CHAPTER 1

Doing Criticism/Doing without Criticism

1.1 Functions of Criticism

Our word *criticism* comes from an ancient Greek word (*krinein*) meaning both to separate and to judge. Those two ideas, connected as they are, provide a usable working definition for most purposes. To see the intimate connection between discrimination and evaluation in the critical act, consider the anecdote offered by eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume in an essay that explains criticism in philosophical terms. The story is one that Hume himself borrowed from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and it is told by Sancho Panza about his kinsmen, who were reputed to be great judges of wine.

> Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it, and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it.[1]

Doing Criticism: Across Literary and Screen Arts, First Edition. James Chandler.

Hume, whose Greek was very good, means us to understand by this story that analytic competence—the capacity to distinguish the elements in a composition—supports evaluative authority. Assessing the *quality* of something requires discerning its separate *qualities*. This is why Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, broke Greek tragedy down to its six component parts and, in judging some tragedies better than others, analytically isolated special kinds of moments (like reversal and discovery). The relationship between analysis and judgment was crucial to his pioneering efforts in criticism.

Criticism has sometimes been accused of pressing too hard with its analytic tasks and of coming down too hard with its judgments. The poet Wordsworth hints as much, with some irony, when he has one of his characters exclaim: "we murder to dissect."[2] The American critic Wayne Booth once even turned this worry into a witty question: "Must Critics Kill?"[3] These days the news is more likely to be about the demise of criticism itself, though there is reason to wonder about what that might mean. One guiding question for this book about doing criticism, indeed, is what to make of the thought that we might do without it. The question is not an idle one, for such a prospect has not long ago been raised by Ronan McDonald in *The Death of the Critic* (2005)—though he raised it in the context of a defense of criticism. There was a time when only cultural conservatives made such defenses. Yet recently, even a left-leaning cultural warrior like the Shakespearean Marjorie Garber advocated reviving criticism in her book *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011), proposing a method she calls "centripetal" reading.[4] Or consider the unlikely testimony of literary theorist Terry Eagleton, who now laments the near extinction of an intellectual practice that he sees as formative in his own career: "Like thatching, or clog dancing," writes the Irish-Briton Eagleton, "literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art." It has been dying, he explains, for at least two academic generations: students don't learn it because their teachers don't teach it, not having been taught themselves. In a moment of candor, Eagleton acknowledges that "the charge may seem pretty rich, coming as it does from a literary theorist," adding: "Wasn't it literary theory, with its soulless abstractions and vacuous generalities, which destroyed the habit of close reading in the first place?"[5] The question, one suspects, is tongue-in-cheek.

Eagleton's formulations are especially useful on account of his all-but-explicit connection of criticism with the practice of close reading a poem. This connection provides a key to understanding the current situation. To see why, let's first remember that, like history and philosophy, but unlike post-Enlightenment disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, or

biology, criticism is an intellectual pursuit that has in fact been around since the time of those ancient Greeks who coined the term. Indeed, criticism dates back almost as far in the Western tradition as the invention of writing and theater, further than Aristotle's *Poetics* (fourth century BCE), which already makes reference to still earlier ways of inquiring about poetic objects—earlier, even, than those of Aristotle's teacher Plato. This fact alone ought to give pause to those who expect criticism's imminent demise. It is true that in English departments around the world, a course in the history of criticism that begins with Plato and Aristotle and comes down to the present is no longer the standard offering it was eighty, fifty, or even thirty years ago. It may thus be reasonable to speculate that criticism has undergone some change in status—or at least in "function"—within the last two or three academic generations. Post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory: these have all shaped what it means to do criticism in recent decades. Yet, altering its function is something that criticism has been recognized as doing for a long time, certainly since Matthew Arnold's famous 1864 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time."

In that seminal essay, Arnold argued that Romanticism had decisively changed the game for those who call themselves critics by casting the creative and critical principles in opposition, with perhaps the further insinuation that the latter was parasitical on the former. Arnold thought this story misleading in that it underestimated the role of criticism in cultivating the ground on which poetry flourishes in the first place. "The burst of creative activity" in English Romanticism, he wrote, "had about it in fact something premature": "the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough." Diminished by both the French Revolution and English utilitarianism, the Romantic poets had thus left behind even more diminished prospects for poetry. Criticism in 1864 thus needed all the more to provide the environments of thought and knowledge—what Arnold called simply "culture"—that might allow poetry to flourish anew.[6] We needn't accept either Arnold's diagnosis or his specific prescription to agree with the idea that criticism changes function over time. Arnold's own "time" is not so distant from ours, but, taking a longer historical perspective, we see that criticism has changed in many ways over its long history. There have been moments when criticism has been more aligned with rhetoric and communication (as in the case of ancient Rome), or more aligned with poetics and craft (as in Aristotle's Greece), or more interested in the rules of art (as in neoclassicism), or more oriented toward the author's life and values (the nineteenth century), or

more oriented toward "the poem itself," as T. S. Eliot said criticism must be in his twentieth century.[7]

Eliot's notion of "the poem itself" came to be a kind of shibboleth for what is called the New Criticism, a movement inspired by the important early-twentieth-century British thinker I. A. Richards. Richards boldly established literary criticism at the center of an ambitious campaign to rehabilitate cultural values in his contemporary Britain, and he established the study of poetry at the center of literary criticism. The story of how he set out to achieve this goal is by now a familiar one. In 1925, the year after he published *Principles of Literary Criticism*, he undertook some far-reaching pedagogical experiments requiring students to respond in writing to clusters of poetic texts from which all markings of date or authorship had been removed. He attracted to his project some of the best literary minds of the period: William Empson, Muriel Bradbrook, and Eliot himself among them. Richards' poetry courses had such an enormous following that classes had to meet in the streets of Cambridge for the first time in centuries. He published his findings from these classroom experiments in *Practical Criticism* (1929), one of the few genuinely seminal works of criticism in English since the nineteenth century.[8]

With these books, and through this group, and not least by the powerful force of his own charismatic example, Richards changed the way literature was studied. He made criticism the primary activity of the field of English, and he installed the notion of "close reading" at the center of that field. The American New Critics of the 1930s—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt—all acknowledged the leadership of Richards in showing them the way forward. In America, this enterprise of "practical criticism," with the study of lyric poems in isolation, indeed became a centerpiece of liberal education for decades. And one of the most important features of this program was that it implicitly identified itself as a kind of activity or doing, for *practical* also derives from a Greek word (*prattein*), which means, precisely, to do.

The commission to write a book about how to do criticism thus necessarily returns me to this question of "practical criticism." It will become clear, however, that I assign practical criticism a somewhat different function from that of Richards. It is one that builds upon Richards' idea but enlarges the sphere in which criticism is called on to do its work.[9] My aim is to illuminate how practical criticism might be effectively sustained in our moment partly by understanding its application to poetics in an *expanded field of reference*. I will explain what I mean by that in due course. By way of introduction to this book and this mission, however, I turn first to the task of providing

a sense of what it means to "do criticism" in the sense that Eagleton intends, just to provide a reminder of what criticism feels like when, to adapt a phrase from Keats, it is proven upon the pulses. I will then broaden the horizon of poetics beyond the study of lyric poetry to include not only literature broadly considered but also film and the motion picture arts. I wish not only to show a viable path forward for criticism "at the present time" but also to suggest that doing without criticism is not only imprudent but also perhaps impossible.

