This book offers an original examination of the formation of the English canon during the first two thirds of the eighteenth century, looking in particular at the treatment of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. Through close readings of periodical essays, editions, treatises, reviews, disquisitions, pamphlets, and poems, Jonathan Brody Kramnick recounts the origins of modern literary study and situates the rise of national literary tradition in the broad context of the making of a public culture. He argues against the consensus view that locates the beginnings of literary criticism comfortably within the rise of the public sphere, and suggests instead that the makings of the canon lie in a combined evolution of publicity and specialization. Much of what we understand as professional criticism, literary language, and national literary tradition, he proposes, received its definitive shape during the mid-eighteenth century, when the century-long effort to define ''modern'' literature against the earlier achievements of the ''ancients'' culminated with a new idea of national antiquity.

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MAKING THE ENGLISH CANON

Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770

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For my parents

Contents

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The epigraphs for chapter two are from Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., trans. Ephraim Fischoff *et al.*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978) 608; and Georg Luckács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971) 137.

The epigraph for chapter five is from Laurence Stern, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (London and New York: Penguin, 1968) 106–107.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The structural transformation of literary history

Few notions may appear so essential to a literary canon as the antiquity of its authors. What is a canon, after all, if not a pantheon of older writers and their great works? For much of the eighteenth century, however, the English canon consisted of writers valued for their modernity. This is not to say that antiquity was entirely a late arriving concept. The seventeenth and early eighteenth century had a settled notion of the ancients. But the ancients were writers from the classical age of Greece and Rome: Homer and Virgil in epic poetry, Sophocles in drama, Horace in satire, and so forth.[1] In its initial moment, the English canon consisted of modern authors who were understood to write like their ancient predecessors. Denham and Waller, for instance, composed with a stately decorum akin to the Greeks and the Romans. The idea of a particularly English antiquity, against which modern English pales, developed gradually during the eighteenth century as critics began to think through the conditions of literary culture and society. This chapter explores the transformation in the narrative of English literary history that gave to us the modern form of the canon: a trinity of English ancients. Criticism's lasting idea of English antiquity, I argue, grew out of a prolonged consideration of the contexts of reading: the uneven distribution of print and literacy, the professionalization of criticism and scholarship, the institutions of print culture, and the commerce in books.

THE CAREER OF REFINEMENT

Like all cultural developments, the formation of the English canon into its canonical form – Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton – was at once a reaction to immediate concerns and a long and complicated process of abstraction.[2] Critics of the mid-eighteenth century made

their own history, as it were, but they did not make it just as they pleased. The terms of midcentury criticism were shaped by previous generations of thinking through the problem of literary change. In the decades before the formation of the canon as a trinity, critics put in place a model of literary history concerned with the progress of major and minor poets across the span of vernacular writing. The progressive narrative focused on the linguistic substance of poetry; the diction and meter of English literature leveled out over time. From the vantage of contemporary refinement, critics viewed the past as the prehistory of the present, roughness the progenitor of eloquence. The prism glass of politeness both presented to the modern age an account of its insuperable progress – the march of national culture through commerce and conquest – and refracted a literary history uniquely suited for the elegant colloquy of the public sphere. For a model so concerned with stability, however, the signal importance of this literary history was actually to transform itself into the discourse of retrospective canon building. Progress and refinement gave way to decline and roughness. Bridging the moment of Joseph Addison to Joseph Warton is an important discussion among critics about the different status of commodity and aesthetic value and about the changing nature of criticism itself.

How did the literary history of England arrive at the model of refinement only to have refinement turn into recession? The making of the English canon occurred against the backdrop of the late seventeenth century's "battle of the books," in which the defenders of Greco-Roman antiquity took on the avatars of modern writing.[3] (In the characteristic opposition, the friends of Aristotle fought off the promoters of Bacon, or the followers of Sophocles stood ground against the party of Jonson.) During the early years of this battle, all writing in English was considered to be modern, insofar as it was not from the classical age. English poets from Chaucer to Dryden stood together as a unit defined in contradistinction to the ancient writers of Greece and Rome. The question for critics was how close did modern poetry approximate the transcendent value of Homer and Virgil and how might one judge the various achievements of modern writers among and against themselves? When Gerard Langbaine's *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatic Poets* (1691) endeavored to give "a succinct account of the time in which most of the poets lived; the place of their nativity, quality, death, [and] writings," for example, he cataloged and *alphabetically* discussed all hitherto existing

playwrights.[4] The "memory of those later writers . . . of our own nation, Mr. Shakespeare, Fletcher, Johnson, Cowley, &c" had the form of simultaneity rather than chronology, an orbit rather than a sequence (4).

When critics did attempt to understand the procession of modern writing and measure its historical evolution they often made reference to a narrative of progressive and unfolding refinement. English literature may not aspire to the same heights as classical literature but it still could promote rational thought and polite language among a nation of readers. We may get a sense of this project in a derisive aside by the prototypical "ancient," Sir William Temple. Midway through the 1691 *Miscellanea*'s essay "On Poetry" Temple switches focus from the formal properties of verse to their elaboration over time: "Instead of critick, or rules concerning poetry, I shall rather turn my thoughts to the history of it, and observe the antiquity, the uses, the changes, the decays, that have attended this great empire of wit."[5] His history charts a predictable decline from antiquity to modernity; but in ridiculing the debased poetry of the moderns Temple also engages what was more and more modernity's central claim for legitimacy:

> much application has been made to the smoothness of language or stile, which has at the best, but the beauty of colouring in a picture, and can never make a good one, without spirit and strength; [this] vein has been much cultivated in our modern *English* poetry, and by such poor recruits have the broken forces of this empire been of late made up, with what success I leave to be judged by such, as consider it in the former heights, and the present declines both of power and of honour. (354–355)

The trajectory from ancient to modern poetry limns a descending curve. A near century later, this idea of "decline" will be established within English literary history. At this point, however, modern verse as a unit pales against the long-ago past. Temple's rejection of refinement concentrates on the one obvious claim that the moderns have over the ancients, their composition in the shared language of the nation. The argument that English poetry could bring about a refined and dignified speech, as Temple notes with distaste, was one way in which critics could defend modernity's value without setting it against antiquity. The language of English poetry was the language of polite society. Polite society embodied the nation at its finest hour.

Early models of national literary history made a great deal of discursive refinement. Many turn-of-the-century critics described

the English literary past in terms of the successive improvement of modern writers on their own uncouth ancestors. English as both a language and a literature, in this account, culminated with poets like John Denham and Edmund Waller, whose "smooth numbers" marked the arrival of English verse to regularity and the English language to mannered speech. In Thomas Rymer's paradigmatic formulation, "Chaucer found an Herculean labour on his hands; and did perform to admiration [but] our language retain'd something of the churl; something of the stiff and Gothish did stick upon it, till long after Chaucer . . . In Queen Elizabeth's time it grew fine but came not to an head and spirit, did not shine and sparkle till Mr. Waller set it running."[6] In Rymer's account, the English poetic tradition stages unfolding drama of smoothness. The important contribution of this model was not just the idea that the language of the moderns was refined, but that the career of refinement might be understood as a narrative, in which the move from one writer to the next mapped the leveling out of English over time.

By Dryden's *Fables Ancient and Modern, Translated into Verse* (1700) the narrative of refinement had set.[7] In this volume, Dryden defended his "translation" of Chaucer into "modern English" by suggesting that Chaucer's language had become foreign, and that "turning some of the *Canterbury Tales* into our language as it is now refined" presented an improved and readable text.[8] The distance and difference between Chaucer's language and Dryden's is the history of poetry. English poetry is a progressively unfolding lineage. While Chaucer "is the father of English poetry," he "lived in the infancy of our poetry" and "the dawning of our language" (277–278, 281). After this birth, English reached its adolescence with Spenser, Fairfax, and Milton, and then matured with Denham and Waller. Dryden's progressive narrative thus does not hesitate to suborn the father to his offspring: "nothing is brought into perfection at the first . . . we must be children before we grow into men" (281). Seen from the vantage of prosody, the history of English poetry charts the steady civilizing of the native language. Poetry overcomes the roughness of earlier English to arrive at Dryden's moment to a stability of utterance and constancy of measure: "even after Chaucer, there was a Spenser, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being; and our numbers were in their nonage until these last appeared" (281). Chaucer "first adorned and amplified our barren tongue"; next came "Spenser and Fairfax both . . . great masters in

our language . . . who saw much farther into the beauties of our numbers than those who immediately followed them''; after this generation arose ''Milton . . . the poetical son of Spenser and Waller of Fairfax''; of the two it is ''our famous Waller'' who is responsible for ''harmony of numbers'' (270–271).

For many turn-of-the-century writers, Waller and Denham evinced the arrival of English verse at the regularity of modern form and the English language at the etiquettes of polite speech. In some quarters, the progress of refinement was enough to seal the case for the moderns. John Dennis declared that his design in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) was ''no less than to set the moderns upon an equal foot with even more admir'd antiquity.''[9] Dennis uses the term advancement in two senses: his cause is to champion modernity; modernity advances on the past. Both types of advancement turn on linguistic regularity, the very substance of poetry itself.

