STEFAN COLLINI

ON VARIOUSNESS; AND

ON PERSUASION

A S THIS IS, I understand, to be the final instalment of the current exchange between Francis Mulhern and myself in these pages, it may be helpful if I try, very briefly, to summarize the main steps in the argument so far. I do not pretend this is an adequate account of the exchange in its entirety; it concentrates on what seems to me to have been the main locus of dispute between us, at least before the appearance of his most recent contribution.[1]

The central argument of *Culture/Metaculture* may again be given in Mulhern's own words:

> 'Metaculture' names a modern discursive formation in which 'culture', however understood, speaks of its own generality and historical conditions of existence. Its inherent strategic impulse—failing which it would be no more than descriptive anthropology—is to mobilize 'culture' as a principle against the prevailing generality of 'politics' in the disputed plane of social authority. What speaks in metacultural discourse is the cultural principle itself, as it strives to dissolve the political as locus of general arbitration in social relations. Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies, typically contrasting in social attachment yet sharing this discursive template, have been strong versions of this metacultural will to authority.[2]

On this view, what has been conventionally understood as 'cultural criticism'—which Mulhern, with polemical intent, re-designates as 'Kulturkritik'—stands accused of attempting to 'mediate a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity'. Only something properly describable as 'politics' rather than any form of 'metapolitics' could achieve a real resolution of these contradictions. Metacultural discourse is an attempt to 'supplant the authority of

politics'; it 'dissolves the political'.[3] The nub of his argument is condensed in this one phrase.

My first response, while warmly appreciative of the book's merits, raised objections on two fronts, historical and conceptual. I objected that Mulhern's tightly-defined category of 'Kulturkritik' could not, without distortion, embrace the wide range of intellectual figures to whom he wished to apply it. And I argued that Mulhern's own book, including its exhortation to practise a form of 'cultural politics', was itself a continuation of metacultural discourse, not a supersession of it, but that this was, in my view, no bad thing since to write from the perspective of culture does not, as Mulhern would have it, require an appeal to transcendentals: 'it only requires the presumption that disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance can furnish a place to stand in attempting to engage critically with the narrow pragmatism (or "specialism") of any particular political programme.'[4]

In his reply, 'Beyond Metaculture', Mulhern clarified and in some respects extended the argument of his book, particularly in relation to his category of 'Kulturkritik' and to the contrast he wishes to draw between the pernicious logic of all metacultural discourse and the legitimate enterprise of 'cultural politics'. He repeated that culture-as-principle asserts a 'claim to authority over the social whole' and thus that the attempt to displace politics was the 'inherent strategic impulse' of metacultural discourse. He characterized the role I had briefly sketched for cultural criticism as governed by the logic of 'the Arnoldian problematic' and hence vitiated by the incoherence present in all metacultural discourse. He further extended the reach of his category of 'Kulturkritik' by proposing that a Marxist version of it was to be found in the work of Adorno and Marcuse. He re-affirmed the contrast with 'politics' understood as the re-shaping of social patterns 'according to judgements based on a socially determinate programme and strategy'.[5] (It should be said that since I had not taken issue with the discussion of Cultural Studies in Mulhern's book, that aspect of the

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[1] Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, London 2000; Stefan Collini, 'Culture Talk', NLR 7, Jan–Feb 2001; Mulhern, 'Beyond Metaculture', NLR 16, July–Aug 2002; Collini, 'Defending Cultural Criticism', NLR 18, Nov–Dec 2002; Mulhern, 'What is Cultural Criticism?', NLR 23, Sept–Oct 2003.
[2] 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 86.   [3] *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 169, 166.
[4] 'Culture Talk', p. 51.   [5] 'Beyond Metaculture', pp. 100, 86, 103.

argument, which may be thought its most interesting and original ele-
ment, has rather fallen from view in our subsequent exchange.)

In 'Defending Cultural Criticism', I acknowledged the ways in which
Mulhern had clarified and extended his case, but I found this later ver-
sion more troubling than the original. In an attempt to isolate the issues
at stake, I essayed this brief summary of our areas of agreement:

> By this point, readers could be forgiven for feeling some frustration that
> Mulhern and I appear to agree on so much yet to differ on everything. We
> both insist on the non-identity of culture and politics; we both recognize
> politics as the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine
> relations of power in a given space. We both have reservations about the
> extent to which so many on the left, especially the academic left, now treat
> questions of cultural identity, variously conceived, as the defining issues of
> politics. We both believe that those forms of criticism that seek to resolve
> the problems they diagnose simply by asserting the desirability or inevita-
> bility of some kind of harmony are indeed guilty of an evasion of politics.
> And we both seem drawn to a similar tone or writerly stance in discussing
> these matters, including a taste for certain kinds of intellectual irony. So,
> is there, in the end, any real difference between what he chooses to term
> 'cultural politics' and what I prefer to persist in calling 'cultural criticism'?

I elaborated on my objections to his now enlarged category of
'Kulturkritik' (on which more in a moment), and I asked whether for
Mulhern there could be any 'cultural critics' who did *not* display the disa-
bling failings of 'Kulturkritik' since it seems that for him public discourse
belongs rightfully, and *exclusively*, to politics, while culture is always an
intruder into this domain. I re-stated the familiar sense of 'cultural criti-
cism', noting that in so doing I did 'not take myself to be saying anything
particularly novel or to be staking out a distinctively personal position'. I
again challenged the understanding of culture, influentially propounded
by Raymond Williams, which sees it essentially as a compensatory proj-
ection of values excluded by the progress of 'capitalist modernity'. I
urged that we do not have to understand culture in these functionalist,
compensatory terms; that we should not attempt to make too clean or
complete a division between 'culture' and 'society'; and that we do not
need to regard *all* criticism of instrumental activity as presupposing or
appealing to some 'transcendental realm'. I also urged that Mulhern's
assertions *about* politics remain what he elsewhere calls 'metapolitics',
indeed that what they offer might be described, applying his own phrase,
as 'a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist

modernity'. I concluded that 'speaking about broadly political matters from a broadly cultural perspective is both legitimate and likely to be of limited effect. It is only one among the valuable forms of public debate, and by no means always the most important one.'[6]

I. WHAT IS CULTURAL CRITICISM?

In his most recent contribution, 'What is Cultural Criticism?', Mulhern attempts to move the exchange into new territory. In particular, he engages with some of my writing from the past fifteen years or so on the assumption that it represents the intellectual practice whose legitimacy I have thus far been attempting to vindicate under the label of 'cultural criticism'. He detects in that writing a certain vacancy, an absence of 'specific commitments', a lack of 'substantive critical value'. Along the way, he generously identifies several positive qualities in my work, but in the end it, too, is assigned to his overarching category of 'meta-cultural discourse', though it lacks the 'metapolitical' ambition hitherto constitutive of that discourse, and as a result merely offers a 'quietist variation' of it. In my own practice, therefore, I am held to have exhibited the inadequacies that are inseparable from any appeal to 'culture' in the criticism of society.[7]

It will be no great surprise that I wish to take issue with this analysis at several points, but before dealing with what Mulhern does say in his latest response, it is worth remarking what he does not. First, he says nothing more about his construction of the historical category of 'Kulturkritik' and my criticisms of it: he is content, he declares, to let others 'weigh the arguments for themselves'. This seems intended to suggest a quiet confidence about the persuasiveness of his own arguments, as well, perhaps, as a weathered realism about the likely barrenness of further dispute. But in fact Mulhern cannot stand pat at this point since my objections, if not answered, are fatal for the viability of his larger argument.

Under this head I had pressed two different types of objection. The first was that this category is formulated at such a high level of abstraction, and at such a great remove from the idioms and concerns of those it

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[6] 'Defending Cultural Criticism', pp. 90, 74, 89, 97.
[7] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', pp. 36, 43, 49.

is intended to embrace, that its use risks distorting rather than illuminating. A strikingly wide variety of figures—from Burke and Cobbett and Herder right through to Mann and Benda and Ortega, and on to Adorno and Marcuse and Orwell and Hoggart—are said to have 'acted within a shared discursive order and subserved its governing logic'. But this 'discursive order' is not one that members of this alleged 'tradition' recognized themselves as sharing, and the alleged 'governing logic', while discernible in a few cases, appears marginal or non-existent in others. The definition of the category is drawn too tightly: something that could be suggestive if presented as a series of family resemblances becomes obstructively Procrustean when made subject to one governing logic. The upshot is to weaken rather than strengthen the persuasiveness of 'Kulturkritik' as a (re)organizing idea.