1.2 Two Thought Experiments

In the spirit of Richards' experiments in criticism, then, let us now attempt a thought experiment of our own. Imagine that you share a refrigerator with someone—a sibling, a roommate, a partner, or a spouse. One groggy morning you go to open it, and you find stuck to its door the following message (Figure 1.1):

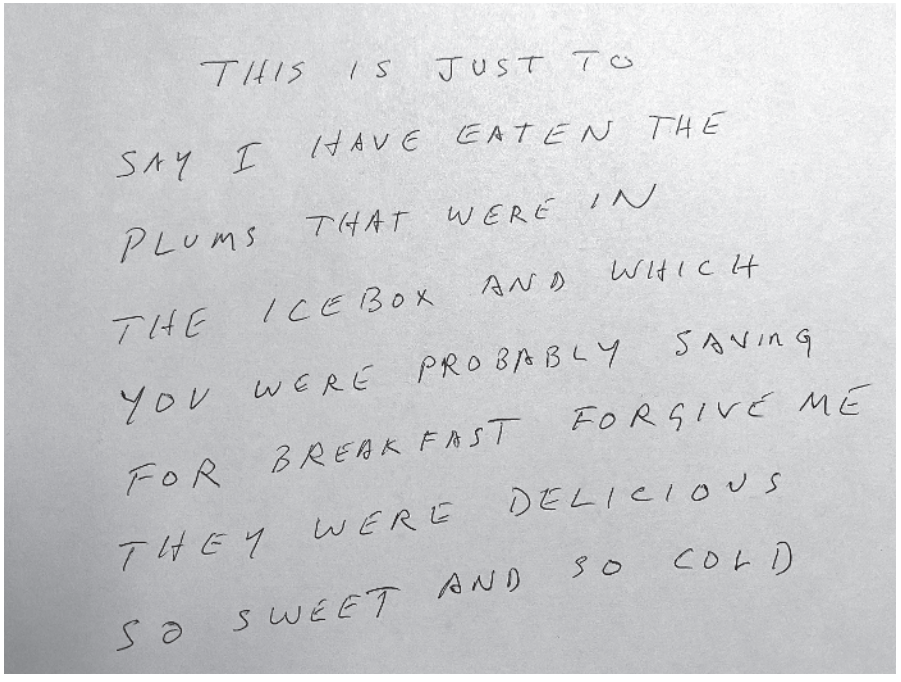

FIGURE 1.1 Prose transcription of Williams Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say," handmade for this book by its author.

It is a fair guess you might be a little annoyed by this note, and perhaps a little puzzled. It might be said to raise questions. Why is the person who stole your plums telling you how good they tasted? Is this a confession or a declaration, an apology or a taunt? The answers to such questions would probably depend upon what terms you were on with your sibling, roommate, partner, spouse, or child. So would your general response: bemusement, irritation, anger. You might do something *on account of* this message. You might steal your sister's yogurt, confront your roommate, ask your partner if you have done something to deserve this bizarre treatment, scold your child. You might even laugh it off. But such a message doesn't call on you do anything *with* it. It doesn't call on you, that is, to "do criticism." Its questions tend to be of a different order from those of criticism.

Now imagine, instead, that you open a standard anthology of poetry, and you find the following:

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

(William Carlos Williams, 1934)[10]

This arrangement of words (twenty eight of them, not counting the title) asks for a different kind of response. Such words, so disposed, along with the context in which they appear, do ask you to do something with them. They ask you to perform an act of criticism. They do so, furthermore, by raising a further set of questions. Why should so apparently plain and simple a statement be produced in a formal arrangement of twelve lines in three stanzas? Is the title part of the poem or separate from the poem? Given the fact that the words seem to take the shape of a poem, why does the title emphasize the idea of words reduced to the most basic message they can communicate: "This is *just* to say"? Why is a simple statement given such an arrangement? Why does it include the detail about how good the plums taste? Is the speaker asking forgiveness for taking the plums in the first place or for not being able to resist an evaluation that adds insult to injury?

Some of these questions might loosely connect with those we might have asked ourselves if the note were in prose form and left by someone with whom we shared a fridge. The differences are nonetheless important. In this case, for example, we don't know who the speaker of these words is supposed to be. We have to imagine both a speaker and an addressee, because neither is given. We don't know if the two are on good terms or bad. In the *Norton Anthology*, the poem is identified with an author, William Carlos Williams. We may or may not know that the author was one of the foremost American poets of the early twentieth century. We may or may not know that he is from Rutherford, New Jersey. There is a date of publication, too, 1934, which might lead us to think about this composition as belonging to a past moment in time. That was the middle of the Great Depression, when money was short and food was scarce, especially luxury foods like plums. Does that matter to the way we respond to these words? "Icebox," in that light, might thus come to seem less like a peculiar expression that our grandmother would have used than perhaps a marker of the poet's historical moment. How might that sort of historical indicator figure in what we do with this form of words, this thing that seems to be proposing itself as a poem?

The more we look at the words in this way, critically, taking them as making up a poem, the more we are likely to experience the effect that the Germans call *Verfremdung*, or defamiliarization, and the Russians *ostranenie*—and the stranger its apparently simple "message" becomes.[11] The request to be forgiven for stealing the plums (which seems to lie in the realm of ethical responsibility) is followed by the description of what it was like to eat them (which seems to belong to the realm of sensual pleasure). Is the description of the pleasure meant to explain the act of theft? To excuse it? To justify it? "I know I stole your plums, but all I can say is they were so good to eat." Is that implied "all I can say" what the poem has "just to say"? And then there is another range of questions. If this is supposed to be a poem, how are we to judge if it is a good poem? How does its versification matter, the fact that it is arranged in very brief lines and stanzas? Is there a logic to these line breaks and stanza breaks? Is the poem's versification—its management of rhythm—handled well or badly?

When we pose such questions of words that we encounter in this way, we are beginning to do criticism. We are beginning to engage with the words in an active process of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. This active process involves formulating questions and working out answers. This activity of posing and addressing questions, moreover, has its own medium and form of expression—in my case here, that of English prose paragraphs. As with other activities, the more we practice it—on such objects, in such a medium—the more adept we become. And with such adeptness comes the capacity to bring a new kind of value into being alongside the value of the object in question—and this will hold true even when, as must often happen, we find fault with the

poem. If one wanted to identify a small fault in this poem, for example, it might be the switch in relative pronouns from "that" to "which," where, grammatically, "that" should appear in both instances. I can think of possible defenses of this switch. One might call it a deliberate performance of colloquial speech, for example, though I don't myself find this defense very convincing. We might also defend the switch of pronouns as a sign of haste. We know that William Carlos Williams was a practicing physician in his native New Jersey, and that he sometimes dashed off short poems on a typewriter between patients. That would make a kind of sense of the inconsistency, though it wouldn't explain it away.

Implicit in some of the questions posed in this rudimentary act of criticism is an assumption of some grounds for comparison, and comparison lends a further dimension to the act of criticism. David Hume strongly emphasized that practical criticism depends on, well, practice, especially the practice of comparing works with one another. Suppose, then, that we undertake another little thought experiment and imagine another piece of textual scrawl on an arguably similar theme (Figure 1.2):