> Before we proceed let us define poetry; which is the first time that a definition has been given of that noble art: For neither ancient nor modern criticks have defin'd poetry in general. Poetry then is an imitation of nature by a pathetick and numerous speech. As poetry is an art, it must be an imitation of nature. That the instrument with which it makes its imitation is speech need not be disputed. That that speech must be musical, no one can doubt: For numbers distinguish the parts of poetick diction from the periods of prose. Now numbers are nothing but articulate sounds and their pauses measur'd by their proper proportions of time. (24)

Dennis's eclectic and brazen claim to be the first critic ever to have defined poetry contains a suggestive sense of the work that the vernacular canon was understood to perform at the turn of the eighteenth century. Poetry equals metered language. Meter should be regular. Regularity is the foundation of national culture: ''I am very much inclin'd to believe, that 'tis the polite learning of any nation that contributes most to the extending its language, and poetry is the branch of polite learning which is the most efficacious in it'' (7). As the pure form of orderly speech, of abstract equivalence among the members of polite society, poetic refinement ''extends'' learning across the manifold: ''the poetry of that language which is most reasonable and most instructive, must in all likelihood have most attraction for the gentlemen of neighbouring nations; and we have shewn above, that that is the most reasonable and most instructive poetry, which is the most regular'' (xviii). The modernity

of modern writers lies not in their subservience to the ancients but in their worldly sociability, their utility in establishing civil bonds. Placing the moderns on equal footing with the ancients obliges Dennis, in turn, to repudiate moderns who fail to meet the canons of regularity. These are writers from modernity's own past. While Sophocles's "*Oedipus* is exactly just and regular," for example, Shakespeare's "*Julius Caesar* is very extravagant and irregular" (viii).

The distinction that Dennis draws between the modest regularity of contemporary English and the extravagant irregularity of older English (here, notably, in Shakespeare) turns out to be rather important in the long term making of the canon. As critics considered the progressive evolution of vernacular writing they soon discovered an "ancients and modern" distinction within English literature itself and, in this initial phase, valued modern English writers over their ancient precursors. Consider Edward Bysshe's *Art of English Poetry* (1702). The *Art* was half miscellany, half poetic manual.[10] Passages from English poetry sat next to a handy rhyming dictionary and lists of familiar tropes. Readers were invited to enjoy the great works of English poetry and to try their hand at composition. Both the reading and writing of poetry were understood to be leisurely activities; "this is a book that may be taken up and laid down at pleasure, and would rather choose to lye about in a drawing-room, or a grove, than be set up in a closet."[11] The poetry suitable for such leisurely politeness was uniquely contemporary.

> I have inserted not only similes, allusions, characters, and descriptions, but also the most natural and noble thoughts on all subjects of our modern poets; I say of our modern: for . . . the garb in which the ancients (as *Chaucer, Spenser,* and others) are cloath'd, tho' then Alamode, is now become so out of fashion, that the readers of our age have no ear for them: And this is the reason that the good *Shakespeare* himself is not so frequently cited in the following pages, as he would otherwise deserve to be. (3–4)

The English ancients have fallen out of fashion because their language is difficult for modern ears. The reference to aural reception here is not accidental. It exemplifies the importance of the sonorous quality of polite speech for the evaluation of modern writing. One perceives the smoothness and regularity of modern writing in its sound, a sound evidently superior to the rough cadence of the English ancients. This is not to say, however, that Bysshe like Dennis understands the vernacular moderns to take precedence over their Greco-Roman precursors. Rather, this early displacement of

the ancients and moderns division onto English literature transforms the value of the division's crucial terms. The English moderns are more like the Greco-Roman ancients than are the English ancients because they write with decorous uniformity. It is this celebration of the vernacular moderns, therefore, that is subsequently reversed by the midcentury revival of the very poets whom Bysshe finds to be lost on the modern world. For critics writing fifty or so years later, the linguistic distance of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton (and on occasion Chaucer as well) was an important part of what made these writers "literature." The emphasis falls on the English ancients. Bysshe's preference for modern refinement, however, is characteristic of his period, referring to a common understanding of literary and linguistic *progress*.[12]

Smooth enunciation and uniformity of measure may appear to be curious ingredients for literary canon formation, but we need only glance at the social conditions of early eighteenth-century England to see their logic. Drawn on the largest canvas, the early eighteenth century's semi-official culture of polite speech brought together the reformed aristocracy and the mercantile bourgeoisie into what contemporaries giddily referred to as the "beau monde," "the better sort" or "the public." The collusion or "alliance" of land and commerce after the settlement of 1688 is something of a truism of eighteenth-century studies, as is its shaping by the material culture of reading: the commerce in books and newspapers, the growth of coffee-houses and lending libraries.[13] One important consequence of this alliance was that its linguistic foundation could not be Latin, the cosmopolitan script of the old aristocracy.[14] Print-capitalism fashioned a vernacular culture of broad latitude and duration, and in the small venue of literary history it placed great emphasis on urbane discourse as the shared idiom of the public. This is one way to understand the early formation of Habermas's famous "public sphere": the joining of print and social power.[15] As Habermas's "model case," eighteenth-century England first saw the formation of "public opinion" over matters of literary taste and political judgment.[16] Print abstracted individual readers into an imaginary collective that evaluated art for aesthetic value and politics for civic value.

Habermas's work has occasioned much revisionary work on the social history of print and audience in the eighteenth century.[17] I would emphasize, for the moment, the broad dimension to his

argument. The dialectic of public and private finds its origin in the separation of state and civil society, the parting of economic production and the patriarchal family from politics and the court. Like Hegel and Marx before him, Habermas views this disseverment as singular to the capitalist epoch and first instantiated in England. "With the growth of the market economy arose the sphere of the 'social,' which broke the fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested with state authority. In the measure to which it was linked to market exchange, production was disengaged from its connection with functions of public authority; conversely, political administration was released from production tasks" (*Structural Transformation*, 141). Habermas's eponymous public sphere hence carves itself out of the officially private domain of civil society. The prior division between state and civil society "was repeated once more within society itself" as private readers confronted texts understood to be public culture (28). For Habermas, the dialectical volatility of public and private charts the course of cultural development in the modern age. Privacy inevitably discovers a public component; publicity inevitably splits off a section of the private. We have seen this dialectic already at work in turn-of-the-century models of literary history. The public culture of polite speech sheered modern writers from an antiquity overly bound to the difficult privacy of the "gothic" past.

Readers familiar with *The Structural Transformation* will recall how Addison and Steele's *Spectator* enjoys a special place in the Habermasian narrative.[18] The *Spectator*'s interweaving of aesthetic discussion with broadly topical matters represented for Habermas the dual project of widening the scope of literary culture and refining the taste of the new reading public. In this account, the emergent book trade was warmly embraced by Addison and his followers, who found in the new print institutions a form of sociability not limited by aristocratic entitlement. Such was at least the crux of Addison's famous claim, in *Spectator* no. 10, to have brought philosophy down from the heavens and into the polite quarters of the reading public: "I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses."[19] Addison's claim to be the modern Socrates is inseparable, in his own estimation, from his being "possessed of the art of printing" and from his successful sale of his writing: "my bookseller tells me that

the demand for these my papers increases daily''; ''my loose tracts and single pieces'' are ''retailed to the publick, and every page submitted to the Taste of forty or fifty thousand Readers'' (I: no. 124, 507–508). The commerce in print allows modern English culture to surpass even the culture of the ancients as it lays the grounds for rational discourse:

> Had the philosophers and great men of antiquity, who took so much pains in order to instruct mankind, and leave the world wiser and better than they found it; had they, I say, been possessed of the art of printing, there is no question but they would have made such an advantage of it, in dealing out their lectures to the publick. Our common prints would be of great use were they thus calculated to diffuse good sense through the bulk of a people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrows of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments with innocent amusements. (507)

Here print-capitalism is at one with the standardization and refinement of the social activity Addison terms ''conversation.'' ''Knowledge, instead of being bound up in books and kept in libraries and retirements, is thus obtruded upon the publick; . . . it is canvassed in every assembly, and exposed upon every table'' (507). Addison's widely remarked extolling of the new reading public is of course not without hesitation. As I shall discuss at greater length in the following chapter, the idea of dispersed reading was a matter of tactical ambivalence for the *Spectator*, the full consequence of which would not be apparent until later in the century. Nevertheless, the disencumbering of culture for what the *Spectator* represented as a nation poised for its perusal was the periodical's favorite mode of self-authorization. Among those given a new entrée into the literary world were women – an invitation subject to pronounced uncertainty. Feminine literacy was something to be contained and educated as well as the herald of egalitarian modernity.[20] The ''unaccountable humour in woman-kind, of being smitten with every thing that is showy and superficial'' needed the supervisory attention of criticism (I: no. 15, 66). At the same time, the prominence of ''gentle readers'' from the ''female world,'' whose leisurely domesticity put ''so much time on their hands,'' was an emblem and agent of modern England's polished elegance (I: no. 10, 47).