My second objection was that although Mulhern claimed to define this category in formal terms, he in fact made certain historically specific elements constitutive of it. In commenting on the novel use made of the category of 'Kulturkritik' in *Culture/Metaculture*, I wrote that 'Mulhern makes European interwar cultural pessimism its defining moment, so that the appeal to "culture" has to be socially elitist, culturally alarmist, and politically conservative'.[8] In his first reply, Mulhern denied this description, reiterating that the category was defined in formal terms and had no determinate political bearing. But as I suggested in return, the terms that he uses to characterize the thought of figures whom he discusses—'authoritarian', 'aristocratic', 'regressive'—surely indicate 'attitudes that most readers would recognize as broadly conservative in character'. Whatever positions the writers in question actually took in the politics of their time, assigning them to the tightly defined category of 'Kulturkritik' damns them for deploying a perspective that was 'authoritarian in final effect'. Moreover, some of the supposedly 'formal' properties in question are actually substantive and historical: for example, one of the defining tropes Mulhern proffers is 'modernity as disintegration', where the culminating feature of modernity turns out to be 'the rise of the masses'. The fact that this body of work was much given to identifying 'climacterics' and issuing a 'general alert' certainly seems to point towards my description of it as 'alarmist'. And, from another angle, the fact that a figure such as Croce may be described as having 'some formal affinity with Kulturkritik but perhaps no more

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[8] 'Culture Talk', p. 47.

substantial association' suggests that the category is not wholly defined in formal terms.[9] In other words, Mulhern's transhistorical category of 'Kulturkritik' appears to be a generalization of features particularly to be found in the work of critics of 'mass society' in the interwar period, but only selectively or faintly present in those writing in other periods or with other concerns. No one would dispute that several of these features are to be found in the cultural criticism of such figures as Thomas Mann or F. R. Leavis, to whom Mulhern returns with what I find to be a revealing frequency, but his deployment of the category allows him to tar all previous and subsequent cultural critics (now including me, it seems) with the same brush.

The unsustainable imperialism of his proposed new category can be indicated in a further way. *Culture/Metaculture*, the book in which Mulhern announces his category and sets it to work in re-organizing our understanding of twentieth-century intellectual history, draws on, and in places largely reprints, material from earlier essays. This is a common and unexceptionable practice (I am in no position to disapprove), but what is revealing in this case is that several passages have been reproduced more or less verbatim except that 'Kulturkritik' has now been silently substituted for a variety of interestingly different earlier terms. For example, in the later book he accounts for the lack of proper recognition of 'working-class self-organization in politics' in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* in terms of 'the spontaneous perceptual effect of the convention that framed his analysis: that of Kulturkritik'. The same wording occurs in the earlier essay save only that there the culprit is named as 'cultural criticism'. Or again, the later book speaks of Williams establishing 'the irreducible distance between Kulturkritik in all its variants—reactionary or reforming—and an integrally socialist politics of culture'. The same phrase occurs in the earlier essay except that 'cultural liberalism' takes the place of 'Kulturkritik'. Or, finally, when Mulhern allows himself to register a rare note of reservation about Williams's work, he says of *Culture and Society* that its title concepts 'seemed often to exert reflexive control over his own discourse, deflecting his analytic and evaluative priorities away from political reason proper towards a "higher", finally "common" moral ground—the familiar orientation of Kulturkritik'. The phrasing in the original essay again displayed a revealing change: '. . . reflexive control over his own discourse, inflecting his analytic and evaluative priorities towards a typically

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[9] 'Defending Cultural Criticism', pp. 76–81.

"humanist" derogation of political reason, with correlative intimations of a finally "common" moral interest.'[10] 'Cultural criticism', 'cultural liberalism', 'humanism'—whatever these disputed terms are taken to mean, they are far from identical. 'Kulturkritik', in Mulhern's new usage, elides distinctions in the present as well as the past in order to underwrite a polemical claim about 'political reason': this is surely the chief argument that readers will have to weigh for themselves.

The elimination of cultural criticism

This leads on to the second and larger matter that Mulhern does not address in his latest response. He begins by asking 'what is the substance of the position' I wish to defend, and proffers an answer by means of 'an outline of [my] cultural criticism' as expressed in some of my more recent writing. I shall return in a moment to the hasty assumption that the position I have been defending thus far in this exchange must be represented by my own practice—indeed, that the defence of that practice is the unavowed impulse behind my general argument. But what is most striking about this tactic is that it makes no acknowledgment of the fact that the polemical thrust of Mulhern's initial position, as set out in *Culture/Metaculture* and defended in his subsequent essay, was to deny the possibility of any legitimate form of cultural criticism and to propose to replace it with his own version of 'cultural politics'. My earlier contributions did indeed involve a 'defence' of the possibility of a legitimate form of cultural criticism, but precisely because a defence seemed called for in the face of his attack. Again I offered a series of arguments against the sweepingness of his initial claims, but again his most recent contribution does not attempt to respond to these objections. It is important, therefore, to restate the nub of this disagreement before we can proceed to judge whether the remarks he makes about some of my other writings are to the point.

As we have just seen, Mulhern has for some time been training his sights on what he called the 'typically "humanist" derogation of political reason'.

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[10] *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 59, 72, 67; cf. *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Cork 1998, pp. 122, 130, 127. The next sentence after this last passage speaks of *Culture and Society* as Williams's 'revaluation of English Kulturkritik' where the original had spoken of 'revaluation of English cultural criticism', and so on. As I noted in 'Culture Talk', p. 45, the relevant essay, 'A welfare culture? Hoggart and Williams in the fifties', appeared first in *Radical Philosophy* in 1996 and was then reprinted in *Present* before being extensively re-used in *Culture/Metaculture*.

Here, the scare-quotes are the typographical expression of the curled lip, set against the almost Kantian grandeur bestowed by speaking of 'political reason' rather than simply 'politics'. Expanding the range of targets in his recent book, he attacked what he described as 'the utopian impulse, common to the old cultural criticism and the new cultural studies, to resolve the tension of the relationship between culture and politics by dissolving political reason itself'.[11] In response, I disputed this claim, not least because it seemed to propose a restrictive and tendentious understanding of 'the old cultural criticism'. I restated a fairly conventional understanding of that activity (hence my insistence that the position I was occupying was neither novel nor distinctively personal), an activity in which the intellectual and aesthetic practices loosely denominated as 'culture' provide a series of resources or perspectives from which to engage in the criticism of society, including its largely instrumental activities, as well as criticism of the work of other critics. Mulhern has still not established that this must, in principle, be an illegitimate activity.

I had said that this was the sense 'associated, in Britain, with aspects of the work of figures such as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Richard Hoggart, and so on'.[12] In his most recent piece, Mulhern immediately begins by summarizing my account and then saying, having quoted this illustrative list: 'This is recognizable as a self-description (except in its evocation of Eliot, whom I for one would not have thought to associate with Collini's critical journalism).'[13] What strikes me here is not the assumption that I have all along been offering a covert defence of my own critical practice, but the suggestion that Eliot's name is somehow out of place in the list, that he is too unlike the others mentioned—perhaps on account of his provokingly reactionary views? This is the first place (more are to come) where I sense that Mulhern naturally tends to assume that an activity or tradition presupposes substantive agreement. If I *had* been offering, with extreme presumption, a sly self-description in the passage in question, I would not have found Eliot's inclusion incongruous, however much I might recoil from some of his unappealing political stances and social attitudes. The truth surely is that anyone drawing up a short shortlist of names illustrative of the genre of cultural criticism in twentieth-century Britain would be likely to include Eliot, without thereby identifying with or endorsing his (or any of the other names') practice of the activity.

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[11] *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. xx–xxi; 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 86.
[12] 'Defending Cultural Criticism', p. 74.   [13] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 36.