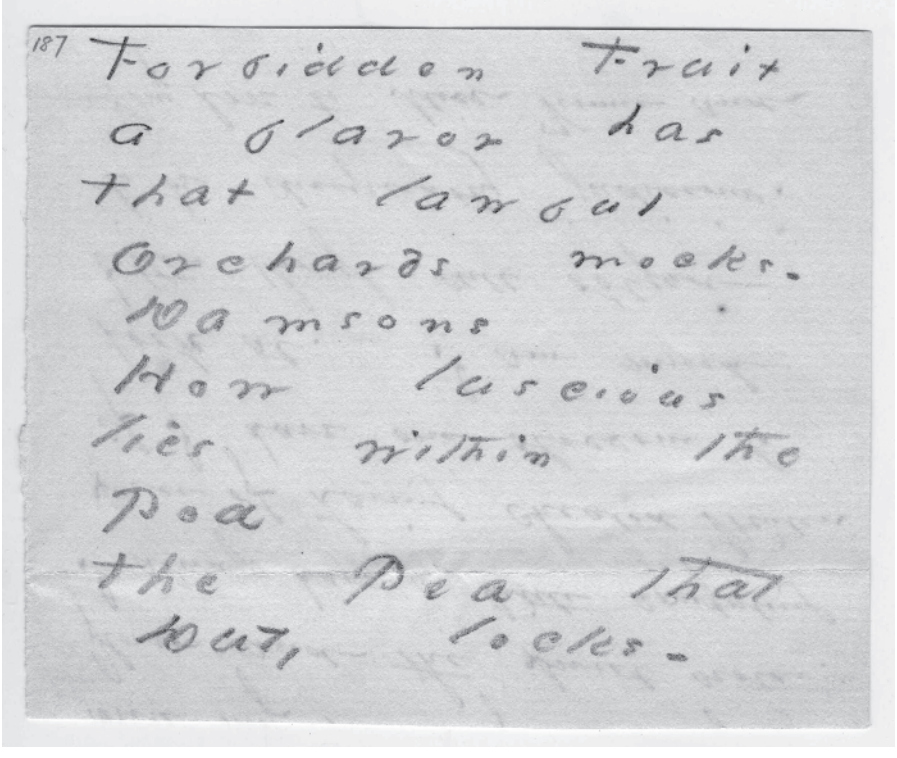

FIGURE 1.2 Manuscript copy of Emily Dickinson's "Forbidden fruit a flavor has." Emily Dickinson Collection, Amherst College, Manuscript 187.

This piece of writing is untitled, like the message we might imagine on the refrigerator door. Like that message, too, it seems a bit messy and informal. We may, however, be struck by some special features in this arrangement of words.

We might notice first that the words here compose two independent clauses, each consisting of exactly fourteen syllables. These two clauses are also marked by a certain rhythm, and by a peculiarity of grammar that we might call "syntactic inversion": not "has a flavor," but "a flavor has." Not "that mocks lawful orchards," but "that lawful orchards mocks." We know that that second example involves an inversion because, if we look carefully, we see the inflected ending of the English verb *to mock*—"mocks"—needs to correspond to a singular subject. We might therefore first have imagined that the line involves the mocking of the flavor of the forbidden fruit before realizing that the grammar requires us to read it the other way around: it is the flavor, with its peculiar quality, that mocks the lawful orchards. This sort of device, which demands revisiting the lines, can expose and test our routine assumptions about the world, as the best poetry often does. We might also detect the dominance of *f* sounds in the first part of the poem, and how they give way to *l* sounds in the second part, with the interesting word "lawful"—with its *l*, *f*, *l* sequence—making the pivot from the one to the other. And some words, it turns out, rhyme with others.

Seeing all this, we might conclude that this piece of writing is a poem, even before we ever see it laid out in a book of poetry in this form (perhaps the same book in which we found the Williams poem):

> Forbidden fruit a flavor has
> That lawful orchards mocks;
> How luscious lies the pea within
> The pod that Duty locks![12]

Looking at these two poems together, critically, we might ask a new set of questions. Which is a better poem? What is the difference between their treatment of the question of how sweet it is to taste fruit that one is not supposed to be tasting? How much does it matter that the second poem was published some forty years earlier and composed well before that? How much does it matter that it was written by a woman? By Emily Dickinson, in fact? Is there an allusion to the book of Genesis in the Dickinson poem? Is there an allusion to the book of Genesis in the Williams poem?

As we think about these two poems in broader contexts, other critical questions come to mind, especially if we learn a little more about the authors. One of Emily Dickinson's only sojourns beyond her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, was a brief spell in the nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Does this piece of information matter to how we think of this poem's relation to the book of Genesis? Williams, for his part, was active in a twentieth-century poetry movement that rejected a heavy reliance on poetic diction, on simile and metaphor, and on figurative language generally. Should "This Is Just to Say" be paired with another famously brief, elemental poem by Williams, the one about a red wheelbarrow—"glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens"—in order to see both poems as advancing his effort to, as he put it, clean off the words of American English?[13] Should its straddling of verse and prose be paired with another short American poem about food and sustenance, Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Bean Eaters" (1960)? In this poem, two rhyming quatrains, both relatively terse and formal, about an old, impoverished African American couple, eating and remembering, give way to a final stanza that seems to dissolve its verse into prose: "And remembering.../ Remembering, with twinklings and twinges, / As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes."[14] What does this formal dissolution convey about conditions of their daily life and the circumstances of their acts of remembering? What does it convey about lived experience on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s?

1.3 Limits of the Lyric Paradigm

These are the sorts of questions that will be familiar enough, I suppose, to anyone who has taken even an elementary course in the subject we call "English." It has, however, grown fashionable in recent decades to think of them as questions not particularly essential to the great issues of the modern world, or even to the hard work of getting on in life. At the outbreak of the Second World War, W. H. Auden famously wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen," and even Wordsworth, for all his faith in the mission of the poet, confessed that he sometimes felt that his attempt to address the great problems of his time by resort to poetry might seem merely a "feeble effort."[15] Questions of social efficacy aside, however, there has been a clear demotion of the study of poetry since the decades when it was enshrined at the heart of

liberal education, an essential part of what it meant to learn to read well. This book can be thought of in part as resisting that demotion.

An initial response is simply to declare that engaging with poems in the way I have begun to do with Williams, Dickinson, and Brooks is a pleasure in itself; that the sheer joy of articulate response, as we put our pleasures and our puzzles into words, is already a great deal. The drive to do criticism, H. L. Mencken wrote, "is no more and no less than the simple desire to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to ... make an articulate noise in the world."[16] One might go further to claim that this sort of activity opens the mind and liberates the spirit; indeed, that its interplay of analysis and judgment brings, as I put it earlier, new value into the world. In our engagement with Williams, Dickinson, and Brooks, to be sure, the question of value is dynamically in play: the poems seem to analyze and judge us even as we attempt to analyze and judge them.[17] The guiding assumption behind Richards' influential program in practical criticism is that the organized and "articulate noises" of a lyric poem provide a particularly good—even paradigmatic—starting point for this activity.

Two questions thus emerge here and now. First, how do we extend the scope of criticism's subject matter beyond the lyric poem—the poem itself—so as to identify a range of things that might serve the work of practical criticism as well as the lyric poem does? Second, how do we extend the benefits of critical engagement beyond the circumference of personal growth and gratification? Both are important questions for addressing the question of how to do criticism at the present time.

To the question of extending the scope of practical criticism's subject matter, at least two important lines of response have been pursued in the past. Both will be familiar enough, but one is more limited than what I propose here, the other more expansive. The former approach is to extend the subject matter of criticism to include a domain called "literature." Indeed, when the subject of "critics and criticism" arises in academic circles, the default understanding is that the object in question is in fact "literature." This is easy to see in a quick sampling of titles, as in the case of the volume bearing that very title, *Critics and Criticism*, in which the Chicago Aristotelians produced one of the most weighty essay compilations of the mid-twentieth century.[18] We might also think of landmark books such as Georg Lukács' *Writer and Critic* or Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*; or the major anthology by Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and

Susan Gubar, *New Feminist Criticism*; or Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*.[19] In every case, "criticism" means by default "literary criticism." This explains why, when commentators like Eagleton speak of the death of criticism they tend to mean, specifically, "literary criticism," even as they take poetry as its primary concern.[20]

One important support for this familiar disciplinary category is a developed notion of "reading" that is assumed to be foundational for all literature. On this understanding of things, the practice of criticism teaches us to read better, to read on a higher level than even that of an advanced literacy. It enables us, as well, to produce "readings" of the works we engage. A major Black feminist critic of our moment, Hortense Spillers, also betrays an assumption that criticism means literary criticism but does so in a way that also helpfully makes the link between reading and producing a reading. Addressing "the relationship between the critical work and that which it contemplates," Spillers contends that "the literary work describes, or carves out, an arena of choices, and in doing so, the writer suspends definitive judgment." Conversely, she continues, "the critic's task, as Northrop Frye observes, is to *speak* or *explain* where the work does not, to supply the right questions for a proffered riddle."[21] This "speaking" or "explaining" is the production of a reading, and Spillers' and Frye's emphasis on the role of questions in that process points to an issue for the doing of criticism that will be central to my discussion in this book.