The opening up of the cultural product for a nation of readers darkened the past, when texts were read by only the literati and when writers composed in an obscure idiom. Like Dryden's ''trans-

lation'' of Chaucer, Addison's essays on wit, the pleasures of the imagination, and the virtues of Milton designed a polite modernity by separating it from a ''gothick'' prehistory (I: no. 124, 211). Addison's version of the past was by no means isolated. Glancing at older works, many early eighteenth-century critics retroactively barbarized antique English writers, whose versification was rough and diction impolite, whose puerile language troubled the mature flowering of the public. In addition to celebrating contemporary style, many critics revised or rewrote older works so that their rough language or their indecorous bawdiness and violence would better fit modern reading habits. Dryden's ''translation'' of Chaucer was but one instance of a movement which included, among others, John Hughes's orthographically ''improved'' edition of Spenser (1715), Pope's laboriously regularized and sanitized edition of Shakespeare and ''versification'' of Donne (1725, 1735), and Bentley's notorious *Paradise Lost* (1732). Here the present not only produced its own past, of which it was the necessary and healthy descendant, but also fashioned that past in such a way that would persist into the future: whence enchantment, superstition, the mythic, and the gothic.[21]

Against this darkened past, the present shone brightly. Models of the progress of English poetry and the English language often widened themselves to include military triumph, political stability, and economic expansion. ''I think Old England to have been in every respect a very indifferent country,'' wrote Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, in 1711.[22]

> We were [then] . . . under a sort of Polish nobility, and had no other liberties than what were in common to us with the then fashionable monarchies and Gothic lordships of Europe . . . I think Late England, since the Revolution, to be better . . . than Old England by many a degree, and that in the main we make somewhat a better figure in Europe than we did a few reigns before . . . [O]ur name or credit have risen, our trade and navigation, our manufactures or our husbandry [have] been improved. (III: 150–151)

English modernity, in this Whig-celebrant formulation, comprises a broad improvement across culture and economy alike. Like Shaftesbury, the editor of *The Present State of the Republic of Learning* (1728) argues in the inaugural number that ''no country in the world furnishes greater plenty of good materials for such a work [as this periodical] than England, as there is none where arts and sciences are cultivated with greater encouragement, or better success.'' This

plenty is a consequence of a vibrant civil society: "'Tis to this happy liberty, both of conscience and the press, so much envied by our neighbours, that we owe those many excellent books that are daily printed in England."[23] Freed from the integument of state authority (in the particular form of censorship and "licensing"), English culture can now flourish along side of its economy. In the words of Edward Young:

> Commerce gives Arts, as well as gain:
> By Commerce wafted o'er the main,
> They barbarous climes enlighten as they run.
> Arts, the rich traffic of the soul
> May travel thus from pole to pole,
> And gild the world with Learning's brighter sun.
>
> Commerce gives learning, virtue, gold:
> Ply Commerce, then, ye Britons bold,
> Inured to winds and seas; lest gods repent,
> The gods that throned you in the wave,
> And, as the trident's emblem gave
> A triple realm, that awes the continent. (*Imperium Pelagi*, II: 1–2)

Literature, commerce, and nation are reciprocally bound. England's commercial and naval power brings with it a certain cultural imperialism: the illuming of the world with the lamp of its learning. Yet it is also the "arts" of the Britons that subtend the nation's economic and nautical supremacy:

> Hence, Reason, the first palm is thine:
> Old Britain learnt from thee to shine.
> By thee Trade's swarming throng, gay Freedom's smile,
> Armies, – in war, of fatal frown;
> Of Peace the pride, – Arts, flowing down,
> Enrich, exalt, defend, instruct our isle. (I: 34)

Commerce and culture form an integral and dialectical unit. The one motors the other only to find that it is itself the other's product. As this dialectic works itself out over the course of the century the interdependence of commerce and national "arts" becomes increasingly fraught. While commerce and culture remain tied to each other's fate, their relation, as we shall see, is more and more conceived in terms of negation. In the writings of early eighteenth-century critics, however, polite speech, regular meter, the refinement of English verse and the like became tied to a national culture of

broad scope, an imagined community somehow realized by the even couplet.

One consequence of the nationalist aspect to the discourse of refinement – in which polite society and the *beau monde* become sufficiently abstract to stand for "England," and the latter for glorious power – was that the subordination of England's past as gothic or barbarous carried with it a certain guilt. Almost as soon as it was constituted as "gothic" and superseded by the politeness of the modern age, the English past became the object of nostalgic retrospection. A suggestive example of how the socio-linguistic program of politeness generated both the narrative of refinement and the seeds of its later critique may be found in Henry Felton's *A Dissertation on Reading the Classics and Forming a Just Style* (1718). The *Dissertation* is presented as one long letter from Felton to the young Marquis of Granby (in line to become Duke of Devonshire) on matters of taste and learning, on what sort of culture is appropriate to his breeding. The whole is organized into a familiar tautology, namely, how the members of a class ought to acquire the breeding that they always already have. Yet the tautology is only tautological to the degree to which this audience is, in fact, the recipient of the letter. Once printed, the point is to publicize the culture of aristocratic refinement for an audience of readers that, of course, extends beyond the nobility:

> Your birth is attended with peculiar advantages of title and estate, or worth and goodness in your ancestors and parents: the honour and dignity of your family; the great examples of virtue in your progenitors for a long descent; and the living and more prevailing example of your most illustrious grand-father and father will fire a soul like yours to a generous emulation; and, I hope, your lordship with *follow them with equal steps, if you do not go beyond them*. So select a conjunction of the happiest circumstances must have a blessed influence on the whole course of your life; and if families are the more noble for being more ancient, your lordship will shine in true nobility, and reflect a luster on all the long *Gallery* of your predecessors. But, my Lord, the fairest diamonds are rough till they are polished, and the purest gold must be run and washed, and sifted in the oar. (5)

Readers of the *Dissertation* are here, with the intermediation of print, let in on a private conversation between a young noble and his rector over the manner of achieving the appropriate polish. The *Dissertation* goes so far as to close with a calculated disclosure of its

composition: "I am ashamed to present these thoughts in so ill an hand" (230). Felton's attempt to authenticate the letter with the intimate reference to his penmanship at once reminds the reader of the author's virtuoso dashing off of the pages on one leisurely afternoon and hints at the secret of private correspondence which the consumer of this little duodecimo enjoys. The "polish" of the young marquis is as abstractable as consumption itself, and to that degree the emblem of a certain idealized version of English national identity.

Central to achieving the polish appropriate for an elevated station is the reading of English classics as well as the works of antiquity. Yet, while the version of the English canon that Felton recommends for the young Marquis and which by implication is the sign of cultivated refinement conforms to the narrative of linguistic refinement, it also wistfully glances at the strong works of the past that ought still to be read despite their roughness.

I may recommend Mr. Addison, and Mr. Prior, as perfect patterns of true poetic writing. To these I may add some of a more ancient date, and tho' their style is out of the standard now, there are in them still some lines so extremely beautiful, that our modern language cannot reach them. Chaucer is too old, I fear, for so young a company as your lordship; but Spenser, tho' he be antiquated too, hath still charms remaining to make your lordship enamoured of him. His antique verse has music in it to ravish any ears, that can be sensible of the softest sweetest numbers, that ever flowed from a poet's pen.

Shakespeare is a wonderful genius, a single instance of the grace of nature, and the strength of wit. Nothing can be greater, and more lively, than his thoughts, nothing nobler, and more forcible, than his expression . . .

Milton, my lord, is the assertor of poetic liberty, and would have freed us from the bondage of rhyme, but like sinners, and like lovers, we hug our chain, and are pleased in being slaves . . .

Waller, for the music of his numbers, the courtliness of his verse, the easiness and happiness of his thoughts on a thousand subjects, deserves your lordship's consideration more, perhaps, than any other, because his manner and his subjects are more common to persons of quality, and the affairs of a court . . .

I cannot help inserting into the body of this book that character which I think Sir John Denham so highly deserveth, for his excellent version of the psalms: they are so admirable in our old prose translation, that I despair of ever seeing them equaled in verse; but Sir John, by a noble simplicity of style, by a clearness and easiness of expression, by an exactness and

harmony of numbers, hath made them so delightful to the ear, and so pleasing to the reader that as a mere poetical work, it must be read with all satisfaction which pieces perfect in their kind can give us. (215–218)

Refinement oscillates with its own transcendence. Felton outlines a course of vernacular study for his student that dwells on the measured grace and numerical purity of the most modern of the moderns while also pointing to an essential kernel of older English writers whose value depends less on ease than on "charm," "force," "wonder," and "genius." The two scales of valuation exist side by side: the one sees vernacular culture as the instrument of sociable polish; the other (eventually) sees it as the rejection of sociability. Within this oscillation one may detect a conflict between modes of understanding the nature of reading and the cultural economy that will continue to unfold to dramatic affect. Does English poetry continue to improve over time? Did English literature consummate itself in the forceful and wondrous writings of the ancients? Should the language of poetry be the same as polite speech or oppose itself to the language of trade and callings? For many critics, the answers to these questions lay in the very nature of the cultural economy.

ANTINOMIES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

As critics began to rethink the consequences of widespread reading and the trade in books, an affirmative relation to the cultural market became increasingly difficult to sustain. The very "common prints" Addison saw as the condition of rationality soon became the condition of an unstable consumer culture.[24] The earlier emphasis on decorous ease gave way to a revaluing of difficult obscurity. To the degree that linguistic difference still distinguished between ancient and modern English literature it only confirmed for many midcentury critics the valuable distance of older writers from what they took to be the competitive stress of market society, the utility of polite conversation, and the disintegration of literacy.[25] Why did print rationality bring about a nostalgia for pre-rational forms and language? In a suggestive gloss on Walter Benjamin's famous story of the desuetude of art's aura, Habermas describes how the public sphere instituted a crisis at its very meridian:

Culture products no longer remained components of the Church's and court's publicity of representation; that is precisely what is meant by the

loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character. The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority. (*Structural Transformation*, 36–37)

Benjamin's narrative, in this analysis, is ultimately grounded in the social relations of artistic production: the change in producers and consumers over time.[26] The important point for the current argument is not so much the implicitly Whiggish story of art's democratization, however, as the counter-narrative of the aura's phoenix-like rebirth as the aesthetic. The affirmative culture of the market soon produced its antithesis. Literary culture became an object of critical discussion and so formed a public sphere of private subjects; but, at the same time, its sacramental aura was debased by circulation and consumption. Far from disappearing in modern culture, the aura was in fact its product. Habermas's analysis may be rewritten to cover the emergence of English literary history only by turning our attention to that moment in the 1740s and 50s when the earlier emphasis on polite conversation bequeathed a compensatory revaluing of the past.