A similar problem surfaces when Mulhern, in the course of disputing the coherence of the sense of 'cultural criticism' I have invoked, juxtaposes T. S. Eliot, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart as 'three reflective, critically distant contributions to postwar discussion of culture and society', and then concludes, with the air of a prosecuting counsel who has just clinched his case: 'They all meet Collini's minimum criteria for cultural criticism, and they are mutually incompatible'.[14] Well, if 'incompatible' means they exhibit or champion different intellectual styles and political values, then they are indeed 'incompatible', but that doesn't make them any the less practitioners of forms of cultural criticism. To say that the formal characteristics I had mentioned, such as distance, reflectiveness, and generality, do not enable us to 'set about discriminating among' these three writers is not an objection to characterizing cultural criticism partly in these general terms. Of course there would be other features and other values in terms of which one could discriminate among them; the three characteristics mentioned could never be supposed to be all that one would bring to reading them. In almost any field writers and thinkers can be classified as engaged in a common activity while holding wildly divergent views about aspects of its subject-matter. There is no damaging case to be answered here.

Culture, again

I have to confess that I am not sure if there is a case to be answered with respect to Mulhern's paragraphs on the different senses of 'culture'. I am owning up to a genuine difficulty of understanding here, not essaying a lofty put down, but the paragraphs in question are highly condensed and not easy to interpret. I take Mulhern to be saying that even the conventional sense of 'culture' which I invoked is now so shot through with theoretical contention as to render incoherent any idea of the critic appealing to and speaking from its perspectives and values. Either it tacitly lays claim to an unsustainable superiority over the world of non-culture, requiring some version of Arnold's 'best self' to validate the position from which it speaks, or else, re-thought as an aspect of 'the relations between elements in a whole way of life', it loses any independent standing vis-à-vis 'the divided historical world of sense'. I repudiated the former position, without, allegedly, properly appreciating how the latter understanding undercuts the possibility of

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[14] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 39.

criticism being furnished by 'culture' with an enabling perspective or set of resources, since art and ideas themselves, thus understood, will tend to operate 'within the space of the ideological dominant'. To support this, he cites Williams's analysis, in *Culture and Society*, of the mid-nineteenth-century industrial novel 'in which strong, eloquent witness to the reality of working-class suffering coexisted, imaginatively, with an ungovernable fear of mass irrationality', and he goes on to argue that even when literature takes culture itself as its material, it is still subject to 'such disturbance of vision'.[15]

As can sometimes happen with briskly handled historical instances, the chosen example here appears rather to call the main argument into question than to support it. To speak of these novels suffering from 'disturbance of vision' implies possession of the clear or undisturbed vision that they might have manifested had it not been for the pressure exerted by 'the ideological dominant'. But does that correct, undisturbed vision thus escape 'the divided historical world of sense'? If it does, then the general form of the objection seems null: if Engels can have access to such vision then so, in principle, can Mrs Gaskell. But if it doesn't so escape, then the general objection is null for the opposite reason: being part of 'the divided historical world of sense' does not necessarily prevent writers from arriving at a penetratingly critical grasp of aspects of the society in which they live. This latter proposition seems to me broadly true and borne out by frequent historical example (which is one reason why the notion of 'the ideological dominant' always threatens to over-reach itself). But in that case, the practitioners of 'cultural criticism' and 'cultural politics' are in exactly the same boat: neither group has, nor needs, access to some privileged source of 'undisturbed' vision; both manage to fashion criticisms of contemporary society out of the materials to hand.

In discussing Mulhern's example I have left aside the question of whether one should expect a *novel* to offer a single, unambiguous, analysis of a given social issue; perhaps the 'imaginative coexistence' of different planes or registers of experience is part of what we find distinctive and distinctively valuable about fiction. But the fact that, in offering his example, Mulhern himself does not seem at all troubled by this thought suggests to me a possible interpretation of his more abstract—and, to my eye, somewhat more opaque—general statements about 'culture'.

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[15] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', pp. 38–9.

In talking about the extended, more anthropological, notion of 'culture' favoured in the later work of Williams and the style of cultural studies claiming descent from it, Mulhern observes that literature and philosophy persist as part of 'the social relations of meaning as a whole', and then he adds: 'Were it not so, the new concept of culture would simply invert the dualism of the old'. But what is this 'dualism' and in what sense does the allegedly new concept of culture not share in it, whatever it is? Here is where I feel most uncertain in my reading of Mulhern, but the charge of dualism (it is clearly intended as a charge) seems to rest on the assumption that the cultural critic takes literature and ideas to be somehow apart from or above society, and hence reifies culture as—in the term with which Williams critically summarized the outcome of the history he surveyed—'an abstraction and an absolute'. I would remark in passing that it is not obvious to me that all the figures whom Williams discussed did reify culture in this way, but in any event there is no reason whatever to assume that the contemporary cultural critic *must* do so. Of course cultural activities are 'part of society'; all human activities are 'part of society' (what else could they be part of?), including the activities of 'seeking to determine the shape of social relations as a whole in a given space'. To speak of 'culture' as, for certain purposes, distinguishable from 'society' is no more to be the prisoner of a disabling 'dualism' than it is to speak of 'politics' as, for certain purposes, distinguishable from 'society'. In the course of their writing, any writer establishes, both propositionally and symptomatically, how alert they are to the element of arbitrary convention involved in such categories. But, handled with the requisite self-consciousness, 'culture' is as useful and legitimate a term in this context as is 'politics'.

Following the sequence of Mulhern's most recent response, a very brief exegetical digression is required here. I had remarked that in much of the literature on this topic, as in this exchange itself, 'politics' tended to be used with two different emphases. There was what I called 'the conventional, newspaper reader's sense—the everyday doings of politicians, parties, and parliaments'; and there was the 'more elevated' sense, 'the attempt to order social relations in the light of conceptions of human possibility'.[16] Mulhern's invocation of 'political reason itself' clearly shares this second emphasis; the disparaging remarks by some cultural critics about 'the routine reproduction of controversies or competitive interests' just as clearly partake of the first (Raymond Williams helpfully

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[16] 'Defending Cultural Criticism', pp. 86–7.

provides the illustrative phrase in this case). Mulhern berates me for appealing to 'the authority' of the newspaper reader, and then proceeds to read me a long, unnecessary, sermon on the way large issues about contrasting visions of human society suffuse everyday newspaper reports, something especially visible at times of heightened conflict, such as Weimar Germany or, in a different way, Thatcher's Britain. Indeed so: it is hard to imagine anyone ever wanting to deny that. But it was surely clear that I was not *appealing* to 'the authority' of the newspaper reader, whatever that would be; I was simply using a familiar piece of shorthand. I was not trying to introduce some new piece of conceptual machinery here, merely remarking a movement between emphases, a movement which has been remarked before but which, if not attended to, fosters confusion about the level of discourse or activity in question. A critic may reasonably call attention to instances of short-termism, careerism and cynicism in aspects of contemporary political life without thereby being guilty of attempting 'to dissolve political reason itself'.

Varieties of criticism

In my earlier contribution, I observed that the question at issue is obviously closely bound up with ways of understanding the role of 'the intellectual'. In response, Mulhern offers us two alternatives. There is the 'corporatist' conception: 'intellectuals are in principle a cohesive social group, bonded morally in a commitment to universals by virtue of which they pass judgement on the world'. Set over against this is a more modest conception which recognizes that 'the characteristic practice of intellectuals is one modality of intervention among others in the contested field of social relations'; 'intellectuals make their choices from a range of historical possibilities that they share with everyone'. He correctly surmises that the first of these alternatives is 'not an option' for me, but he also suspects that the second accords the intellectual even less 'status' than I would wish to do, since (I extrapolate from his other remarks) it reserves no distinctive content for 'culture' in the name of which I see the intellectual as speaking.[17]

I have to begin by saying that I would not choose to work within this binary pairing, but I do not, in fact, want to reserve any special status for intellectuals. That term has come to be principally applied to those who,

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[17] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', pp. 42–3.

from a basis in some creative, scholarly, or other cultural achievement, address a non-specialist audience on matters of general concern. That is, in Mulhern's terms, their distinctive 'modality of intervention', but it is distinctive enough for the purpose and is different from 'intervening' on the basis of, say, one's commercial or legal role. But while this may still seem to Mulhern to be claiming too much for the activity of intellectuals, it also seems to him to be claiming too little. 'If intellectual practice is really so modestly specified, after all, what position can it sustain?'[18] But what does 'position' refer to here? Intellectual practice is intellectual practice, modestly specified or not (and if there is to be a choice, then a little modesty in such matters seems more appealing than its opposite). There's no great mystery about it, nor about the ways in which one might draw upon its protocols in criticizing contemporary society. What 'position' *may* mean, as indicated by Mulhern's reference in the previous paragraph to the 'social grounding' of 'universals', is a set of views which endorse or promote the interests of a particular social class. But to ask for 'universals' would already be one contestable move; to assume they only have any validity when 'socially grounded' in this way would be another (and saying this is not to be committed to 'Idealism'). It is part of my overall case that one does not *have* to speak in these terms.

