretty pointless, a schoolboy exercise, if it does not aspire to address the polity. In this book, I explore the difficulties of acting on that aspiration in light of the various conflicting and incompatible pressures on intellectuals who are, for better and worse, placed by this society in academies. And I also explore the affinity of intellectuals, particularly literary intellectuals, for cultural politics, attempting to balance an appreciation for the questions and dilemmas that elicit that strategy with my persistent skepticism about the airs it assumes and the claims about its effects.

Sometimes I think my stance just reflects a sense that the cultural left is too subtle by half. Injustice and the indignities that attend it are just not that complex. In particular, I find any reliance on intricate accounts of psychological mechanisms implausible—and politically troubling when attached to claims about unconscious processes. Democratic interaction depends, I believe, on a faith that people generally know what they are about and that rhetorical efforts to shift their self-understandings can be direct. After all, the intellectual will resent attempts at indirect manipulation and will believe herself able to see through this. Why not accord the same ability to our audiences? Once we have to rely on strategies that by-pass conscious beliefs in order to transform those beliefs' unconscious underpinnings, we have entered a realm of discourse that renders autonomy, consent, and equality problematic. That this trinity cannot be assumed is an important truth; that the attempt to achieve it is to be abandoned is far less evident. Doubtless, the cultural left (of which I am indubitably a member) shares my political commitment to democracy, which is why I feel it important to indicate the undemocratic flavor of some work in cultural politics.

The most usual complaint, of course, is that this kind of intellectual work hardly addresses the polity because it is written in a vocabulary only accessible to academic initiates. I address this issue, which is more com-

plicated than is often admitted, in chapter 3. For now, suffice it to say that such work is produced under multiple pressures, ones that its style reflects.

I want to conclude by considering how my own literary education may have contributed to the commitment to democracy I have articulated here. I take it as both necessary to my own democratic desires and as pedagogically required that I be as swayed by what happens in the classroom as I hope my students to be. That transformations occur over a semester is more important than any particular transformation or conversion occur. To take this open-ended position would be to get entirely off the hook of illegitimately influencing students' beliefs. And, to a certain extent, teaching literary texts goes well with such openness. What many English teachers want to convey to students about novels and poems is how they complicate the direct, simple, univocal notion of a message sent from speaker to hearer. The literary text works on its audience on a variety of levels and its messages cannot be easily unified or summarized. We want to make our students better able to become entangled in the miasma of emotions, thoughts, arguments, analogies, and associations that a literary work evokes.

But it would be ingenuous to claim that any and all transformations are equally prized. I do not see how the teacher committed to democracy can avoid a commitment to the cherishing of plurality. Liberality is a crucial virtue in democratic societies that include substantive disagreements.<sup>10</sup> The literary is prized for its expansiveness of vision. Does this mean that everyone who reads literature—and especially those who do it for a life's work—gains an expanded vision? Surely not. We don't want to smugly claim some moral superiority for ourselves. But the embarrassment of self-righteousness aside, don't we really believe, somewhere deep down, that a literary education is a moral education? I am uneasy with this thought, and don't fully know where or how to push it. But I think it leads toward the question of sensibility, toward considering whether democracy—insofar as it entails cherishing and enjoying the agonistic and potentially transformative interaction with those who think, feel, and believe differently from me—calls for a certain temperament. If a democratic

10. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996) explore, as their subtitle puts it, "why moral conflicts cannot be avoided in politics and what should be done about it." Their solution rests on "reciprocity," on the rational granting of liberty of opinion to others that I grant to myself. My comments about sensibility here and my appeal to liberality, which entails generosity of spirit rather than a calculation of what is fair, indicate my desire to beef up tolerance rather differently than Gutmann and Thompson do.

education includes the effort to nourish such a sensibility, do we believe that time spent reading, discussing, and responding to literature has a role to play in that nourishing? The presence of some such belief may explain why literature classes in both high schools and colleges are more likely to rely primarily on discussion than classes in other subjects.

My final thought will return us from the classroom to the written work of literary intellectuals. The combination of a commitment to democracy and to a vision of the literary as non-univocal has, I have suggested, made it likely that literary intellectuals will have a taste for and want to champion a taste for plurality, for difference. The blatant, obsessive, and by now boring display of that taste forms the stereotypical image of the politically correct literary academic of our day. I am as bored by politics worn on the sleeve and public stagings of virtue as the next guy. But I don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater (at least not now and in this place. I think I have been guilty of such rash flingings in the past.) It is not surprising that literary intellectuals will, for the most part, practice cultural politics, by which I mean practices meant to intervene in the basic categories of thought and the basic repertoire of representations circulating in the society. Such practitioners tend to fluctuate wildly between proclaiming that the only true and effective political action must take place in the cultural realm *and* bemoaning their endless marginality and ineffectiveness because real politics happens elsewhere (in the halls of power, or on the streets, or any place but the arts, the classroom, and the mind). In similar fashion, educators tend to either wildly overstate the impact of education or to proclaim the complete impotence of schools in face of the all-determining influence of families, peers, and the wider culture.

Cultural politics, like education, is one kind of work; it is neither trivial nor omnipotent. I happen to think it is more likely to have an impact when its real limitations are acknowledged from the start, when the other sites of political action/intervention are also named, if not (at this moment) engaged. My point is that I do not think literary intellectuals should back down from their interest in how literary texts (in different instances) foreclose or enhance plurality in specific social realms. Similarly, images of and attempts to make the classroom a utopian space must continually be tested against categorical and representational exclusions. An obsession with difference is salutary and is likely to remain so for any foreseeable future. But preaching to the converted and the ritualistic displays of right belief are less useful, whereas to believe that an engagement with

prevalent forms of thought and representation is the be-all and end-all of democratic activism is to leave far too much of the field to those indifferent or hostile to democracy. My ideal intellectual, then, may only work in the field of cultural politics, but he or she keeps open the lines of communication with what is happening in other fields, and always reminds himself or herself (and his or her readers and students) that important work is being done elsewhere, and that a richly plural democratic polity calls for these varieties of work. Finally, the intellectual's work would be pitched in such a way that not only does it allow dialogic interaction with those in one's own specific field, but also provides an opening for those in other fields who want to maintain a sense of that field. In our written work as in our classrooms, we can strive to model the very forms of interaction that we want to claim are vitally important and desirable in a democracy.