Spillers' book, which addresses fiction by Tony Morrison and Ralph Ellison, drama by Langston Hughes, and the poetry Gwendolyn Brooks, also dramatizes the point that, within the conception of criticism that takes "literature" for its default subject matter, there is nonetheless a considerable range in what *counts* as literature. And the reasons for this range of understandings are not far to seek. Consider the cases of poetry and drama. Within the discipline of literary criticism, as practiced in the wake of Richards' New Criticism, the lyric poem often retains a central place and paradigmatic role: one need only think how often a poem like Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" becomes the occasion for an illustrative exercise for what criticism can do or how it should be done.[22] Yet there is something odd about this development at the heart of Richards' reinvention of literary criticism, since poetry in its origins is anything but *literary* in the strict sense of the term: occurring in the medium of *letters*. Poetic composition, as has been amply demonstrated in the anthropology of nonliterate societies, does for such cultures the work of mnemonic codification and conservation that would be taken up by writing itself in the transition to literacy. Some of the most significant features of written or printed poetry—its constitution by rhyme, by rhythm, by

sound—are residues of an oral function, a sign of the fact that poetry is precisely *not* literary in its origins. Poetry, after all, is intricately connected with song, and this is true for both lyric and epic poetry.

Much the same could be said about drama, which has long since come to be considered as central to what we count as literature. If plays like *Hamlet* or *King Lear* do not lie at the heart of the field we have long called "English literature," then what does? Drama, however, is no more reducible to "literature" than poetry is. The very urtext of the Western critical tradition, the one that tends to appear at the beginning of any historical anthology of "literary criticism," is Aristotle's *Poetics*. Yet Aristotle's primary objects of consideration in that pioneering treatise—the plays of Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy, for example—were theatrical works composed and staged in Athens in the decades before he wrote. Moreover, the categories of "rhythm," "song," and even "spectacle" were explicitly used to identify the basic "parts" of tragedy as Aristotle analyzed it (along with plot, character, diction, and thought).[23]

Clearly, this expansion of the scope of Richards' approach to practical criticism beyond the paradigm of the poem on the page had ample precedent, and it was conceptually important for shaping the discipline of "English" in the twentieth century. A second, much broader expansion of the scope of practical criticism would draw on the post-Enlightenment discipline of aesthetics, in which criticism was understood to extend beyond "literature" (even in its broadest sense) to the wider range of what we sometimes call "the fine arts." In the eighteenth century when both the category of the fine arts and the discipline of aesthetics began to take shape, these other arts included painting, sculpture, architecture, and music. Each of these arts boasts a considerable—in some cases even venerable—body of critical commentary. The criticism of painting developed rapidly in Arnold's nineteenth century. Among English critics who excelled in it we might think of Walter Pater (whose book on the Renaissance remains a classic), but literary types like William Hazlitt and Charles Baudelaire were also drawn to the criticism of painting.

Architecture criticism in English also boasts a rich tradition of writing that includes such minor masterpieces as John Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic." In that brilliant analysis, Ruskin took issue with the view that classical architecture, with its salient regularity and unity of design, should be considered superior to the medieval style of cathedral making, with its equally conspicuous idiosyncrasy and asymmetry. He argued the case on the grounds that classical architecture enslaved the worker's imagination to a master plan, while the Gothic approach allowed different levels of relative

autonomy to local guilds and to the craftsmen who work in them. That, he explained, is why not all gargoyles on a medieval cathedral look alike, nor even all porticos or spires. Beyond his influential work on architecture, Ruskin himself wrote extensively about poetry, prose, and painting.

"The Nature of Gothic," a chapter from an extraordinary book about late Renaissance Venice, is often included in anthologies devoted chiefly to literary criticism.[24] At a certain level of abstraction, of course, some principles or tendencies of criticism can be said to obtain across a wide spectrum of the arts. Such generalizations might be loosely grouped together under the category of aesthetics, understood as the study of what it is that constitutes something as a work of art in the first place: the presence of made beauty, for example. Aesthetics, Ruskin showed, can have a political or ethical dimension, and his concern for the role of labor as a decisive consideration in critical judgment survives into the present. We encounter it again just below in the unlikely setting of a New Jersey convenience store in an argument favoring one *Star Wars* sequel over another on the basis of the fate of the laborers in each plot.[25]

This more generalized idea of criticism, as practiced across many art forms, emerged forcefully in the movement known as Aestheticism, an important forerunner to the Modernism that brought with it such influential critical voices as Roger Fry in Britain and Clement Greenberg in America. Criticism is still understood in many contexts as a category that embraces all the arts, including the arts that have developed since the mid-nineteenth century such as photography, cinema, and the new media arts of our own moment. There are in fact good introductory books to be found—such as Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*—that deal more generally with music, painting, and sculpture, as well as literature, drama, and cinema.[26] However, as will become clear, the scope of the term *criticism* for the present book is not as broad as what is implied in aesthetics generally, nor yet limited to literary criticism in the narrowest sense of the term. To explain what it includes and why, I turn to the second of the two questions raised by Richards' guiding program for practical criticism: how to generalize the benefits of criticism beyond personal pleasure and moral profit.

This second question requires that we consider how the practice of criticism matters to the practice of a given art in society at large. Looking thus broadly at culture, we might observe that a public that has developed a competence for doing criticism with (say) a lyric poem is likely to enhance the overall condition of the art—just as a critically sophisticated audience for theater in a city like London goes hand in hand with great productions and lively performance. Here is one of my favorite formulations of this point by the

influential Canadian critic Northrop Frye, framed as a negative hypothesis about the consequences for a society that might seek to do without criticism:

> ...the fate of art that tries to do without criticism is instructive. The attempt to reach the public directly through "popular" art assumes that criticism is artificial and public taste natural. Behind this is a further assumption about natural taste which goes back through Tolstoy to Romantic theories of a spontaneously creative "folk." These theories have had a fair trial; they have not stood up very well to the facts of literary history and experience, and it is perhaps time to move beyond them.[27]

Some years ago, the witty musical parodist and comedian Tom Lehrer made the same point more starkly when he quipped that what makes folk songs "so atrocious is that they're written by the people."[28]

Lehrer's comment may sound harsh, but even some cases that seem to be exceptions to this rule actually prove it. Wordsworth started a revolution in English poetry around 1800 by attempting to return poetry to its sources in "low and rustic life" and by using the "actual language of men."[29] But the enormous sophistication that this program demanded both from its poets and its reading audiences alike is evident in the rich critical writings that supported and explained the enterprise: including Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Much the same can be said about the critical sophistication of recent Nobel laureate Bob Dylan. I don't need to make this argument, though, because the Coen Brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) already has, with its portrayal of Dylan's immersion in the knowing musical and intellectual milieu of Greenwich Village in the early 1960s.[30] "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" did not itself fall from the sky but emerged from an environment rich in critical ideas, as Dylan's autobiography also attests.[31] In the second half of this book I address several cases in which criticism has mattered to creative production, sometimes quite explicitly, as in the example of Patricia Rozema's film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, which relies heavily on an essay by Edward Said about Austen's handling of slavery in the novel.