It is, presumably, largely for this reason that Mulhern claims to detect a kind of vacancy or absence at the heart of my writing in this area. 'This reduced idea of the intellectual, like the abstract "perspective of culture" with which he [Collini] now very plausibly associates it, is a piece of algebra: y to the other's x, it is a cipher awaiting its substantive critical value'.[19] Clearly, something about my writing frustrates and irritates Mulhern, but this expression of his frustration does not advance the argument. Any 'idea of the intellectual' will be principally a characterization of a relation—a relation between a public, a medium, an occasion, a reputation and so on. It can obviously not be specified in terms of expressing only one kind of view, nor is a commentator, in analysing 'the idea of the intellectual', thereby endorsing one kind of view over others.

Mulhern is sufficiently pleased with the conceit of 'algebra' to repeat it, as when he lists several things which I, as an intellectual historian, am interested in, such as manner, tone, temper and so on, and comments: 'So the algebraic series continues'.[20] But are such matters really

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[18] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 43. [19] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 43.
[20] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 44.

such an empty notational code, a deferral of 'substance'? Differences of temper, for example, are not just among the most interesting differences distinguishing human beings from each other; they may be highly consequential as well, and to attend to those differences is not necessarily to withdraw one's attention from a public to a private sphere. The 'substance', against which such empty algebra is contrasted, seems to be provided by differences of 'political evaluation', the deliverances of 'political reason itself'. But these are the phrases which seem vulnerable, if any are, to the charges of 'vacancy' and the deferral of substance. Here we seem to be in that topsy-turvy world in which proclaiming one's general allegiance to some supposed direction of world history counts as 'substantive', whereas offering some individual characterization or detailed critical discrimination is derogated as mere 'algebra'. And this returns us to the question of why '*political* evaluation' should automatically be thought to trump all other kinds: sometimes it quite properly does and sometimes, surely, it does not.

2. DOING CULTURAL CRITICISM

The greater part of Mulhern's most recent essay is given over to an extended critique of some of my writing during the past couple of decades. I should say immediately that, flattering though this critique is in some ways, it strikes me as largely irrelevant to the matter in hand. In trying to reinstate the possibility of some legitimate form of cultural criticism, in the face of its elimination in Mulhern's conceptual scheme, I did not intend to be justifying any practice of my own. The case was made in general terms because it was a general possibility whose legitimacy had been called into question. However, since Mulhern has now proceeded in this way, and since he clearly believes that his critical observations on my writing do serve to discredit the case for cultural criticism more generally, I shall try to respond to his criticisms, aware of the perils of self-justification and the kinds of intellectual egotism to which it can lead.

I should begin by declaring that I do not think of myself as having been a 'cultural critic' with a consistent and distinctive practice, not least because very little of what I have written until quite recently would have any claim to be regarded as 'cultural criticism' in the first place. For many years all of my work, and even now the larger part of it, has been

recognizable as a contribution to intellectual history, pursued in a scholarly and (as it has seemed to some readers) rather austere mode. For several years, now, it is true, I have also written occasional pieces that attempt to address a wider, non-specialist readership, though I am not sure whether these pieces, most of which have taken the form of review-essays, count as even minor contributions to the activity of 'cultural criticism' as that term has conventionally been understood. More generally, my intellectual development has been slow and uneven, making me less confident and less settled about the direction of my thinking than Mulhern himself seems to have been from a comparatively early stage. One or two of the cited examples of my work, especially from some time ago, all too visibly bear the marks of someone trying to find his way.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, in addressing aspects of nineteenth-century British intellectual history that also figured as part of the subject-matter of the sub-fields of the history of the social sciences and the history of political thought, I was particularly concerned to try to rescue the quiddity of past historical agents from the schematizing and present-minded treatment they often received from social scientists and political theorists raiding the past to support some contemporary theoretical position. I have since come to see that *Public Moralists* (completed in 1990 and drawing on material from the previous decade) would have been a better book if I had not allowed a desire to escape from under the shadow of the 'history of political theory' to shape my mode of address in places, and Mulhern is justified in detecting an irritable insistence in some of my more sweeping remarks from that period about the coerciveness of 'doctrines' and 'theories'.

Nonetheless, even in my own case I acknowledge the truth of Dr Johnson's observation that 'he who writes much will not easily escape a manner, such a recurrence of particular modes as may be easily noted',[21] and I recognize some of the continuities in manner and mode to which Mulhern draws attention. But the larger case, which he prosecutes with no little forensic zeal, simply does not stand up. Mulhern is, needless to say, under no obligation to give a comprehensive and proportioned account of my work, but since he furnishes several summary characterizations of it and then uses those characterizations to criticize or discredit the activity of cultural criticism more generally, it seems necessary to

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[21] Samuel Johnson, 'The Life of Dryden', *Lives of the Poets*, (1779–81), quoted in Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, Oxford 2002, p. 42.

point out at least some of the ways in which his reading of me risks being tendentious or culpably selective.

Back to Arnold?

Mulhern makes much of my handling of particular figures, such as Matthew Arnold, Richard Hoggart and Christopher Hitchens, so let me take each case in turn. The chief reservation I have about his discussion of my writing on Matthew Arnold, a reservation I should like to think any reader of that writing would share, is that it rests on a too-ready identification of author and subject. It is clearly the case that there are aspects of Arnold's writing that I find winning, and in the Preface to my brief 'Past Masters' volume I explained why, writing on that subject at that moment in that format, I had chosen to present a portrait that some might consider 'culpably indulgent'. But sympathetic re-creation does not entail endorsement. Indeed, in the concluding chapter I made clear that I am not one of Arnold's 'most devoted champions', and I hoped the book had indicated some of the ways in which I thought him 'most liable to criticism'.[22] Mulhern nonetheless persists in reading me as 'not far apart' from Arnold on various crucial matters, concluding from one passage in my exposition that, 'if the free indirect style allows a confident reading', I am not speaking 'at any significant distance' from the views I am describing.[23] I am surprised that anyone trained in literary criticism, as Mulhern was, should so confidently identify me with views reported through this particular literary strategy. This general case is then buttressed by what seem to me misreadings of particular passages. For example, he cites my speaking of Arnold's 'deep intellectual affinity' with Platonism which I took as one indication of 'what might be described as the "anti-political" character of his thought'. Mulhern reads this as straightforward endorsement on my part, though I would have thought the original text was sufficiently clear on the matter. In the paragraph from which Mulhern quotes, I say: 'Arnold was temperamentally something of a Platonist, with all the Platonist's vulnerability to being dazzled by the beauty of his own ideals to the neglect of their abuse in practice'. I go on to say in the immediately succeeding paragraph: 'No-one with such a strong aversion to conflict as Arnold came to manifest could be an altogether satisfactory writer on politics.'[24] I cannot see how these sentences could be read as other than criticisms, criticisms

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[22] *Arnold*, Oxford 1988, pp. vii, 117.   [23] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 41.
[24] *Arnold*, pp. 91–2.

which emphasize the limitations of 'the "anti-political" character of his thought' and which surely signal a more than temporal distance separating historical author and modern commentator.