The first intimations of such nostalgia were virtually coincident with the birth of refinement, typically as a mourning of the loss of the strength of the English ancients (as in the case of Felton but also earlier in such poems as Dryden's "To Oldham" and "To Congreve").[27] Over the course of the century, nostalgia for the literary past gradually combined with a skeptical rethinking of the narrative of refinement. John Oldmixon's *An Essay on Criticism* (1728), for instance, notes how "we in *England* are apt to confound all the various kinds under the general terms of good language, and a fine stile. The sublime, the natural, the didactick, the narrative, the tragick, the comick, the polite, the affected, are seldom rightly distinguished, and the latter very often mistaken for the polite."[28] Politeness is too often "affect," an instrumentalizing of writing for the social agenda of the public. As such, it smoothes over the various achievements of modern verse. "In these things our taste is strangely confined: provided the verses run smoothly, and the language is soft and harmonious, we think it is fine" (70). Oldmixon's argument has two important components that will develop into greater promi-

nence and clarity later in the century: first, that modern habits of reading are themselves lacking; second, that this lack has to do with the composition of the national audience. The slackness of modern reading is revealed by the public's increasing inability to read older English writers: "Several ladies and gentlemen have subscribed for *Chaucer* in the *Christ-Church* edition, but I much doubt whether they understand him or not" (68). The gendering of this imaginary audience will prove to be significant. The often tacit conflation of cultural refinement with feminine taste is made manifest, but in the manner of critique: "ladies and gentlemen who read like ladies are nine out of ten of all readers of poetry" (70). Like many critics who came after him, Oldmixon represents the expansion of the public as the inclusion of women and, as a result, the effeminization of men.

Oldmixon's skepticism of polite reading establishes itself in deliberate contrast to the moment and program of Addison.

> The Spectator, with all his Modesty, has discover'd something of this self-love in that of the sciences, and could not help giving into this infirmity. Every one knows what a fine talent he had for writing, and particularly how beautiful his imagination was, and how polite his language. Himself was not a stranger to it; and we therefore read in the Spectator, no. 291; *I might further observe, that there is not a Greek or Latin Critick, who has not shewn, even in the stile of his criticisms, that he was master of all the elegance and delicacy of his native language.* Here does this excellent author forbid any one's claim to the character of a critick, who is not like himself master of the delicacy and elegance of his native tongue. (8)

Oldmixon finds it difficult to imagine that refinement, especially as it becomes in this case a variety of self-advertisement, is itself a sufficient criterion of judgment. Eloquence begins to lose its legitimacy as a means of distinguishing among cultural products. The implication of the *Spectator*'s agenda, Oldmixon protests, was that "no body ought to criticize on that author's writings, unless he could write as elegantly as himself, which effectively cuts off all *criticism*" (15). One ought to judge literary products by criteria relatively distinct from their sociability. The difficult labor of critical judgment need not disguise itself as mannered ease. Yet Oldmixon only partially develops this argument. For all of his resistance to Addison's program, his literary history falls well within the narrative of refinement he critiques. The line of poets from Dryden to Pope charts "the improvement of our tongue 'till the time of the *Spectator*

and the translation of *Homer*, where, I think, it is in the greatest purity and elegance'' (55).

Oldmixon's position on refinement is internally divided: refinement is both an insufficiently rigorous way of understanding the properties of literature and the activity of criticism, *and* an important means of appreciating the improvement of English poetry over time. In subsequent decades these two positions become more clearly distinct and the critique of refinement begins to produce a countervailing literary historical model. Part of what motivates this shift is the increasing attention paid to the problem of the cultural market. We may get a sense of the changing perception of the book trade by comparing two similarly framed yet starkly opposed observations, the first by Philip Skelton in his monograph *The Candid Reader* (1744) and the second by an essayist in the periodical *The World* (1753). Near the beginning of his piece, Skelton ironically announces a ''very peculiar'' pleasure ''in beholding the daily and plentiful additions made to the commonwealth of letters by my contemporary writers'';[29]

> I consider the whole body of writings, that have hitherto appeared in the world, of whatsoever kind, whether philosophical or poetical, historical or political, moral, theological, or critical; whether they be the performances of great wits or dunces, of the learned or the illiterate, as one great community or republic of books, in which every individual performance hath its own place and use. As in a well regulated commonwealth, consisting of men, there must be persons for all purposes, some to be treasurers, and others to be scavengers, some to be judges, and others to be hangmen; so in one of books, there ought to be some sublime and learned, others low and illiterate, some, full of sense and life, others, dull and insipid, some, of a senatorian order, and some other of a plebeian; because, all books being wrote, if I mistake not, in order for perusal, and all mankind being either obliged by duty, or moved by inclination, to peruse some kind of books or other, and there being such an infinite variety of tastes and capacities among men, prodigious numbers would be excluded from the great and delectable exercise of reading, were it not for the plentiful provision made, and laid in, by the writers of past and present times. We have almost a competency of writings, calculated for all sorts of tastes, and all degrees of understanding. (227–228)

This passage seems to express nothing so much as confidence about the abiding regime of cultural and social hierarchy. Every ''senatorian'' reader corresponds to a ''sublime and learned'' text, and every ''plebeian'' reader a ''dull and insipid'' text. Skelton's remarks

are remarkable not just in their one-to-one overlaying of the cultural onto the social, but also in their vision of society as a stable, unified, and "well regulated commonwealth." Perennial social order subsumes cultural change; while the commonwealth of letters includes all sorts of books, these books are ranked as rigidly as the "commonwealth of men." High culture bears the same immemorial relation to mass culture as elites do to peasants.

Despite Skelton's apparent equanimity, his canon is notably defensive; it is shaped in response to what he represents as a tide of plebeian books and illiterate readers. The notion of social and cultural stability is rendered with tongue in cheek, or at the least with the sense that both were under significant pressure. When the contributor to *The World* (1753) attempted a parallel "meditation . . . on a library of books" nine years later he was pointedly unable to see them in terms of Skelton's rational and hierarchical order. For this critic, the new glut of books was a primordial chaos:

> Before my eyes an almost innumerable multitude of authors are ranged; different in their opinions, as in their bulk and appearance; in what light shall I view this great assembly? Shall I consider it as an ancient legion, drawn out in goodly array under fit commanders? or as a modern regiment of writers, where the common men have been forced by want, or seduced through wickedness into the service, and where the leaders owe their advancement rather to caprice, party favour, and the partiality of friends, than to merit or service?
>
> Shall I consider ye, o ye books! as a herd of courtiers or strumpets, who profess to be subservient to my use, and yet seek only your own advantage? No; let me consider this room as the great charnel-house of human reason.[30]

Literature is here experiencing a crisis of over-production. The excess of books has lowered their overall value; "complete cooks and conveyances; bodies of school divinity and Tommy Thumb; little story-books, systems of philosophy, and memoirs of women of pleasure; apologies for the lives of players and prime ministers; all are consigned to one common oblivion" (153). The essayist does manage to catch a fleeting glimpse of a vanquished high culture within the sepulchral oblivion of the library, but the image is equally telling:

> Amidst this army of anti-martyrs, I discern a volume of peculiar appearance; its meagre aspect, and the dirty gaudiness of its habit, make it bear a perfect resemblance of a decayed gentleman. The wretched

monument of mortality was brought forth in the reign of Charles the Second; it was the darling and only child of a man of quality. How did its parent exult at its birth! How many flatterers extolled it beyond their own offspring, and urged its credulous father to display its excellencies to the whole world! Induced by their solicitations, the father arrayed his child in scarlet and gold, submitted it to the public eye, and called it *Poems by a person of honour.* While he lived his booby-offspring was treated with the cold respect due to the ranks and fortune of its parent: but when death had locked up his kitchen, and carried off the keys of his cellar, the poor child was abandoned to the parish: it was kicked from stall to stall, like a despised prostitute; and after various calamities, was rescued out of the vender of Scots snuff, and safely placed as a pensioner in the band of freethinkers. (153)

The position of the essay's speaker in this passage is curious, and can be read in at least two ways. The late aristocratic milieu of the Restoration court is either the last redoubt of high culture before the triumph of the market or a farce dressed up in the expired raiment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Each reading of the passage would imply a different object of nostalgia; the first, a nostalgia for books of poetry that cannot be read by ill-educated moderns (like *Poems by a person of honour*); the second, a nostalgia not so much for the Restoration and *Poems by a person of honour* as the book's genuinely aristocratic and honorable father who cannot even be named because he is so obscured by the tide of print. The one points to an abuse of high culture writ large, the other to an abuse particularly of the English ancients. The essay does not come down on either side but ironically offers both readings as plausible responses to the deathly oblivion of modern culture.