This way of generalizing from the personal benefits of criticism to its advantages for a culture writ large underwrites a certain understanding of art and society that extends from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* through the work of the great Modernists. Indeed, Northrop Frye's position, thus stated, might itself seem too caught up in a Modernist point of view—too committed to a notion of art defined as an elitist project supported by a

critical establishment, a game played between alienated artists and the knowing few, both sides deeply suspicious of the popular and the commercial. As it happens, though, Frye anticipates this objection. Here is the rest of that paragraph from his *Anatomy of Criticism*:

> An extreme reaction against the primitive view, at one time associated with the "art for art's sake" catchword, thinks of art in precisely the opposite terms, as a mystery, an initiation into an esoterically civilized community. Here criticism is restricted to ritual masonic gestures, to raised eyebrows and cryptic comments and other signs of an understanding too occult for syntax. The fallacy common to both attitudes is that of a rough correlation between the merit of art and the degree of public response to it, though the correlation assumed is direct in one case and inverse in the other.[32]

There is nothing radical about what Frye is claiming here, but there is something attractive about his double formulation of criticism's role, mediating between populist or consumerist tendencies on the one hand and recherché aesthetic mystification on the other.

It is at this point that we can bring together the two kinds of responses that I have been developing, both answers to the question of how to generalize beyond Richards' efforts to ground "criticism" in the study of lyric poetry. One involves a middle way between restricting the relevant sense of criticism to "literature" and extending it across all forms of "art." The other involves a middle way between populism (or consumerism) and aesthetic mystification. Both have some relation to the limits of Modernism and to the enterprise of practical criticism that was partly circumscribed by these limits. I can clarify what I mean by returning to Richards, who was writing in the heyday of British Modernism. Here is what he wrote in 1924, the year before he launched his project in practical criticism at Cambridge:

> For many reasons standards are much more in need of defence than they used to be. It is perhaps premature to envisage a collapse of values, a transvaluation by which popular taste replaces trained discrimination. Yet commercialism has done stranger things: we have not yet fathomed the more sinister potentialities of the cinema and the loud-speaker...
>
> [*PC,* p. 31]

It would be unfair to say that Richards was interested in sustaining mystification, as Frye suggests some Modernists were. Indeed, Richards' relation to

Modernist aestheticism was complicated. It is certainly true, however, that Richards was relentlessly focused on the lyric poem as both bearer of culture, in something still close to Matthew Arnold's sense, and as the paradigmatic object of criticism. At certain moments, Richards actually talks about cinema as if it were equivalent to, as he puts it, "bad art" (*PC*, p. 189). For Richards, we might say, cinema represented the cultural problem for which the proper study of the poem on the page—practical criticism, in his narrow sense—is the solution.

In retrospect Richards' position seems quite extraordinary. Writing across the years of the transition from silent cinema to sound cinema, with three full decades of cinematic art behind him, he treats cinema indiscriminately as though it were simply a source of mass distraction and manipulation. Even setting aside the pioneering work of Georges Méliès and the Lumière Brothers and of D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, it must be remembered that the great art films of Fritz Lang (in Germany), Abel Gance (in France), and Carl Dreyer (in Denmark) had all already begun to appear when Richards was working. Indeed, Jean Epstein, the French filmmaker and cineaste, had already developed his notion of a poetics of film.[33] And Eisenstein, in the Soviet Union, was already theorizing an art of cinema by 1929.

When current critics worry about the death of criticism, then, their outlook is often limited to something like what Richards, and even Frye and Spillers, understood as criticism in the first place. Meanwhile, much critical interest—much critical *energy*—seems to have migrated to those domains that Richards disparaged in the cultures of film and the moving image. It's not just that one can find thriving academic programs in cinema and media studies across the world, even at Richards' Cambridge. Drop by any coffee shop or office lunchroom, or just pay attention to the transactions of daily life in and out of universities, in and out of domestic circumstances, and you will find that film and television make for energetic ongoing critical conversation. And before the advent of online streaming, cinephiles had begun to relish "extra features"—including critical commentaries—on material media such as DVDs and BluRay disks. In short, practical criticism is not dead. It is just showing more vital signs in some places than in others, even or especially in the scenes of everyday life. The philosopher Stanley Cavell anticipated such new directions in criticism more than half a century ago, in *The World Viewed*, when he noted that the example of cinema poses a special problem for Modernism and can help to expose its aesthetic limitations partly by virtue of the connection between cinema and the ordinary.[34]

This shift in critical energies has itself been registered with increasing prominence in the way motion-picture media themselves represent the place

of criticism in everyday life. Certainly, the cinema of the last thirty years has often preoccupied itself with dramatizing acts of criticism that range from the crudest kind of judgments to the most refined. It is possible, without much effort, to name a score of such examples over the last couple of decades, especially if we extend the scope of criticism to include music criticism. The sophistication of critical judgment represented in such films varies accordingly. It can range from Ed and Shaun choosing which records they will hurl at the zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) ("Purple Rain, no ... Dire Straits, throw it") to more considered performances of aesthetic judgment of the sort offered in John Cusack's character's top ten rankings in *High Fidelity* (2000).[35] Many films feature critical commentary, sometimes extended and quasi-academic commentary. Think of Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway*, with Chazz Palminteri playing the sophisticated gangster-critic who gives detailed technical advice to the John Cusack character about his screenplay.[36] In Lisa Cholodenko's 1998 film *High Art*, a Brooklyn woman trained in "critical theory" delivers a critical analysis on her upstairs neighbor's photograph and invokes Roland Barthes' account of the "punctum."[37] The figure of the critic has been fully embodied in the character played by Dustin Hoffman in *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), where Emma Thompson plays an author trying to kill off a character (played by Will Farrell) who doesn't want to die, and also in Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's complex film *Adaptation* (2002), when the Kaufman character (Nicolas Cage) seeks advice from a screenwriting guru played by Brian Cox.[38]

It also seems clear enough, for example, that the films of Quentin Tarantino and a television series like *The Sopranos* would not be what they are without their characters' explicit and recurring acts of critical commentary on objects in a contemporary cultural scene in which these works themselves have come to gain a place of iconic centrality. Consider how often characters in Tarantino's films or David Chase's episodes become preoccupied with critical reflection on objects and events in contemporary culture: the bank robbers at the start of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) discussing a Madonna song or Tony Soprano commenting on American war films.[39] Sometimes the chain of reference can be extensive, as I suggest in Chapter 3, running through several works for the screen, and it can even involve cinematographic techniques that likewise, on another level, offer pointed commentary on prior works. There is such a sequence that runs from Jon Favreau's appearance on *The Sopranos* back to his film *Swingers* (1996) and from there to the opening of *Reservoir Dogs* and Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990).[40]

One measure of how criticism has migrated to the screen can be found in the television series that Spike Lee has recently adapted from his own first

commercial film, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). In the television series launched in 2017, as in the original film, Nola Darling (DeWanda Wise) is an African American artist with several lovers. Also set in Brooklyn, now gentrified, the series is more topically relevant than the film was: characters discuss the election of Donald Trump when it happens, for example. It is also far more discursive about matters of criticism. Nola discusses the influence of Chicago painter Kerry James Marshall on her work. She is a film buff and often frames situations by way of cinematic references, annoyed when a friend or a lover cannot keep up with her. In direct address to the camera, she likens her own story to that of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), a film narrated by multiple narrators in a way that doesn't quite add up. Literary arts also come into play. Early in season 1, Nola and one of her lovers have a meeting of minds over a book of poetry, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. In the three decades or more between Spike Lee's film and his series, clearly, the relationship of criticism and the screen has changed and, as I discuss in this book's final chapter, he is an artist who helped to change it. Indeed, already in his 1995 film *Clockers*, discussed at some length in Chapter 6, we find an opening sequence in which young drug dealers in the Brooklyn projects discuss the merits of various rappers, in some cases according to the criterion of whether they are "hard" enough ever to have killed someone.

I turn now to look in some detail at a particularly telling example of how the function of criticism can be internalized in a screen narrative, the pioneering 1994 independent film *Clerks*, directed by Kevin Smith, now something of a cult classic, but noted chiefly in its moment for having won two awards at the Cannes Film Festival after being made on an absurdly small budget of less than $27,000. Like "This Is Just to Say," this film gives us a moment of critical reflection in a world of everyday consumption. It is not exactly Williams' kitchen this time but a site just as ordinary—and also, as it happens, in New Jersey.