Since Mulhern has already paid me the compliment of reading several things that I have written, it may seem ungracious on my part to reproach him with not reading more, but given that he makes so much of my supposed identification with Arnold's views, I think he should feel obliged to take into account the explicit reflections on this issue that appear in the 'Afterword' to the Clarendon Press re-issue of the 'Past Masters' volume.[25] Although I there acknowledged that in the first edition I may have been naïve in not anticipating how reductively my sympathetic portrait of Arnold could be construed, I reiterated, in pretty plain terms, my sense of distance from not just his 'severest detractors' but his 'zealous champions' as well: 'I have no wish to defend all of Arnold's particular judgements or tastes . . . Similarly, the notion of trying to "imitate" Arnold's performance seems to me fundamentally misguided, only capable, even at its best, of yielding wilful anachronism and mannered pastiche'. And I singled out for criticism those modern readers who do attempt to endorse Arnold in the way Mulhern objects to: 'I have no sympathy with the . . . appropriation of this particular Victorian writer to add a historical veneer to an intransigent anti-modernism.'[26]

Mulhern himself, of course, is not prey to any incriminating sympathy or even ambivalence on the subject: 'bourgeois society defined Arnold's imaginative horizon'. He immediately moves to what he takes to be the telling contrast: 'Marx saw in the same society the conditions of a qualitatively superior collective life beyond it, to be achieved by political means'. Mulhern is confident in these ascriptions; he is confident that they are the only real choices; and he is confident that this divide is what matters above all others. He and I must accordingly be slotted into this template; he knows where he stands, and now he feels reasonably confident he has put me in my box, too.

The niceties of my relation to the work of Matthew Arnold (or of any other historical figure) are not, I suspect, of very wide interest, but it seemed important to pause on this example because it exhibits a recurring feature of Mulhern's case. I sense in his most recent essay an

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[25] 'Afterword' in *Matthew Arnold: a Critical Portrait*, Oxford 1994, pp. 125–38.
[26] *Matthew Arnold*, pp. 134, 137, 131–2.

insistent urge to classify and label me. As in his previous contribution, one of the ways he attempts to do this is by establishing what he takes to be my preferred historical affiliations, but he consistently over-reads these and finds political endorsement where there is only imaginative sympathy. This accounts for his disproportionately frequent return to my supposed alignment of myself with Richard Hoggart. One reason this seems to me disproportionate (in a way that his case about Arnold, whatever its other defects, does not), is that I have only ever published half of one essay about Hoggart, a piece that began as a review of one of his later books, *Townscape with Figures*. I clearly found that an interesting book, and I used it to illustrate what I took to be certain admirable and attractive features in the personal ethos of Hoggart's writing more generally.[27] But I have never attempted any thorough discussion of his work or even given parts of it the kind of close analytical scrutiny I have devoted to, say, Eliot, Leavis, or Williams. The truth is that Hoggart figures much more substantially in *Mulhern's* work than in mine and is for him an important negative reference point.[28] I suspect I may be partly to blame for his reading a little too much into my brief discussion, because in revising it for re-publication I made it one half of a diptych in which I contrasted Hoggart with Raymond Williams, especially in terms of their styles as *writers*, where the balance of judgement seems to me to favour Hoggart. This is obviously not all I would say about either of them from other points of view, especially Williams, but Mulhern reads it as a defining declaration of allegiance.

Huntin' with Hitchens?

The single piece of my writing which Mulhern subjects to the most extended scrutiny is a review-essay on Christopher Hitchens's *Orwell's Victory*, which appeared in the *London Review of Books* last year.[29] The

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[27] Reprinted in *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture*, Oxford 1999, pp. 219–30. I should say, in case any significance could be thought to attach to my not saying, that I subsequently met and got to know Hoggart a little, and also that he later wrote a measured but largely positive review of *English Pasts*.

[28] See, for example, his essay 'A welfare culture?', reproduced in *The Present Lasts a Long Time*, and the sections of *Culture/Metaculture* entitled 'Hoggart and the abuses of literacy', 'Literature and contemporary cultural studies', and 'From Hoggart to Stuart Hall'.

[29] '"No Bullshit" Bullshit', *London Review of Books*, 23 January 2003; since Mulhern notes that 'Hitchens rather than Orwell is indeed the subject', I should perhaps record that this was at the request of the editors of the *LRB*.

burden of his objection here appears to be that I remain too close to my subject both stylistically and in cultural reference. Noting that the idea of 'company' crops up several times, especially in the piece's closing vignette, he finds me altogether too 'convivial', though after re-reading my piece I have to say that Mulhern must have a more bracing and strenuous sense of 'conviviality' than I do. But the force of his objection rests, yet again, on what I do not do, or do not do sufficiently emphatically. Above all, he notes I only make one reference to 'Hitchens's support for Bush's wars of aggression' and that I do so in wording that is said to 'ease readers past the political crisis to which it alludes'. The phrase in question—about Hitchens's position on the invasion of Iraq putting him in 'some very unlovely company'—may itself be thought too oblique or even arch, but yet again I would have to say that an essayist has to be allowed some choice about his point of access to a topic and his mode of address. 'Hitchens's support for Bush's wars of aggression' is certainly one legitimate topic, but it is not the only one; in this case, it also happened to be one that several other writers had already written about. I see no reason to regard it as the key or the ultimate destination of all of Hitchens's writing, or as somehow more central than the features of that writing which I do discuss. Yet again, we seem to be back with the overriding status Mulhern ascribes to political affiliation understood in elemental friend–foe terms. Commenting on the concluding paragraph of my piece, he complains that 'the burden of [my] judgement remains . . . not fully public in the expected way'.[30] It is not clear to me who is doing the expecting here, but my sense of the readers of the *LRB* is that they are a sophisticated and diverse lot, well able to appreciate the burden of judgement even of a piece liberally salted with 'high-spirited irony'.

Generalizing from this example to the limitations of my cultural criticism as a whole, Mulhern declares: 'This is criticism as home truths. Home truths have force but little scope.'[31] But surely the point about 'home truths' is that they have precisely the scope that is appropriate to the occasion: that is what makes them effective. Here, and not for the first time, I find myself wondering what kind of effectiveness Mulhern, were he to have been writing in that paper on that occasion, would feel was desirable and attainable. In any event, the kind of 'scope' he finds lacking in my criticism is suggested by his immediately passing, in the

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[30] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 47.   [31] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 47.

same paragraph, to the question of the possibility of the 'transformation' of 'the social relations of capitalism', and he in effect reproves me for not conducting my examination of Hitchens by the light of an explicit declaration of where I stand on this. But I trust I have by now made clear why I do not share his sense of the constant obligatoriness of that exercise.

Scarcely political?

More generally, I hope I have also made clear that I do not accept the terms in which Mulhern no less constantly draws a contrast between 'real' or 'substantive commitments' and the matters of voice, tone, perspective and so on that much of my writing has focused on. The universal applicability and usefulness of a distinction framed in these terms is part of what is at issue between us. But even according to Mulhern's preferred conceptual vocabulary, it has to be said that he does not properly acknowledge, or give the reader an adequate sense of, the place that such 'substantive commitments' do have in my writing. My alleged failings in this respect are summed up in summary fashion indeed: 'The terms of evaluation that he brings to public discourse are scarcely political, even where politics is the matter in hand'.[32] It is, of course, possible that Mulhern is working with an esoteric and hard-to-measure-up-to sense of what is to count as 'political' here, but I fear that he may just be exaggerating a fair comment on some parts of my work into a false generalization about the whole of it.

For brevity's sake, let me confine my counter-examples to those available in the sources he himself makes use of, the kind of essay collected in *English Pasts* and the kind of essay recently published in the *London Review of Books*. Thus, writing in the former about the Tory Party's appeal to 'Victorian values' in the 1980s, I hardly hid my hostility to 'policies that manifestly make the rich richer and the poor poorer', or my support for those measures from earlier in the century that 'had, until the 1980s, made Britain a less horrible country to be poor in', or more generally my disdain for 'the gutter individualism of the 1980s and 1990s'.[33] Since Mulhern rests so much of his case on a piece from the LRB that was

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[32] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 48. I leave aside, as an uncharacteristically cheap shot that stands self-condemned, his jibe that my style of cultural criticism is 'at one with the times' in being 'another kind of privatization'.