What has transformed the order of culture into a "charnel house"? The swell of books and their readers was, for many critics, evidence of the economy's shadow over culture. In the parodic *Peri Bathous* (1727), Pope's Martin Scriblerus notes that "our wiser Authors have a present end . . . Their true design is *profit* or *gain*; in order to acquire which, 'tis necessary to procure Applause, by administering *pleasure* to the Reader: From whence it follows demonstrably, that their Productions must be suited to the *present taste*."[31] This disavowal of the "present taste" is an early example of an increasingly common mode of critical position-taking. Scriblerus aligns writing with production, reading with consumption and both with the aesthetically devaluing standard of profit. Ironically mimicking the voice of Grub Street, Pope tells what soon becomes a

cardinal rule of modern culture building, that market criteria erode the viability of aesthetic experience. Pope's cautionary satire squares well with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. The latter's corpus is concerned to watch how the aesthetic separates itself out from politics and develops a peculiar symbolic value inversely proportional to exchange value. In this account of the "cultural field" as an "economic world reversed," the market places insuperable pressure on the relative autonomy of the aesthetic. The value of artistic goods is soon released from the vulgar dominion of commercial sales; the "loser wins." The expert culture of criticism and the academy emerge at this point both to labor on the new sphere of culture and to renew constantly its distance from the idioms of everyday life. The cultural field is forever split between "the field of restricted production" for other artists and cultural *cognoscenti* and the "field of large scale production" for lay purchasers and mass audiences.[32]

Bourdieu's work helps us to examine with greater specificity the idea of the market in the making of the canon. Still, once we bring his terms to bear on eighteenth-century culture, we need to be alert that, for contemporary critics, "large scale" and "restricted" culture were conceived in relation to each other and shaped by the gradually evolving problem of publicity, refinement, and national reading. Critics concerned with public culture and the commerce in books became increasingly moved to distinguish fiscal profit from literary excellence. Consider the anonymous pamphlet *A Letter to the Society of Booksellers* (1738). The *Letter* is written as a critic's friendly admonition to the collected tradesmen and publishers of books, urging them to forge a "due disposal of books," an internally regulated control on the quality of the nation's cultural product. The *Letter* unambiguously frames the problem as a matter of art's new status as a commodity: "Do not all mankind naturally seek their own interest? and I believe it will readily enough be allowed that booksellers do not less consult it than other people. Now if so, it cannot well be deny'd, that, where you can imagine or see your profit, you will readily enough come into it, and consequently without the least difficulty willingly print any such copies, seeing none can be more sensible of the great profits where the copy is good."[33] That booksellers would print what sells is taken as a matter of course. Yet this is an item of some worry. The exchange value of a cultural product is motored by a demand almost appetitive in its intensity: "the good success of a book does not so much depend on the excellency of the performance, as on the

necessity, novelty, or the interest it has in our passions which excite us to demand it (tho' it must be confessed, that its excellency or exceeding accuracy enhances its real value)'' (25–26). The point of this statement is less to vaunt demand as the measure of genuine literary goodness than to suggest that the aesthetic, ''real'' value of the product ought to be defined in terms other than profit and economic success. Aesthetic value (what the author calls twice simply ''excellency'') and exchange value, that is, are shown to be at once inseparable and antithetical categories. Books are commodities with a commercial value and a cultural value. The one is based on the suppression of the other.

The *Letter* hardly blames booksellers for consulting their ''interest,'' but it does remain disturbed by the turning of books into commodities. The author describes, with notable distaste, having stumbled upon ''an apple or orange-woman who sold fruit, near the court, one side of her shop being used for that purpose, and the other for the sale of pamphlets, small books, &c, for she likewise followed this business.'' ''The good woman'' was ''flush'd with the prospect of great success in the bookselling way'' (18). Demand and desire cut across food and culture; each are items for purchase, products in a basket of goods. The problem is that demand is an insufficient guarantor of cultural excellence. While our taste for fruit may ensure that the best apple or orange is purchased, our taste for books may ensure that the entire cultural order is overturned. ''We find that Robinson Crusoe sells quicker than Locke on Human Understanding, and the Beggars Opera than the best comedy: nay is it not sufficiently known, that some have acquired estates by printing Tom Thumb, riddles, songs, fables, the Pilgrims Progress, and such like common trumpery?'' (31).

The resolution that the *Letter* offers to this upside-down world of consumer culture is to distinguish among the distributors of cultural products, to divide ''mean peddling traders,'' like the ''aforementioned apple or herb-woman,'' ''from those of capacity, credit and reputation'' (40). Booksellers of capacity will, the author hopes, be able to balance aesthetic and exchange value in such a way that ensures profits without debasing the national product. The adjustment of the two systems of value proves, however, to be a difficult act:

I doubt not you will be apt to tell me, that the books which sell best are

most for your purpose, and that you need not be solicitous about the intrinsic value of a book, if it does not sell, that being its principal goodness in your estimation . . . I am very sensible, gentlemen, that your business, like all other trades, is to *get money*; yet give me leave at the same time to remark, that this immediate or present gain (so commonly snatch'd at by the unthinking) perhaps, very seldom proves to be their real interest; so that, in my opinion, as honesty is the best policy, and good wine needs no blush, the tradesmen, who take the contrary course, are generally found to thrive most; and, perhaps, it is not once in ten times that it happens otherwise. Accordingly, a bookseller, who takes due care to examine his copies, and prints none but such as truly deserve the notice and esteem of the public, even tho' they should not run off so fast as others, on more trifling, indifferent, or obscene subjects, finds at last that they turn to the best account; for men, in general, entertaining a better opinion of such a bookseller, and consequently of the books he prints; his customers will venture to take 'em on his own word, and even strangers be no way fearful of dealing him, since they know he has an established character, for being concerned in no copies that are not really good. (28–29)

The salutation to booksellers does not attempt to hide the public's preference for literary trinkets, for what we would now call mass culture. But neither does the salutation pretend that booksellers will pursue the cultural profit of marketing wares that won't sell. The dilemma is that the "intrinsic value of the book" may not be expressed in the price it fetches. The pamphlet aims to resolve this problem by reuniting what it had intended to keep apart, exchange and aesthetic value. Establish trust among your consumers, the *Letter* promises, and they will purchase more books; your shop will receive the "best account." How are we to assess this slippage from describing "intrinsic value" against the system of exchange to describing it within that system? The answer, I would suggest, is ultimately historical: the commodification of books generates "intrinsic value" as its own antithesis, as everything that lies outside of and so defines the market. In this version of Bourdieu's "economic world reversed," there is a certain "market" in seeming to be outside of the market. If exchange value generates intrinsic value, the latter can generate former. The pamphlet winkingly suggests to the bookseller that people will want to buy books that appear to be elevated above "trifling, indifferent, or obscene subjects."

It is precisely the antithetical proximity of exchange and aesthetic value that underlies Fielding's ironic description, in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), of how "Homer not only divided his great work into twenty-

four books, (in compliment perhaps to the twenty-four letters to which he had very particular obligations) but, according to the opinion of some very sagacious critics, hawked them all separately, delivering one book at a time, (probably by subscription),'' and thus ''was the first inventor of the art which hath so long lain dormant, of publishing by numbers.''[34] The irony lies not simply in the framing of the past through the distorted prism of print categories, but in proposing that ''great antiquity'' itself has become an instrument to reap a certain kind of profit. Readers trained in confronting printed texts have no other means of situating older works, Fielding suggests; for the same reason, Homer's aura derives from his publication by booksellers. But what kind of profit does Fielding intend to burlesque? The aside that Homer's works were published ''probably by subscription'' refers to the practice in which sales were contracted in advance, so that the publisher could remit the expenses of printing, in return for the subscriber's name appearing in the inside leaf of the book (exactly the sort of high-cultural publication and quality control the *Letter to the Society of Booksellers* wished to see more of). Subscription publishing ties together economic and cultural capital in an intricate knot: the bookseller receives in advance the price of production, while the subscriber receives the permanent marker of his or her cultivation. The value of this marker depends upon the fragility of the book's strictly economic value, the quantum of anticipated demand. That the book cannot be expected to draw a large audience, that it will probably maintain a distance from the modern public's taste, raises the cultural equity of the subscriber, whose interest in such rarefied material is made visible for the smaller public of elite consumers.

Fielding intends to expose and derive a satiric energy from the situation in which high culture and mass culture are interdependent categories, each within the deformative logic of the cultural market. Such is the wisdom imparted by the bookseller to Parson Adams when the latter tries to sell his ill-fated sermons. Adams

> was sorry to hear sermons compared to plays. ''Not by me, I assure you,'' cried the Bookseller, ''though I don't know whether the licensing act may not shortly bring them to the same footing; but I have formerly known a hundred guineas given for a play –.'' ''More shame for those who gave it'' cry'd Barnabus. ''Why so?'' cried the Bookseller, ''for they got hundreds by it.'' ''But is there no difference between conveying good or ill instructions to mankind?'' said Adams; ''would not an honest mind rather lose money by

the one, than gain it by the other?'' ''If you can find any such, I will not be their hindrance,'' answered the Bookseller, ''but I think those persons who get by preaching sermons, are the properist to lose by printing them: for my part, the copy that sells best, will be always the best copy in my opinion: I am no enemy to sermons but because they don't sell.'' (*Joseph Andrews*, 78)

Adams's is a compound dilemma. Modernity has stripped ''religion'' of its tacit authority and placed it at odds with the profit motive; the ''good'' of spirit vies with the ''ill'' of greed. The message of the bookseller is also double. Even as exchange has taken over religion, the aura of theology, as with literature, is negatively bound to economic profit and the cash-nexus.