1.4 Criticism in the Convenience Store

What could be more ordinary, after all, than the location in which *Clerks* was shot, a convenience store in the working-class community of Leonardo, some thirty miles south of Williams' Rutherford on the Garden State Parkway? The convenience store is located in a small strip mall, next door to a video rental store—a fleeting commercial institution of that era. Both stores are staffed by young working-class men: Dante in the convenience store and his friend Randal in the video store. At one point in this "day in the

FIGURE 1.3 Dante Hicks (Brian O'Halloran) and Randal Graves (Jeff Anderson) discussing *Star Wars* in *Clerks*. Source: *Clerks* (1994). Directed by Kevin Smith. Produced by View Askew Productions/Miramax.

life," Randal wanders into the convenience store and prompts a discussion with his friend about the relative merits of the second and third installments of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. (In 1994, only three *Star Wars* films had been produced.) It turns out that they agree that *The Empire Strikes Back* is superior to *Return of the Jedi* (a "blasphemy," as they acknowledge, against a presumed critical orthodoxy). Dante directs attention to how the two films end, suggesting that *Empire* is superior because its seemingly tragic conclusion is true to the tragic turn of the world. Randal doesn't disagree but has his own more detailed analysis to add, along different lines (Figure 1.3):

Randal: There was something else going on in Jedi. I never noticed it 'til today.

Dante: They build another Death Star, right?

Randal: Yeah. The first one was completed and fully operational before the rebels destroyed it.

Dante: Luke blew it up. Give credit where credit's due.

Randal: The second one was still being built when they blew it up.

Dante: Compliments of Lando Calrissian [the villain played by Billy Dee Williams]

Randal: Something just never sat right with me that second time around. I could never put my finger on it, but something just wasn't right.

Dante: And you figured it out.

Randal: The first Death Star was manned by the Imperial Army. The only people on board were Storm Troopers, dignitaries, Imperialists.

Dante: Basically.

Randal: So when they blew it up, no problem. Evil's punished.

Dante: And the second time around?

Randal: It wasn't even done being built yet ... it was still under construction.

Dante: So?

Randal: A construction job of that magnitude would require ... a lot more manpower than the Imperial Army had to offer. I'll bet they brought independent contractors in on that thing. Plumbers, aluminum siders, roofers—

Dante: Not just Imperialists. Is that what you're getting at?

Randal: Exactly. To get it built quickly and quietly, they'd hire anybody that could do the job. You think the average Storm Trooper knows how to install a toilet main? All they know is killing.

Dante: So they bring in independent contractors. Why are you so upset?

Randal: Those innocent contractors brought in are killed, casualties of a war they had nothing to do with. Look, you're a roofer. Some juicy government contract comes your way. You got a wife and kids, the two-story in suburbia. This is a government contract, which means all sorts of benefits. Along come these left-wing militants who blast everything within a three-mile radius with their lasers. You didn't ask for that; you had no personal politics. You're just trying to scrape out a living.[41]

This passage leads us deep into the world of *Star Wars* lore, where aficionados, in their rivalry with *Star Trek* aficionados, generated a feature-length film about this very conflict in critical preference: *Fan Boys* (2009). It is also, of course, a world of white male adolescence and a seemingly jejune obsession with trivia. Nonetheless, I propose that we take Randal's analysis as a genuine example of doing criticism, not least for the way he supports a critical judgment with a highly particularized and, in its way, cogent account of his objects.

True, there may be something arch about the tone: the language of this conversation verges on a becoming a pastiche of academic commentary. It is

also the case that the politics are those we might imagine for vaguely working-class (perhaps petty-bourgeois) young men in Leonardo, New Jersey, with their special sympathy for the figure of the "independent contractor," the local family man struggling to stay solvent. This is a figure who stands opposed to the left-wing militants who indiscriminately destroy them, and perhaps against a left-wing Hollywood filmmaker who may not even be aware of their existence. The critique, like the judgment about which is the "better movie," is not only grounded in an aesthetic instinct—"Something just never sat right with me"—but also supported by moral and political reasoning.

For all its creative license, then, what seems powerful and true about the scene is that it captures a certain critical energy very much embedded in everyday life, and it does so in an environment not obviously distinguished for its cultural richness or sensitivity: the Jersey Shore. (Think of Snooki and Pauly D from the wildly popular reality television show of that title that ran from 2009 to 2012.) Yet people in the most ordinary circumstances do have arguments like this about works they care about, and the works that Dante and Randal care about are the three films in the first *Star Wars* trilogy. It matters some that these films were actually not so recent in 1994, having appeared between 1977 and 1983. In the lifetimes of Dante and Randal, presumably young men in their early twenties, this is no small gap in time. Randal says he has just seen *Jedi* again today, presumably on the VHS player in the video store. It is of course precisely the institution of video rental that provides a new "library" function for ordinary cinephiles in this period, making it possible for Randal to rescreen a film from more than a decade earlier so as to get to the bottom of a critical instinct he has about it. Dante and Randal stand at the start of an era of expanding resources that continues into the present moment, as relatively affordable film streaming services offer ready access to thousands and thousands of film and video materials.

In *Clerks*, conversations like the one between Dante and Randal not only reveal what they care about, as evident in the detailed references they exchange and readily recognize; such conversations also *enact* a kind of caring. They represent a kind of meaning making even in a cultural zone like a 1980s working-class Jersey strip mall, where such forms of care and meaning making may not be easy to come by. Judgments of the sorts they concur in here—and arguments on behalf of those judgments such as they exchange here—come to carry a certain moral weight. There is, potentially, some irony in the scene, some gentle mockery of the pedantry of the analytic commentary Dante elicits from Randal. Smith takes care to set up the scene so that the actor playing Randal, Jeff Anderson, can actually read his complicated

critical analysis from an off-screen script board. But the irony is, I suggest, enabling rather than undercutting: without making these interlocutors sound vaguely academic it would be harder to make the scene work.

Then again, it might also be tempting to view this exchange, and to dismiss the film, as merely an event in American consumer culture. What makes such a dismissal awkward in this case is that the film so pointedly stages this discussion—stages itself, really—in the immediate context of American consumer culture. Like much dialogue in the film, this conversation takes place with Dante behind the counter of the convenience store, in front of a wall that is chockablock with everyday things to buy—especially products containing addictive substances like nicotine, caffeine, and sugar. And these addictive products have their role in the way that the scene plays out. For example, while the conversation with Randal is progressing, a man steps over from the coffee maker to announce *himself* an "independent contractor" and to volunteer an opinion about Randal's reading of *Jedi*. Moreover, toward the end of the scene, Dante and Randal are so caught up in their critical discourse that they fail to notice that their friend Jay—who spends his days hanging out in front of the store with his sidekick Silent Bob (played by Kevin Smith himself)—is stuffing his mouth with Hostess Twinkies (the notoriously sugary American junk food) (Figure 1.4). Variations on the psychology of consumption are played out through several figures over the course of the film, such as the "milk lady," always sorting through the convenience store cooler in search of the freshest gallon, and the "egg man," who rearranges eggs there

FIGURE 1.4 Jay (Jason Mewes) sneaking a Twinkie in *Clerks*.

in hopes, as Dante philosophically observes, of making the perfect dozen. In these ways and by these means, Smith's film carves out a place for a poetics of cinema in the most implausible of circumstances.