[33] *English Pasts*, pp. 106, 110, 114.

allegedly characteristic of my writing in avoiding 'political' terms of evaluation, perhaps I may quote at some length from a slightly earlier essay in those pages. Thus, when writing about the fantasy of 'England' promoted by Roger Scruton, whom I characterized as 'a born-again Tory ideologue masquerading as a once-born countryman', I spoke of his evasion of the fact that 'those who control great concentrations of wealth can systematically determine the life-chances of the many who do not', and went on: 'At such moments, all this sub-Waugh attitudinising ceases to seem amiably harmless, and falls into place as part of a wider cultural tendency whose effect is to distract our attention from what "the experience of class" is actually about.' And at the end of the essay, I offered some more general thoughts that do not, on re-reading, seem chiefly distinguished by their avoidance of political terms of evaluation:

> For the fact is that the unsleeping destructive energy of capital seeking to maximise its returns is not going to be tamed by a spot of huntin', shootin', and fishin'. It is not going to be tamed by a spot of Anglicanism, either, or any other prettied-up form of 're-enchantment'. It might, possibly, be tamed by a spot of Socialism.

I then concluded: 'And this, surely, is the disabling paradox of modern "conservatism", namely that it wants simultaneously to liberate market forces and to lament the effects of market forces. Hence the deep structural dilemma of the modern Tory social critic: the forces that are destroying all that he loves are the forces he is ideologically committed to supporting.'[34] I would have thought there was enough 'political evaluation' here to satisfy even Mulhern. But it is perfectly true that I don't think this is *always* what needs saying—and so on such occasions I don't say it.

It may also be to the point to mention a more recent piece anatomizing the assumptions informing current New Labour policy on universities—to the point because although it appeared too late for Mulhern to have taken it into account, its concerns and critical intent are continuous with those in a couple of pieces published in the 1980s on higher education policy which are included in *English Pasts*.[35] I trust the terms in which I analyse public discourse here could not be

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[34] 'Hegel in green wellies', *London Review of Books*, 8 January 2001 (reviewing Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, London 2000, and Kenneth Baker, ed., *The Faber Book of Landscape Poetry*, London 2000).

[35] 'HiEdBiz', *London Review of Books*, 6 November 2003.

stigmatized as 'scarcely political'. Of course, Mulhern may, like any other reader, have objections to or reservations about the piece, but I hope it may serve as an example of one form of cultural criticism which engages with a pressing contemporary issue without tending, even implicitly, to authoritarianism or nostalgia.

Mulhern concludes his assessment of my work with a most curious closing paragraph. He writes that I insist that my intellectual practice (which I had not actually been writing about) 'is none the worse for not being "politics", leaving at least one reader to wonder who has been maintaining the contrary position'.[36] This is disingenuous in the extreme: our whole exchange has pivoted around Mulhern's indictment of cultural criticism, as part of 'metacultural discourse', for its 'inherent' impulse to 'displace politics, dissolve political reason itself'. But this, he says, is not the issue where my 'intellectual practice' is concerned (though it is he who has concerned it): 'No, the simple question is how far it reaches *as criticism*, and how consequentially. The answer as I see it is not very.' Expressed in a more sympathetic spirit, this would be to raise a very interesting, if in some ways intractable, question about any criticism, mine (for what it is worth) included. How *do* we judge the reach and impact of criticism? 'Reach' here is presumably intellectual as well as social, with the implication that since my criticism doesn't reach much beyond matters of voice and temperament, it is hardly surprising that it is ineffective in changing society. Well, I certainly wouldn't want to make any large claims for the effectiveness of what I write, but I can't help wondering a bit about the presumed effectiveness of other modes. May it not be that offering a reasonably wide and heterogeneous range of readers some prompts to re-examining what they think they know has a claim to being as 'effective', in its own way, as advancing a set of theoretical claims, couched at a high level of abstraction, to a small and largely converted set of readers? I wouldn't myself want to give priority to any one measure of effectiveness or to dismiss any of these forms of criticism out of hand, but the comparison leaves me thinking that each form has its own distinctive limitations when it comes to reach and effectiveness.

But I, apparently, 'affiliate' my work to 'English cultural liberalism', a tradition whose record 'has been variable in this decisive respect'. The

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[36] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 48.

decisive respect, remember, is 'how far it reaches *as criticism*, and how consequentially'. In a revealing move, Mulhern suggests that in fact not all criticism in this manner has been as inconsequential as mine has. For example:

> Leavis based his assessments of the contemporary situation on a strong theory of historical modernity, from which he also derived the strategy and tactics of a cultural politics. That the theory was false and the politics desperate—and, increasingly, reactionary—is not the whole point: his critical practice was decided, biting, and, for many, an inspiration.[37]

The rhetorical emphasis here may seem to suggest that it is more important to *have* a 'theory' and to *have* a 'politics', even if they are false, desperate and reactionary, than it is to try to conduct one's 'assessments of the contemporary situation' (insofar as that is what one wishes to address, which it is not always) in more accurate and discriminating but acknowledgedly piecemeal and incomplete ways. Leavis's 'strong theory of historical modernity' was, as Mulhern knows better than anyone, an eclectic amalgam of nostalgia, prejudice and moral austerity, interspersed with some perceptive observations about the changing shapes of an 'educated reading public'. Neither Leavis's nor anyone else's assessments of the contemporary situation were made more probing or more analytical for being based on the historical fantasy of a lost 'organic community'. (It is incidentally interesting to see that, since he is being cited with some measure of approval on this occasion, Leavis is allowed to have practised a 'cultural politics', though normally he figures in Mulhern's indictment of the 'Kulturkritik' tradition as an exponent of 'cultural criticism'.) The passage also sheds an interesting light on Mulhern's recurrent engagement with Leavis during the past twenty-five years. It suggests he sees him as an opponent worth attending to, partly because one can respect the moral strenuousness of his hostility to 'technologico-Benthamite civilization', and partly because, by attempting to develop a 'theory of historical modernity' and to derive a 'cultural politics' from it, Leavis could be regarded as making explicit what was merely presumed by more implicit or evasive forms of 'cultural liberalism'. Demolishing the 'false' theory and the 'desperate' politics is then not only invitingly easy, but it can also claim to be a telling and representative victory.

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[37] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', pp. 48–9.

As it happens, I, too, have a long-standing interest in, and not a little respect for, Leavis, at least for his early literary criticism (rather less for his cultural criticism), and it is true that his particular combination of critical acuity and moral intensity attracted a considerable number of followers in certain circles in England, and elsewhere, in the middle decades of the twentieth century. But in an essay that there is no particular reason for Mulhern to have cited, or even to have been aware of, I have tried to indicate why Leavis seems to me to be more of a warning than an inspiration where criticism of society is concerned, not least on account of the absence in his work of 'any adequately sociological understanding of his own society, and a consequent inability to estimate social and political forces at their true strength'. As it also happens, I there offer further strictures on 'the tradition of literary critics as social critics that descended from Arnold' and itemize some of the 'common sins of cultural criticism carried out in this mode'.[38] It perhaps throws some light on differences of 'temper' between Mulhern and myself (if I may be allowed to take a favourite hobby-horse out for a short canter here) that he, despite fundamental reservations about the political logic of Leavis's work, emphasizes his regard for the reach of his cultural criticism on account of its 'theorized' and 'biting' character, whereas I, despite some regard for Leavis's work as a teacher and critic of literature, am more deterred by the superficiality and exaggeration characteristic of his cultural criticism.

More generally, Mulhern observes, quite justly, that one of my preferred forms is the intellectual portrait. However, he detects a sinister theoretical significance in this preference. For the 'unargued premise' of my work turns out to be 'one of the central commonplaces of literary-liberal culture in the twentieth century', namely, that 'literature . . . is to public discourse what the individual person is to the social order, the limit of classifying presumption'.[39] On another occasion one might pause to ask what authorizes this coarsely aggregative use of 'liberal'; similarly, 'commonplace' suggests that we are dealing with something that is taken to be mere common sense by members of that 'culture' but which can be seen for the peculiar or ideological belief it really is when viewed from

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[38] 'The critic as anti-journalist: Leavis after *Scrutiny*', in Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett, eds, *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower: Literary Journalism and Literary Scholarship from Fielding to the Internet*, Oxford 1998, pp. 151–76, at p. 172.
[39] 'What is Cultural Criticism?', p. 45.

the implicitly superior standpoint. But let us dwell for a moment longer on that neatly turned phrase, 'the limit of classifying presumption'. The implication, from the superior vantage-point outside this commonplace, is that prisoners of the commonplace regard *all* efforts at classification as potentially presumptuous (the 'liberal' culture has to be parodied as incurably nominalist and resistant to any activity of concept-formation). But, braving the sarcastic edge of the phrase, we might ask: does Mulhern himself really believe there could be *no* need for a 'limit to classifying presumption'? It seems clear that he does not, at least where others are doing the classifying. But in that case, 'the individual person' is *bound* to be one possible source of such limits in relation to 'the social order' simply because social classifications, in however 'realist' a vein we construe them, are classifications of groups of individuals.