Like aesthetic value, Fielding archly points out, spiritual value is produced out of exchange as its emollient opposite. Cultural and commercial value exist in a state of continuous inversion: the greater the appearance of commercial value, the lower the cultural value, and vice-versa. For the anonymous author of *Reflections on Various Subjects Relating to Arts and Commerce* (1752) this doubleness is immanent to art's peculiar status as a commodity. Books are at once one of the ''manufacturing arts'' like silk, wool, table linen, or porcelain and also constitutively averse to the laws of the market:

> Manufactures of moderate expense and quick growth may safely be left to private adventurers, and run the common chance for success; the *finer arts* will never flourish but under *public* protection and *noble* patronage; no encouragement in the hands of private persons are adequate rewards to the man of *genius*. Money is the pay of common men, as praise is that of heroes; and honour will ever be found a much stronger principle of fine invention than gain . . . All that was great and noble in antient wit and art, was produced by honours, by the countenance of princes, the favour and kind influence of *great men*.[35]

As in *Letter to the Society of Booksellers*, the market is here understood to be an insufficient agent of aesthetic value. Art is a commodity, but its price can never be set by demand because demand amounts to the lawlessness of the public. The rewards of consumption are adequate only to common men and common products. ''Fine art'' requires a system of valuation that runs in contradistinction to exchange. The system that the *Reflections* promotes for art is scarcely innovative – patronage was not only the practice of the ancients, but also a finely articulated cultural economy in the eighteenth century, itself subject to criticism during this period.[36] What is more interesting, in this case, is the way in which ''honour'' emerges as a type of cultural

wage analogous to but distinct from the vulgar form of money. Exchange value and aesthetic value have moved farther apart than they were in the *Letter.* An art object contains a certain amount of congealed mental labor, while a practical object contains a certain amount of congealed physical labor: "the lower branches of manufacture, wherein the price is paid chiefly to labour, contribute most to the increase of labouring hands. The trades of refinement are no way comparable to these . . . the price of *art* rising above labour in proportion as genius is a scarcer commodity than strength" (*Reflections*, 21). The aesthetic is subject to an economy of genius at variance from an economy of labor. Yet what this passage reveals is that the price mechanism of art is more "comparable" to manufacture than the *Reflections* admits. The emergent labor theory of value is simply stood on its head; the value of art is inversely related to the expenditure of physical labor and thus directly related to the expenditure of "genius." The distance between exchange and aesthetic value here is precisely that of analogy.

The construction of an idea of aesthetic value separate from yet inversely analogous to economic value occurred during the midcentury's prolonged consideration of the book market and public culture. Over time, critics grew concerned that cultural goods were becoming too available to "middling" and "vulgar" classes and too sullied by the leveling system of consumption. An important aspect of this consideration was the notion that the rise of literacy was brought about largely by the inclusion of women readers, that the much celebrated domestic woman was spending her leisure time with books.[37] It is not simply the case, however, that eighteenth-century criticism reacted immediately to contain female literacy. The response to the perception of such literacy was heterogeneous. Women readers were understood throughout the eighteenth century to augur polite culture writ large *or* to vitiate the republic of letters. The elaboration of an idea of feminine literacy had the effect of gradually transforming the self-representation of the cultural community. The shifting representation of women readers, feminine taste, and effeminate culture followed the pattern of dialectical development this chapter has been tracing. Initially, the reading of women illustrated the opening up of national culture for a wider public. Feminine taste would educate the public to enjoy polite subjects instead of the rough matters of older writing. By midcentury, however, the specter of female literacy was often understood to be

the beginning of the end of national, masculine fortitude. Critics at this point frequently overlapped or combined the question of women readers and consumer culture: the commodification of culture was metaphorically expressed as its attenuated emasculation while the latter was literalized in the specter of domestic women armed with books. (Recall the image of "prostituted" high culture in *The World* and "trumpery" of bad books in the *Letter to the Society of Booksellers*.) In any case, the problem dramatically telescoped in the discussion of the "romance" and the "novel" (which, in the droll terms of Clara Reeve later in the century, were at this moment "springing up like mushrooms").[38] One would-be preceptor of young female readers meditated at length in *The Present State of the Republic of Learning* (December, 1730), for example, over how the ostensibly progressive and culture building aspects of the reading revolution threatened to devolve into "romantic" mass culture. Written as an admonishing note to a young pupil, the letter may be taken as suggestively transitional in its conception of gender, genre, and public culture. The author begins by warmly espousing reading as a form of cultivation superior to mere coquetry:

> Madam, as I am now corresponding with you in the capacity of a *tutor*, it may not be amiss to begin with giving you my sentiments of *books*; such, especially, as most commonly fall into the hands of young ladies. Whatever you may think of the matter at present, believe me, you'll one day find *reading* more essential to your passing your time agreeably, than any of the *gay amusements*; which cannot always be had, and grow insipid by being often repeated. So that *reading* is certainly one of the most desirable things imaginable, were it only for this one reason, that it enables us to converse with ourselves, and to be satisfy'd sometimes in our own company, which is very terrible to most *beaux*, and many *fine ladies*.[39]

This celebration of reading illuminates an important change in the understanding of sociability. Here reading is valued as a retreat from the public sphere, a variety of solitude that exists apart from the insipid clamor of "gay amusements." Yet, once reading turns from the public back to the private it seems to create a curious hybrid, a form of public privacy in which we "converse with ourselves" and find solitude to be a "company" of one. The suggestion appears to be that privacy is a better form of publicity than publicity itself. From what sort of publicity does this privacy shrink in order to generate a more authentic public out of solitude? The domestic reader ought to withdraw from the salons and balls and masquer-

ades, to be sure, but also from a certain type of literacy: "And now, as to the ladies favourite, *Romances*; it grieves me to say it, they ruin more virgins than *masquerades* or *brothels*. They strike at the root of all virtue, by corrupting the mind: And tho' every *Romance-reading nymph* may not proceed to overt acts, I hope you do not think her excusable" (453). Here "romance" stands for a deleterious form of publicity brought back into the private, where its corrosive effects are magnified by the inventive liberty of imagination: "Romances, and such like books, must needs be very pernicious since they tend to soften and enfeeble the mind when they chance not to produce greater evils, such as raising peoples passions, and encouraging their various inclinations" (453). This is hardly the sort of public privateness suitable for young women readers; the writer asks his pupil "to judge what an excellent housewife a damsel is likely to make, who has read the *Persian Tales* till she fancies her self a *Sultana* (453).

The problem of romance was thus, as is widely remarked, one way in which critics came to terms with the perceived rise in female literacy, with the new phenomenon of domestic privacy, and with the book trade.[40] (The canonical example is Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* [1752], discussed in chapter three.) It was also one way in which critics addressed the problem of class culture, in particular the specter of lower class reading. Romances are, according to *The Present State of the Republic of Learning*, "current among the common people"; "every footman or chambermaid are fond of [their] lewd inventions" (453–454). The letter puts forth this notion that the vulgar classes were partly responsible for the romantic vogue with, perhaps, a grain of salt; or rather, the point is just as much to invoke the tastes and habits of the lower classes as analogous to the literary class of the romance as it is to contend that the latter's audience is itself "vulgar." In either case, the specter of common, as well as women, readers became increasingly prominent ways to explain commodity culture. When, for example, William Whitehead complains in *The World* (no. 19, 1753) that "the present age is overrun with romances . . . so strong does the appetite for them continue" he distinguishes the venerable writers of old romance, including "Homer and Shakespeare," from the vulgar romance writers of the modern age:

> The present race of romance-writers run universally into a different extreme. They spend the little art they are masters of in weaving into

intricacies the more familiar and more comical adventures of a Jack Slap, or a Betty Sallet. These, though they endeavour to copy after a very great original, I choose to call our writers *below nature*; because very few of them have as yet found out their master's peculiar art of writing upon low subjects without writing in a low manner. Romances, judicially conducted, are a very pleasing way of conveying instruction to all parts of life. But to dwell eternally upon orphan-beggars, and *serving-men of low degree*, is certainly what I have called it, writing *below nature*; and it is so far from conveying instruction, that it does not even afford amusement.[41]

As opposed to "this sort of trash," Homer and Shakespeare retained a nobility of style even when their subject matter was low (84). Modern writing, in contrast, falls to the level of the common world it depicts. Once more, class is used in a double sense: as the category that describes the object and audience of the romance *and* as the status of the romance within the array of cultural products. According to Whitehead, the eighteenth century is overrun with the low "trash" of the modern romance, or, as he portentiously terms it, "the novel": "There are certain vices which the vulgar call fun, and the people of fashion call gallantry; but the middle rank, and those of the gentry who continue to go to church, still stigmatize them by the opprobrious names of fornications and adultery . . . Why then," he asks "should our novel writers take so much pains to spread these infirmities?" (84).

The question is hardly rhetorical. The institution of criticism should, Whitehead claims, exercise a mimetic version of state censorship: "you should interpose your authority," he implores the editors, "and forbid your readers (whom I will suppose to be all persons who can read) even to attempt to open any novel or romance, unlicensed by you; unless it should happen to be stamped Richardson or Fielding" (85). In this embellishment of criticism into a constabulary of culture, we may note several combined developments that together help reconfigure the canon: romance gives way to the novel, while the latter itself divides into the mass, on the one hand, and the Richardsons and Fieldings, on the other; the novel, in turn, betokens a public culture given to vicious gallantry and licentious vulgarity. In response to this situation, criticism begins to superintend the cultural field, to take on a power analogous to the state. The critic is now not just one reader among the manifold but an "authority." Unlike the cultivated amateurs of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, or *Guardian*, Whitehead's critic is a professional, a writer whose

training and skills set him apart from the lay public of fallible readers. For Whitehead, professional critics have the responsibility to censure and admonish. For others, the professional critic simply possessed superior knowledge, a technical facility akin to the modern sciences. For still others, the development of expert literary knowledge corrupted the literary republic, as critics began to use a language and method estranged from the language of polite society. Criticism became the object of a compound ambivalence about the relation between experts and the public. An important consequence of this ambivalence was a revised understanding of the nation's cultural monuments. Casting about for forms that resist the "trash" of the modern age, critical experts looked systematically to the works of the English past.[42]

FROM REFINEMENT TO DESCENT

The shrinking away from modern refinement and commodity culture culminated in a dramatic transformation of the English canon: Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton replaced Denham and Waller; philology replaced modernization, and the narrative of improvement became a narrative of decline. Yet it would be wrong to say that the midcentury simply broke from the norms of the Augustans. Rather, the earlier model of literary historical development – progress toward refinement – was turned on its head; the very past crystallized by the Augustans was dialectically preserved by their successors as the radiant sheen of premodern English culture.