The course of this analysis has returned us to the poetry of the refrigerator with which we began. Set against the background of such scenes of consumption, Dante and Randal's critical discussion of George Lucas' trilogy takes on a distinctive cast. If the milk man and the egg lady go beyond the sheer impulsive gluttony of Jay's gorging on Twinkies to something like an exaggerated form of selectivity, Dante and Randal go beyond selectivity ("which movie did you like better?") to a developed and articulated response. In so doing, one might say, they develop their own articulate responsiveness. Articulate responsiveness may be understood, paradoxically, as both a goal and a condition of doing criticism well. And herein lies an important if somewhat circular principle for the arguments and analysis involved in doing criticism: *Criticism develops responsiveness to works that reward it, and it does so by the practice of responding to them articulately*. These issues will be addressed further in Chapter 2, which looks at the mutually connected role of questions and judgments in criticism.

1.5 Criticism between Page and Screen

I have juxtaposed a trio of canonical American poems with a cult film that perhaps a small fraction of my readers may have seen. Such a gesture ought to prompt a question: What kinds of works are relevant to doing criticism in the sense I have been developing here? My brief in this book will cover the literary arts, the dramatic arts, and the narrative screen arts. As it happens, these inclusions and exclusions also conform to the standard institutional arrangements of higher education, at least in the UK, North America, and the rest of Anglophone world. For in literature departments like the ones we call "English," not only are drama and theater often taught alongside poetry and fiction but so are film and other screen arts. English departments, of course, have been a home for film studies in many institutions for many years, even at places that have a separate program or department for, say, cinema and media studies. It is fair to say that the study of screen narrative is *increasingly* incorporated under separate institutional auspices, and under various rubrics: Film Studies; Cinema Studies; Screen Arts; Theater, Film, and Drama; Film and Television; Media Studies; and so on. It is also fair to say, however, that over the course of a decades-long pursuit of disciplinary autonomy, a certain tendency has arisen among scholars in the CMS fields

to push away from any strong connection with literary criticism. It has become almost a rite of passage for these disciplines.[42]

Conversely, literary criticism has had its own issues with film studies, not least because of the position taken by the most important voice in establishing the academic terms of that discipline in the post-cinema era, I. A. Richards. Richards' founding of his program for practical criticism in academia on a deeply inimical conceptualization of poetry and cinema has had far-reaching consequences for how study of the humanities has developed in the modern university. It was so far-reaching at Cambridge, indeed, that even a force like Raymond Williams, the most important British Marxist critic of his era, long had difficulty in overcoming it there. Williams' early, forgotten championing of cinema studies, like his later and more familiar championing of drama studies, were both carried out on behalf of a challenge to Cambridge English as Richards helped to establish it, a critique of that program as a "theorization of reading" rather than a "theorization of composition." Film, like drama, offered objects to criticism and theory that demanded attention to issues of "composition," which in turn, presumably, had implications for the study of poetry. Working on such objects, as he put it, posed a challenge for practical criticism as it had been increasingly naturalized at Cambridge (and elsewhere), because when working on drama—as with cinema—one is "inevitably brought up against problems of form in the most direct way." That is, one is made to address "basic problems of stance and mode which were never really posed at all" within the more narrowly literary confines of the Richards program.[43]

One indication that things need not be so, that they might have been otherwise, that they still might be otherwise, can be found in a remarkable encounter in Paris during the same year in which Richards published *Practical Criticism*. This is the meeting between Sergei Eisenstein and James Joyce, seven years after Joyce published *Ulysses* (1922), and four years after Eisenstein made *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Far from an occasion for mutual turf defense, the conversation that day, according to both artists, was mutually productive. Eisenstein had acquired *Ulysses* the year before, when he called it "the Bible of the new cinema"—a cultural role Eisenstein would later, in effect, reassign to Dickens.[44] After the meeting with Joyce, he experimented with stream-of-consciousness writing and began to associate Joyce's formal techniques with his own ambitious project to make a film of Marx's *Capital*.[45] Joyce, for his part, later wrote to a friend that Eisenstein was one of two directors to whom he could entrust a film version of *Ulysses*.

It is in the adventurous spirit of this encounter between Joyce and Eisenstein that I choose to discuss how to do criticism in a field with loose but

I hope intelligible parameters: defined narrowly enough for intellectual purchase but not in so constrained a way as to exclude areas of intersection. The decision to go this middle route with Aristotle poses both challenges and opportunities: challenges, because studies of film and literature have been too isolated from each other; opportunities, because it offers a chance to make new links while respecting large distinctions. I do not intend to impose connections between the literary and screen arts where they do not exist. Running against the grain of Richards' influential strictures against cinema, however, there is a counter-tradition dating from Richards' own time for thinking about the poetics of cinema itself: I have already mentioned the example of Jean Epstein. Conversely, Eisenstein himself famously proposed that his understanding of montage extended not only to dramatists like Shakespeare but even to as relentlessly textual an author as John Milton, whose Puritan commitments would have led him to be wary of theatrical productions. Eisenstein went so far as to call *Paradise Lost* "a first-rate school in which to study montage and audio visual relationships," and he illustrated the point with passages he made a point of citing in English on the grounds that the "direct delight in the beauties of composition" would be lost if he were to analyze, say, Pushkin in translation. As a maker of epics himself, Eisenstein is especially interested in the grand-scale effects in *Paradise Lost*, especially in the passages narrating the war in heaven. He later wrote that, had he read Milton before he made one of his own great epics, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), it would have been a different and better motion picture.

T. S. Eliot complained that Milton's poetry was insufficiently vivid in its visual description,[46] but Eisenstein treats it not as *describing* something but rather as *prescribing* a set of montage procedures to be, in effect, reenacted by the spectator, who necessarily "experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image just as it was experienced by the author."[47] Eisenstein goes on to illustrate how this process works by staging an analysis of some passages from Milton's war in heaven (just as he had previously done for a passage from Pushkin) as providing rhythmically sequenced images and (as it were) camera set-ups. Since I began with the theme of tasting forbidden fruit, it might be fitting to examine the famous opening passage of *Paradise Lost*, in order to see how it might lend itself to Eisenstein's montage analysis.

The theme of forbidden fruit is not long in making its appearance in this invocation of the epic muse:

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste

Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou knowst; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support:
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert the eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.[48]

There are certainly features of this passage that we could follow Eisenstein in calling montage effects. One could point, for example, to the shift from the tight focus on the fruit of the forbidden tree in Paradise to the invocation of the elevated prospect from the peaks of Mount Horeb, where divine inspiration was given to Moses, the presumed author of the book of Genesis on which *Paradise Lost* is based. There is also a visual repetition (or "match cut") between this mountain top and that of Sinai, repeated in the invocation of Mount Zion in the clause that begins after the conjunctive "or" in line 10. Eisenstein's expansive idea of montage might also apply to the "adventurous song" that means to "soar above the Aonian mount," transcending that pinnacle, as the transcendent divine Spirit broods dove-like above the primordial abyss before the creative imperative "let there be light." Most striking of all these montage effects, however, might be the juxtaposition of this first light of the world, brought about by the divine Word, and the light that the poet seeks to bring into his dark mind. This latter light, in corresponding to

the first one, forms part of Milton's Puritan belief in the "inner light" available to the "upright heart and pure" of the elect.

As a filmmaker, Eisenstein was famously attentive to the rhythm that governs the succession of images and sounds in cinematic montage, and rhythm is likewise crucial to what Milton has in view when he speaks of his ambition to pursue "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." After all, *Paradise Lost* is written in blank verse, a verse form that is not prose (since it involves lines regulated by iambic pentameter, five repetitions of unstressed and stressed syllables) and has no rhyme scheme. Blank verse is a metrical form nonetheless in which the line matters in two important ways: first by an adherence to the iambic pentameter norm, and second by implied principles of construction for what a line can be (since a blank-verse line cannot end or begin just anywhere). In blank verse, importantly, the unit of the line has little to do with the unit of sense, understood as a clause. And yet, although none of the first six lines are end-stopped—none ends with the completion of a sentence or independent clause—all conclude with a noun that completes a noun phrase: "the fruit," "immortal taste," "all our woe," "one greater man," "the blissful seat," and "the secret top." In each case, a strong monosyllabic noun follows an unstressed syllable, thus lending a kind of closing cadence to the line even as we look beyond it for the completion of the clause or sentence. We have to wait until line 7 to find a line that does not end with a noun phrase set to this particular rhythm, and there we are delivered an important single verb—inspire—that provides the same cadence for line closure, in spite of the fact that it is a transitive verb still awaiting its direct object: "That shepherd" (i.e., Moses). The noun phrases then reappear to close lines 8–10.