Whether literature constitutes a particularly fruitful source of such 'limits' in relation to public discourse is, I would agree, open to discussion, but there is nothing inherently naïve or obstructively nominalist or reprehensibly conservative in thinking that it may do. As mnemonics for the larger argument involved, one may cite two distinguished, if contrasting, cultural critics on the question. First, there is the celebrated observation of Lionel Trilling: 'To the carrying out of the job [of cultural criticism] literature has a unique relevance . . . because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty'.[40] And secondly, there is the less familiar remark by Roland Barthes, not normally regarded as a sharer of the commonplaces of any putative 'literary-liberal culture': 'Knowledge is coarse, life is subtle, and literature matters to us because it corrects this distance.'[41] Both these claims are, as I have already acknowledged, eminently contestable, but I recognize no standpoint from which

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[40] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, New York 1950, p. xv. Mulhern cites part of this passage in an earlier essay, finding Trilling's commitment to these qualities to be the essence of his 'feline liberalism' (*Present*, p. 90).

[41] 'La science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c'est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe': Roland Barthes, *Leçon* [Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France], Paris 1978. The translation is taken from Michael Wood ('What Henry knew', *London Review of Books*, 18 December 2003), who reads '*science*' as 'organized knowledge' and the idea of 'correction' as an optical one. In the *Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, Richard Howard's translation is: 'Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us'.

they can be seen as *self-evidently* foolish or naïve, and nor, by the same token, do I see that one stands self-condemned as a result of being drawn to any such material that may indeed, in certain circumstances, help to 'set limits to classifying presumption'.

This point can also be addressed by reflecting on the import of what is merely a passing remark in 'Beyond Metaculture'. In the course of convicting Adorno of exhibiting a Marxist form of 'Kulturkritik', Mulhern points to the rather lofty tone of a sentence from *Prisms* in which Adorno was objecting to the ugliness and linguistically hybrid origins of the word 'Kulturkritik' in German, and he observes not just that the philology which Adorno implicitly appeals to is 'old school-room dogma', but also that 'the trope of discrimination is reminiscent of Henry James'.[42] I would not want to defend Adorno's expression of literary or intellectual taste here nor any general appeal to old school-room philological dogma, but I could not help wondering whether being 'reminiscent of Henry James' would in this context be so self-evidently undesirable. I found myself thinking, by contrast, that discrimination is at the heart of any worthwhile cultural criticism, and that where discrimination is concerned James surely sets quite high standards. In making his own discriminations, he could certainly be precious and snobbish and much else besides, as, it seems, even Adorno could in his own way, but I would be sorry to think that, even when talking about cultural criticism in these rather unJamesian pages, he should only figure in this determinedly distanced way.

And that in turn led me to recall the exchange James had towards the end of his life with H. G. Wells, where Wells attacked the older novelist for a lack of social relevance (he memorably caricatured a James novel as 'a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea'). By contrast with this rarefied 'view of life and literature', Wells declared, 'I had rather be called a journalist than an artist'. It is, of course, the case that James did not tend to write much about the transformation of the social relations of capitalism, at least directly, and in those few novels that did take up some explicitly 'political' themes, such as *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, he hardly distinguished himself as an enthusiast for the 'progressive' causes of his day. But his magnificent response to

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[42] 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 96.

Wells may nonetheless not be entirely irrelevant to the would-be cultural critic, brooding on the comparative fruitfulness of different routes to insight and understanding.

> But I *have* no view of life and literature, I maintain, other than that our form of the latter in especial [i.e. the novel] is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and liberality, its fairly living on the sincere and shifting experience of the individual practitioner . . . For myself, I live, live intensely and am fed by life, and my value, whatever it be, is my own kind of expression of that . . . So far from [the art as opposed to the utility] of literature being irrelevant to the literary report upon life, and to its being made as interesting as possible, I regard it as relevant in a degree that leaves everything else behind. It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.[43]

One does not have to subscribe to such aestheticism and subjectivism *au pied de la lettre* to feel that the 'plasticity and liberality' that James here invokes can indeed play a legitimate part in setting limits to classifying presumption.

3. ANOTHER WAVE OF THE WAND?

We have travelled a long way from my initial brief review-essay on Mulhern's relatively short book. There I applauded the book's perceptive discussion of cultural studies and its identification of the unobvious continuities with some earlier forms of cultural criticism. But as the exchange has gone on, the nature of the differences between us has become clearer to me. I have come to feel that Mulhern over-generalized and even, dare I say, over-theorized his case: certain historically variable characteristics were turned into logically necessary features; other configurations were ruled illegitimate or impossible. The effect of his argument was to *eliminate* the possibility of legitimate cultural criticism: all such criticism is branded as '*Kulturkritik*', a variant of Metaculture; this is defined as an illegitimate attempt to take over the place rightfully occupied by politics. My role in this exchange has, therefore, principally been to lodge a protest: what we conventionally refer to as 'culture'—a piece of shorthand whose limitations are familiar—still provides, I have

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[43] Henry James to H. G. Wells, 10 July 1915, in Philip Horne, ed., *Henry James: a Life in Letters*, London 1999, pp. 554–5.

argued, a series of resources, idioms and perspectives that enable certain kinds of critical engagement with contemporary society. We do not have so many other resources of comparably enabling power, nor such imminent prospect of living in societies not in need of criticism, that we should hurry to rule this activity out of court just yet.

The primacy of politics

Mulhern, by contrast, constantly asserts and reasserts the primacy of politics. But what, exactly, does that entail in the present case? The prize that, according to his account, politics and culture are vying for is 'authority'. The term appears in every key formulation of his argument: metacultural discourse is trying 'to supplant the authority of politics'; culture asserts 'a claim to authority over the social whole'; culture attempts to displace politics 'in the disputed plane of social authority'; in 'Kulturkritik' culture is the 'valid—because truly general—social authority'; 'the defining aim of what was to become Cultural Studies proper was to demystify the presumptive *authority* of Kulturkritik' (italics in original); and so on. I find something curiously univocal about these formulations: culture is always cast as some kind of illegitimate claimant to a throne rightfully occupied by politics because 'authority' is singular and indivisible. It may be helpful, instead, to import a distinction from classical sociology at this point. Here, put schematically, 'social authority' is understood as 'the probability that people will obey a command recognized as legitimate according to the prevailing rules in their society', whereas 'cultural authority' is understood as 'the probability that particular definitions of reality and judgements of meaning and value will prevail as valid and true'.[44] Where social authority is concerned, the sense of there needing to be in any given space an ultimate or final authority is immediately intelligible; this is, from another angle, the Weberian understanding of the state as the institution possessing a legitimate monopoly of force in a given territory. But with cultural authority, this is presumably not so: there is no 'final authority', only competing claims to authority.

The implication of Mulhern's critique of cultural criticism appears to be to assign to *politics* a legitimate monopoly of which 'definitions of reality

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[44] I take these particular formulations from Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, New York 1982, p. 13; they may serve simply because Starr is here summarizing a body of classic sociological literature deriving from Weber and others.

and judgements of meaning and value will prevail as valid and true'. Thus, at one point in *Culture/Metaculture*, in again invoking a distinction between 'substance' and 'form', he refers to a particular position as 'one of moral substance' which he glosses as meaning 'having to do with specific social interests and purposes'.[45] This courts, it seems to me, a restrictive and theoretically specified sense of 'moral', perhaps a sociologically reductive one. But it illustrates from another angle what is at issue: for Mulhern, questions about values, including the very large questions about how we should live, are 'empty' unless resolved into questions about 'specific social interests'. The clash of specific social interests, in its explicit and injunctive form, is the dynamic of politics, and politics, thus understood, is ultimately the arbiter of 'definitions of reality and judgements of meaning and value'. Such an understanding is, needless to say, by no means peculiar to Mulhern, but perhaps he has, from his earliest work onwards, shown a special concern with the ways in which in twentieth-century Britain fundamental political issues have been sublimated into or disguised as issues of culture, especially culture as mediated by literary critics.