The abuse of modern writing on behalf of the English literature of earlier ages was, in this sense, a further elaboration of the ancients and moderns distinction within the vernacular.[43] Let us consider how this distinction might look over the long term of its development. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century uniform Latinity breaks down as the cultural capital of the elite classes and variously cultivated vernaculars take its place. The first such vernacular makes a fetish out of grammar and politeness. Yet once politeness is seen as too common and modernizing, too much like conversation as such, critics discover an abstruse, quasi-Latinate vernacular in older, canonical English. This mimetic transcoding of ancient versus modern inside of modern literature itself proceeds as a shrinking away from the market of cultural goods, a disavowal of

"modern" politeness and the novel. The project of surmounting the difficulty and vulgarity of England's past gives way to one of appreciating the linguistic distance and aesthetic difficulty of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.

No longer the answer to social change, in other words, vernacular literacy had become by the midcentury a problem in its own right. One solution to this problem was simply to reverse Addison and return culture to the closets and universities from the salons and tea-tables at which it had been sullied. In the *Adventurer* (1753), for example, Joseph Warton argued that what he took to be his period's corruption of literary value and misreading of literary history were both products of the Addisonian embrace of commodity culture. He characterized the entire project of his periodical, in fact, as a rejoinder to the celebration of print and the reading public found in the *Spectator*:

> Addison remarks that Socrates was said to have brought philosophy down from heaven to inhabit among men: "And I," says he, "shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses." But this purpose has in some measure been defeated by its success; and we have been driven from one extreme with such precipitation, that we have not stopped in the medium, but gone on to the other. Learning has been divested of the peculiarities of a college dress, that she might mix in public assemblies; but by this means she has been confounded with ignorance and levity.[44]

The "engaged and easy" manner of the *Spectator* had the unforeseen effect of degrading the very learning with which it intended to please the reading public (288). Addison is right to suggest that the print market has made cultural goods objects of conversation, but this process has turned back on itself; "instead of learning having elevated conversation, conversation has degraded learning" (290).

A striking feature in Warton's response to Addison is that he makes pointed reference to the "literary," a term and problem not yet defined by the *Spectator*. "I would not be thought solicitous to confine the conversation even of scholars to literary subjects, but only to prevent such subjects from being totally excluded" (291). As we move from Addison to Warton, "philosophy" changes to "literary subjects" and "literary subjects" becomes a category at once in crisis and with an importantly educative effect on the public: "It seems therefore that to correct the taste of the present generation, literary

subjects should be again introduced among the polite and gay, without labouring too much to disguise them like common prattle'' (290). We know what literature is by knowing what it is not. Because, as Warton bemoans, ''the tinsel of a burletta has more admirers than the gold of Shakespeare'' we can see the literary value of older texts (291). And because literature is, like gold, a rare substance it ''corrects'' the common taste. This reversal of Addison's model did not so much abandon the project of the *Spectator*, therefore, as extend some of its fundamental premises to their ultimate negation. According to Addison, the language of the public sphere was the same as that of its canonical authors, indeed was formed by them. Warton's subsequent formulation retains the problem of language, but divides the linguistic into two irreconcilable modes. Public conversation and literary language oppose each other, as the prose essay does the lyric poem or as the novel does Shakespeare. In this opposition to the easy and sociable discourse of the literate public, we may begin to detect some of the characteristic features of what begins to be described as uniquely *literary* language: compression, obliquity, rhetoricity, allusion.

One way of thinking about this transformation is that it represents the coming into discourse of the modern category of ''literature.'' No longer an inclusive term for ''good books,'' literature becomes a restrictive category of the ''imagination.'' The story of the literature's increasing specification in the late eighteenth century is, owing to the important work of Raymond Williams, widely familiar to early-modern cultural studies.[45] As John Guillory and Trevor Ross have pointed out, the reduction of literature to the imagination at once displaces and elevates the older term ''poetry.'' Formerly an inclusive term for creative works, poetry is now winnowed to verse and placed at the pinnacle of the literary hierarchy.[46] The midcentury's elevation of the poetic, in Warton and elsewhere, derived from poetry's allegedly fragile relation to a nation more and more drawn to novels, essays, and polite conversation. Older texts, whose customary modes of expression were understood to defy modern conversation, now embodied a frangible and lyrical negativity. But where did this literary language come from and why was it so difficult to access? The rejection of sociability paradoxically incarnated a wide-ranging investigation into the social origins of literary language. Consider Adam Ferguson's chapter ''Of the History of Literature,'' in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). ''The language of early ages,''

Ferguson observes, "is in one respect, simple and confined; in other, it is varied and free: it allows liberties, which, to the poet of after times, are denied."[47] The explanation for the peculiarly literary nature of earlier languages turns on the social constitution of language itself.

> In rude ages men are not separated by distinctions of rank or profession. They live in one manner, and speak one dialect. The bard is not to choose his expression among the singular accents of different conditions. He has not to guard his language from the peculiar errors of the mechanic, the peasant, the scholar, or the courtier, in order to find that elegant propriety, and just elevation, which is free from the vulgar of one class, the pedantic of the second, or the flippant of the third. The name of every object, and of every sentiment, is fixed; and if his conception has the dignity of nature, his expression will have a purity which does not depend on his choice. (174)

As we look back in time at older societies, we see that their simple mode of organization was united by concrete forms of expression. The language of simple societies has yet to divide and weaken itself into the various dialects and idioms of more associative structures of affiliation. The gap between signifier and signified is threadbare; a given linguistic unit emanates collective pathos and concentrated sublimity. Older poetry is hence the spontaneous material of daily life (as the case is often made not just on behalf of Ossian or the Hebrews but, with more lasting impact, on behalf of Shakespeare as well). In contrast, the privileged discourse of the moderns, "elegant propriety," attempts to forge linguistic homogeneity within a society that no longer produces that homogeneity itself. The diffuse and complex structure of modern societies etiolates their linguistic substance. Spontaneous language becomes less literary the more societies become diverse. The vernacular transforms along with the evolving career of the division of labor:

> When men become occupied on the subjects of policy, or commercial arts, they wish to be informed and instructed, as well as moved. They are interested by what was real in past transactions. They build on this foundation, the reflections and reasonings they apply to present affairs, and wish to receive information on the subjects of different pursuits, and of projects in which they begin to be engaged. The manners of men, the practice of ordinary life, and the form of society, furnish their subjects to the moral and political writer. Mere ingenuity, justness of sentiment and correct representation, though conceived in ordinary language, are understood to constitute literary merit, and by applying to reason more than to

the imagination and passions, meet with a reception that is due to the instruction they bring. (175)

Ferguson here makes two points that are at once combined and at potential odds with each other. The language of organic society is unmediated concreteness. The language of commercial society is mediated abstraction. Modernity has eroded the basis for literary achievement because it has structured a language that stretches across the division of labor and is perforce rational, detoxified of any rhetorical excess or semantic irrationality. As Ferguson describes the history of literature, a subtle yet important transformation of the meaning of literary language occurs. While in the earlier passage, literary language was the language of simplified and direct communication, here it is the language of diversion and rhetoricity, of all that is not "ordinary." Literary language, it turns out, is the ordinary language of older ages defamiliarized and rendered unordinary by modern social life. It is all that opposes itself to the daily interchange of commercial society.

But what is the status of older, more collective and "authentic" modes of language under the commercial regime? What is, in other words, the fate of "literature" in modernity? The discovery of a certain type of transfigured language secreted by older social formations is coincident with the midcentury's desire to curb the opening up of vernacular learning. While the earlier catholicity of polite "letters" depended upon a relatively confident relation to public reading, the midcentury's increasingly specified focus on "literature" derives from a new skepticism. Literature is now what is dramatically absent from public discourse and private reading. It is the name for a certain learning that has been lost. This rethinking of what public culture has done to the nation's learning is well captured by another midcentury periodical, the *Connoisseur* (1754). In an early number, the journal delivers a mock encomium to the death of "literature" at the hands of instrumental politeness. "When I consider the absurd taste for literature, that once prevailed among our persons of distinction," the essay ironically begins, "I cannot but applaud the reformation which has been since brought about in this article by the polite world."[48] The reformation consists, as is the now familiar complaint, in the substitution of sociability for study: "we, of this generation, are wiser than to suffer our youth of quality to lose their precious time in studying the *belles lettres*, while our only care is to

introduce them into the *beau-monde*'' (179). Whereas criticism once took *belles lettres* and the *beau monde* to be the same thing – or rather, understood its project to form the two in an interdependent and mutually defining circuit – criticism now takes society to be the death of literature. ''Some part of the polite world read indeed,'' the essay notes, ''but they are so wise as to read only for amusement; or at least only to improve themselves into the more modern and fashionable sciences'' (179). Modern habits of reading bring together the fallen public and the licentious private into a curious unit, collapsing sociable fashion into solitary amusement. Reading has become a kind of literate illiteracy, in which the program of politeness has so socialized literature that its constitutive autonomy is entirely lost:

> I have long observed, with infinite regret, the little care that is taken to supply persons of distinction with proper books for their instruction and amusement. It is no wonder that they should be so averse to study, when learning is rendered so disagreeable. Common creatures, indeed, as soon as they can spell, may be made to read a dull chapter in the Testament; after which, the whole duty of man, or some other useless good book, may be put into their hands; but these can never instruct a man of the world to say fine things to a lady, or to swear with a good grace. (179)

As the *Connoisseur* imagines a national culture given entirely to instrumental politeness, the question of the past's relation to the present becomes hauntingly clear. If the project was in Addison's day to refine the taste of the public and fashion for it a culture that would produce and reflect that taste, the project is now to save literary culture from a refinement that has transformed into mass culture, from a modernity that has so detached itself from the past that it erases its own canonical achievements. In the ironic vision of the *Connoisseur*, the culture of refinement strips away all ''learned'' and ''difficult'' resistance and substitutes in their place a ''polite circulating library'' that makes the entire cultural product serviceable to society.