Even in the absence of rhyme schemes or syntactical end-stopping, therefore, Milton's "adventurous song" begins by reinforcing the iambic pentameter norm. This means that we can register, not just on the page but also in our ears, the forward push beyond the end of a given line, an effect known as *enjambment*. A relatively strong instance of enjambment occurs when the line break falls between a transitive verb and the direct object that it calls for. As noted above, "inspire / That shepherd" is one such case. "Pursues / Things" is another. Slightly less strong is the enjambment across the line break when the verb and direct object are inverted: "What in me is dark / Illumine." Sometimes, even when there is enjambment across a line break without any closing punctuation, Milton continues things in such a way as to give a line a kind of sense in itself, within or apart from the overall syntax. The very opening line of the poem works this way. Despite the forward push of the enjambment—"the fruit / Of that forbidden tree"—it is possible to read

in the opening line by itself a full announcement of this epic poem's subject matter: "man's first disobedience and the fruit." That is, *its* fruit, the fruit of that disobedience. It is after all the case that *Paradise Lost* goes on to deliver an account not only of the motives and circumstances of Adam and Eve's sin, but also its far-reaching consequences: not only the loss of paradise, but also all the implications of original sin, including, by a wondrous mystery, the eventual redemption of that sin by Jesus Christ, the "greater man" whose coming is foretold to Adam and Eve in the final books of the poem.[49]

The kinds of effects that Eisenstein finds in Milton's verse recall his discussion of Dickens' fiction, even closer to home for this filmmaker, whereby an image seems to linger from one scene to another, even as the sense of words does across line breaks in Milton. Not all of the rhythmic and formal features that criticism reveals in *Paradise Lost*, or in Dickens' novels, have close analogues with cinema, and not even Milton's opening sequence of juxtapositions, which I have described as Eisensteinian montage effects, are straightforwardly analogous to montage in cinema.[50] The point is rather that the formal effects based in repetition and variation that govern the literary arts and the screen arts are alike traceable in a critical analysis that enriches our experience of both.

I noted at the start that the art of doing criticism has been around for a long time and is something we are not likely to do without anytime soon. I suggested that the kinds of critical discussion that have been staged within popular cinema in recent decades amply attest to that point. Though this is a book that means, finally, to help students of literature and cinema (students in the broadest sense) to think and write well about what they find in their reading and viewing, I hope at all points to preserve the sense of vital connection with the kind of issues that Randal and Dante argue about in *Clerks*, the kind of issues that any number of readers of this book might find themselves arguing about after an evening of reading or viewing. In Dante and Randal's exchange, we have a fine example of Mencken's critical exuberance. It is not only something wonderful to behold. It is even more wonderful to undertake, to do ourselves. How indeed could we ever imagine doing without it?

NOTES

1. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations* (London: A. Millar, 1757), pp. 216–17.
2. William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," *Selected Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 65.

3. Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. xi.
4. Marjorie Garber, *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), p. 77.
5. Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), p. 1.
6. See Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1865), pp. 1–42.
7. T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 30.
8. See I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004 [1929]); hereafter abbreviated *PC*. Recent research into Richards' classroom notebooks suggests a somewhat different picture of his actual pedagogy than what he offers in his famous book: see Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), pp. 66–106.
9. In this effort, I follow the lead of Raymond Williams' sustained response to the work of Richards. See my "I. A. Richards and Raymond Williams: Reading Poetry, Reading Society," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 46, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 325–52.
10. William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson et al. (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 1274.
11. One modern source for this idea of aesthetic estrangement in criticism is an early essay by the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3–24, but it can be traced back Wordsworth and Coleridge and their Romantic experiments in poetry: "The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 130.
12. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1960), p. 1377.
13. William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, p. 1274. See Williams' essay on Marianne Moore in William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 317.

14. Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Bean Eaters," *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harpers, 1960), p. 16.
15. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, p. 1472. William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Prose Works* 1:130.
16. Cited in A. O. Scott, *Better Living through Criticism: How to Think about Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* (New York: Penguin, 2016), p. 18.
17. For an account of how some of William Blake's short lyrics carry out analysis and judgment on their readers, see my *An Archaelogy of Sympathy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 269–77.
18. See Ronald S. Crane et al., *Critics and Criticism: Essays in Method*, ed. Ronald S. Crane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
19. See Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970); Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Barbara Christian, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985–2000*, ed. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
20. Even McDonald's *Death of the Critic*, which seeks to address a more expansive sense of the term, tends to resort to literary criticism as paradigmatic for criticism as such (see Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* [New York: Continuum, 2007]).
21. Hortense Spillers, "Formalism Comes to Harlem," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 84–85.
22. Virginia Jackson, in a number of contexts, has tracked what she calls the history of "lyricization" in literary criticism. See, for example, her essay "Who Reads Poetry?" *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 181–87.
23. Note the complications with the term *literature* that emerge when we extend our horizon to "world literature"; see David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 6–23.
24. John Ruskin, "Chapter VI: The Nature of Gothic," *The Stones of Venice*, 3 vols. (New York: John Lovell Company, 1851), 2:152–230.
25. It is of course not quite the same, since one involves labor in production of the work the other in its represented story or *diegesis*. See *Clerks*, dir. Kevin Smith (1994).
26. See Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
27. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 3–4.

28. Tom Lehrer, "Clementine," *An Evening Wasted with Tom Lehrer* (Reprise 6199, 1959).
29. Wordsworth, Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Prose Works*, 1:127.
30. See *Inside Llewyn Davis*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen (2013).
31. See Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
32. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 4 (when Frye says "criticism," he means literary criticism).
33. See *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).
34. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). For a discussion of Cavell on cinema, Modernism, and the ordinary, see my "Literature among the Objects of Modernist Criticism: Value, Medium, Genre," in *The Values of Literary Studies*, ed. Ronan McDonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 150–54.
35. *Shaun of the Dead*, dir. Edgar Wright (2004). See *High Fidelity*, dir. Stephen Frears (2000).
36. See *Bullets over Broadway*, dir. Woody Allen (1994).
37. See *High Art*, dir. Lisa Cholodenko (1998).
38. See *Stranger than Fiction*, dir. Marc Forster (2006), and *Adaptation*, dir. Spike Jonze (2002).
39. See *Reservoir Dogs*, dir. Quentin Tarantino (1992), and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007).
40. See *Swingers*, dir. Doug Liman (1996), and *Goodfellas*, dir. Martin Scorscese (1990).
41. Kevin Smith, *Clerks* [screenplay] (New York: Faber and Faber, 2000).
42. See, for example, Peter Wollen, whose example is Eisenstein, in Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 [1969]).
43. Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with "New Left Review"* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015 [1979]), p. 191.
44. See Gösta Werner, "James Joyce and Sergej Eisenstein," trans. Erik Gunnemark, *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 27 (Spring 1990): 504.
45. See Annette Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* (Part 2)," *October*, vol. 3 (Spring 1977): 82–89.
46. Eliot wrote in 1936, "At no period is the visual imagination conspicuous in Milton's poetry." T. S. Eliot, "Milton I" in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 259.
47. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), p. 32.

48. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (New York: Routledge, 2013), lines 1–26.
49. See John Barrell's discussion of blank verse in *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 108–9.
50. See Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, p. 46.