In his most recent work, Mulhern chooses to label his own approach as that of 'cultural politics'. Does this perhaps represent some kind of theoretical Third Way, assigning primacy neither to politics nor to culture? Clearly not, I would say. As a way of approaching this question, consider the passage in the Introduction to *The Present Lasts a Long Time* where Mulhern distinguished his sense of 'cultural politics' from two extremes or caricatures: on the one hand, 'culturalism', 'the generic tendency of the liberal critical tradition', which 'asserts the moral primacy of culture over politics'; and on the other 'instrumentalism', 'the error both fairly and falsely associated with socialist traditions, which elevates existing political priorities as the test of cultural legitimacy'.[46] But it should be noted that the terms in which this contrast is drawn silently introduce a triple asymmetry, so that a) 'the liberal tradition' is inescapably univocal, whereas 'socialist traditions' are allowed an appealing plurality; b) there is a part of these socialist traditions not 'fairly' open to this reproach, an extenuation not permitted to the liberal critical tradition; and c) the reproach in the case of the socialist traditions is narrowed to that of favouring 'existing political priorities', which then allows a true socialist politics to assert the moral primacy of

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[45] *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 170.   [46] *Present*, p. 6.

some future form of social organization without incurring the charge of instrumentalism. Thus, a properly symmetrical version of the contrast would be: 'culturalism, the error both fairly and falsely associated with liberal traditions, which asserts the moral primacy of culture over politics', versus 'instrumentalism, the error both fairly and falsely associated with socialist traditions, which asserts the moral primacy of politics over culture'. Although these two positions are presented as the two extremes against which his own preferred 'cultural politics' is defined, the tilting of the contrast is only one indication of his actual leaning towards the latter member of the pair.

It is true that cultural politics, as he conceives it, may make use of the 'possibility' represented by the 'cultural excess', that is to say those aspects of meaning-bearing life which will always exceed or escape current political institutions and categories. But even so glossed, cultural politics is still politics, as his identifying it with 'the art of the possible' makes plain, as does his insistence that acknowledging the 'discrepancy', which is 'the space of cultural politics', is one of the marks of 'an emancipatory politics', here contrasted with 'any bourgeois political formula'.[47] So 'cultural politics' is not some third option which avoids giving priority to either politics or culture: it retains the primacy of politics, but seeks to exonerate itself, for the moment at least, from the charge of 'instrumentalism' by being open to the 'possibility' encoded in the cultural surplus. But always these possibilities are assessed by whether they point right or left; are you for us or against us; are you friend or enemy 'in final effect'? The evaluation is always 'in the first and last instance political'.[48]

One of the most tiresome and coercive clichés in current speech (as I have no doubt Mulhern would agree) is the phrase 'at the end of the day'. Among the sources of its offensiveness is the way in which it is so often used to rule that there always comes a moment when all that has gone before is rendered irrelevant: from that rhetorical vantage-point, all that matters is the outcome or reigning state of affairs at a posited moment of judgement, as in the logic of a game or war or contest of

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[47] *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 174, 171, 162; *Present*, p. 7.
[48] *Present*, p. 2. In this last example, he apparently (but, I think, only apparently) modifies the claim by saying 'This evaluation of the historical probabilities is in the first and last instance political; but its underlying reasons find their premises in general theory, and are thus more than strictly political in their applications'.

some kind. Of course, the implication may be false even in the case of those activities: there may well be more significant things about a game than the result (I hope Mulhern will not regard this as merely a 'convivial' English view). But a more telling objection to the common use of the phrase is the way it dismisses a whole range of important considerations in favour of the overriding significance of one particular kind of balance-sheet. The metaphors are beginning to multiply, but one way to bring out the objectionableness of the cant phrase is to attend to the literal meaning lurking in the now more or less dead metaphor of 'the end of the day'. For the fact is that twilight or nightfall are only very small parts of the day indeed. Most of life is lived during the rest of the day, and night, and no one moment provides a summative perspective on all the others. Something similar, it seems to me, might be said about assigning overriding status to some political 'final analysis' or 'ultimate reckoning', whether projected to an unspecified point in future historical time or presented as the terminal point reached by theoretical analysis. Of course, we all have ethical or other commitments, and some can rightly claim to be more fundamental than others. But perhaps we need to resist the temptation to let them exercise a prematurely clinching power on the grounds of their privileged status when, ultimately, 'all is said and done'. 'All' never is said and done, and a political monism is no more appealing here than any other kind.

The work of criticism

Neither this essay nor any of my earlier contributions to this exchange are attempts to sketch a new theory of cultural criticism, not least because what I have to say is neither new nor a theory. What I have been offering is, in the first instance, a protest, a protest against the elimination or closing down of a range of possibilities. Our dispute can at one level be understood as being not just between two vocabularies or ways of talking, but also between two different expectations about the level of abstraction required of such vocabularies, and perhaps even about how closed or self-consistent such vocabularies will be. It is for that reason that my responses have mostly taken the form of small-scale, local disagreements, now with this way of stating a case, now with that piece of labelling or classificatory preference, and so on. I well realize that the price I pay for this tactic, if one is thinking purely in terms of some kind of competitive or two-sided 'debate', is an apparent lack of focus or of theoretical force. But the tactic is, I believe, the appropriate

expression of an underlying conviction about the value of persuasion and how persuasion takes place in these matters. That process seems to me more like contagion than like a mathematical demonstration; more like coming to enjoy someone's company than like losing at chess.

Mulhern's is undeniably a tidier intellectual world than mine, but the price of his impressively strenuous domestic regime may be that something valuable about cultural criticism has been tidied out of existence. Adapting Trilling's celebrated phrase, one may say that culture comprises the range of human activities that 'take the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty', and for that reason cultural criticism is always likely to bring into play the kinds of consideration that are uncongenial to, or habitually neglected by, those more instrumental, pragmatic, aggregative processes which are nonetheless wholly necessary for running the world and getting its business done. Those general properties listed by Trilling may be encompassed in more than one way and alongside more than one set of political commitments. Equally, they are not constant or unambiguous goods in themselves, and not remotely the only goods. However, in that cluttered, medium-range, zone of engagement in which serious public debate takes place—well beyond the pragmatic hour-to-hour imperatives of action, but well short of the austere abstractions of systematic theory—any resources that help alert us to variousness, and thus help to prevent our conceptions from foreclosing the range of our perceptions, are worth having and worth nurturing.

So, what I take myself to have been doing as I have moved through what is by now a fairly extended series of these smaller, local disagreements, has been to engage in a practice, a practice which I believe I share with Mulhern though he may not be willing to accept this description of his part in the exchange. Criticism, the elaboration and justification of perceptions about a given object (which may, as in this case, include another writer's criticism), aims at persuasion. In any half-way interesting critical practice, the persuasion happens, as I have said, as much by example and attraction as by propositional enforcement. In the course of coming to be familiar with, perhaps eventually of coming to inhabit and take active possession of, a way of talking, a reader comes to share with the critic a number of discriminations, characterizations, enthusiasms, and aversions. Almost insensibly, certain other ways of talking start to appear, in the given context, as inexact, or exaggerated, or coarse-grained, or

coercive, and so on. It is always open to another voice in the conversation to challenge these perceptions, these judgements, these ways of talking, but the new voice is nonetheless necessarily involved in a version of the same practice. What we call 'theories' furnish powerful, provocative, and wholly legitimate contributions to such conversations, often setting the standards in respect of definition of terms and tightness of logical entailment. But such theories do not bring the conversation to an end. Criticism makes use of the resources at hand to call any such claims to finality into question, and when readers—who are, after all, simply potential interlocutors temporarily given over to silence—find themselves drawn to object, to agree, to admire, to doubt, to smile and to reflect, then the conversation has in practice already been moved on.