> First then, as the musty volumes which contain Greek, Latin, and the sciences, since there is no genteel method of coming at the knowledge of them, I would banish them entirely from the polite world, and would have them chained down in university libraries, the only places where they can be useful or entertaining. Having thus cleared the shelves of this learned lumber, we shall have room to fill them more elegantly . . . Many of my books are entirely new and original; all the modern novels, and most of the

periodical papers fall so directly in with my plan, that they will be sure to find a place in my library. (180)

Addison's inaugural disentombment of learning is here redramatized as parody.[49] Learning flies back to the universities as useless knowledge while mass culture – modern novels and periodical papers – saturates the nation. In this parodic opening up of culture, "elegant" conversation is at one with its opposite, bad taste.

The quantitative spread of reading produces a qualitative decay in "learning." Another way of putting this, however, is that vernacular "learning," like "literature," emerges as a concept and problem, emerges as such, only at this point of acute crisis. Learning and its dissolution appear in tandem; fear of the one prompts a refurbishment of the other. When, for example, Oliver Goldsmith declares, in *New Fashions in Learning* (1761), that "I know no country but this where readers of learning are sufficiently numerous to give every kind of literary excellence adequate encouragement" he quickly proceeds to discuss how the "encouragement" of unlearned readers actually debases cultural products:

> At present every rank of people become . . . pupils; the meanest mechanic has raised his mind to a desire for knowledge; and the scholar condescends to become his instructor.
>
> We now begin to see the reason why learning assumes an appearance so very different from what it wore some years ago and that instead of penetrating more deeply into some new disquisitions, it only becomes a comment upon the past; the effort is now made to please the multitude, since they may be properly considered as the dispensers of rewards. More pain is taken to bring science down to their capacities, than to raise it beyond its present standard, and his talents are now more useful to society and himself, who can communicate what he knows, than his who endeavours to know more than he can communicate.[50]

"Encouragement" comes to mean demand, the zero degree of consumption that Goldsmith imagines to be holding back the advancement in learning. The reading public may encourage "literary excellence," since "learned readers" are numerous, but, for the same reason, the reading habits of the multitude lower cultural production to the level of the marketplace. Literary excellence is inextricably bound up with literary malaise.

What are we to make of this double movement, in which the emergence of a literati coincides with a wariness of the very institutions of reading themselves? One answer is that the category

of "literature" has sufficiently detached itself from "romance," "the novel" and the like in order for it to require a custodial cadre of critics. This cadre is itself internally divided, as we shall see in following chapters. On the one hand, the intellectual culture of the universities re-emerges as the medium to sustain literary knowledge and value, with the important transformation now being that classical hermeneutics and philology have been displaced onto English texts. On the other hand, a new variety of periodical criticism attempts to correct the taste of its public by reinstalling learning in the imaginary center of public culture. In the first case, the critique of the public sphere is undertaken by an invigorated "scholarly" community, which forswears the mass circulated organs of the press for the more restricted institution of the learned essay and which sheds its exclusively Greco-Roman focus for the difficult works of England's past. In the second, the public's own medium attempts to self-correct the dissolution of reading.

Out of this tension between the restricted culture of the academy and the public sphere of journalism emerged a revised narrative of literary history in which modernity breaks from its past in a dizzying career of descent. The idea of literary progress gives way to the idea of literary decline.[51] The English ancients loom out of the past to condemn the English moderns. In perhaps the midcentury's most popular and influential account of cultural degeneration, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Time* (1757), John Brown imagines England's "national capacity" eroded by corrupt literature and dissolute reading:

> A knowledge of books, a taste in arts, a proficiency in science, was formerly regarded as a proper qualification in a man of fashion. The annals of our country have transmitted to us the name and memory of men, as eminent in learning and taste, as in rank and fortune. It will not I presume, be regarded as any kind of satire on the present age, to say, that among the higher ranks this spirit is generally vanished. *Reading* is now sunk at best into a morning's *amusement*; till the important hour of dress comes on. Books are no longer regarded as the repository of taste and knowledge; but rather are laid hold of, as a gentle relaxation from the tedious round of pleasure. But what kind of reading must *that* be which can attract or entertain beyond the languid morning-spirit of modern effeminacy? Any, indeed, that can but prevent the unsupportable toil of *thinking*, that may serve as a preparatory *whet* of *indolence*, to the approaching pleasure of the day. Thus it comes to pass that weekly essays, amatory plays and novels, political pamphlets, and books that revile religion; together with a general *hash* of

these, served up in some monthly *mess* of *dullness*, are the meagre *literary diet* of town and country.[52]

This colorful jeremiad was only part of a wide-ranging catalogue of "the false delicacy and effeminacy of present manners" (40), but it illuminates the extent to which the new narrative of literary decline partook of a larger rethinking of international trade, domestic commerce, and, not least, the over publication and sale of books. For Brown, "the exorbitant trade and wealth of England sufficiently account for its present effeminacy" (81). The situation is dire: "we are rolling to the brink of a precipice that must destroy us" (11). It was the duty of the professional critics, according to Brown and others, to correct effeminate reading habits and, thus, to save the character of England; "if, in any nation, the number of these superior minds be daily decreasing, from the growing manners of the times; what can a nation so circumstanced have more to fear, than that in another age, a general cloud of ignorance may overshadow it" (41).

Brown's worry that the number of "superior minds" was being dissolved by the relaxed manners of modern England was his own peculiar way of demanding that experts stop "the decline we are gliding down to our ruin" (74). But the desire for expertise, in *An Estimate* and elsewhere, foundered on a core ambivalence toward specialists removed from the idioms of the public. This ambivalence was expressed preeminently in the specter of the "pedant," caught in the windowless cell of his research and unable to speak with the commonality. I shall return to this specter in the next chapter; I would note here, however, that even the critics who wrote the new literary history of descent viewed the rise of their own profession as the sign of literary infirmity. The study of older works took off when such classics could no longer be produced anew. Warton's words are succinct: "In no polished nation after criticism has been much studied, and the rules of writing established, has any very extraordinary work ever appeared."[53] Like Warton, Goldsmith saw criticism as the end point of "our degeneracy in literature"; in his version of the story, criticism alone could redeem literary culture: "The manner of being useful on the subject would be to point out the symptoms, to investigate the causes, and direct to the remedies of the approaching decay. This is a subject hitherto unattempted in criticism, perhaps it is the only subject in which criticism can be

useful.''[54] The evaluation of the causes of decline, Goldsmith and Warton seem to suggest, forever cleaves the past from the present, production from consumption. We may understand why we can no longer write like our ancestors, but our knowledge is purchased with distance from their achievement.

The decline from literature to criticism, from great works to studies of those works, was also a decline from poetry to prose. The juxtaposing of poetry and prose became an easy way of lamenting the etiolated language of commerce, the dispersion of learning, and the modern institutions of literacy. The literary language of ancient society was necessarily poetic just as much as the didactic writing of modern commerce is necessarily prosaic. According to Ferguson's speculative ''History of Literature'', it is this iron law of descent – from poetry to prose – that puts in place the untranscendable figures of the literary canon: ''whatever may be the early disposition of mankind to poetry . . . it is a remarkable fact, that not only in countries where every vein of composition was original, and was opened in the order of natural succession; but even at Rome, and in modern Europe, where the learned began early to practice on foreign models, we have poets of every nation, who are perused with pleasure, while the prose writers of the same ages are neglected'' (174–175). Just who are these national poets? ''We had in England, not only Chaucer and Spenser, but Shakespeare and Milton'' (175).

Within prosaic society this canon of older poets takes on a recondite aura, as their language is situated aslant common discourse. Modern readers are averse to the linguistic difficulty and allusive density of ''classic'' texts. The argument that the world of modern prose was eclipsing the world of antique verse fed into the period's frequent lament that the reading audience for older authors was vanishing. Some of the most insistent paeans to the English canon were mounted on behalf of an avowedly unpopular culture, a culture that was both written in English and resistant to the taste of the multitude. Consider again the striking summation to Joseph Warton's *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (1756): ''Our English Poets may, I think, be disposed in four different classes and degrees. In the first class I would place, first, our only three sublime and pathetic poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton.''[55] Warton aligns older writers into a canonical trinity as a way to measure what he takes to be the rather modest achievement of Pope. The limpid confidence of this declaration leads into a broad condemnation of

the poetry and reading habits of the modern age. In contrast to older poets of the first class, writers of what Warton calls "PURE POETRY" (iv), Pope was too satirical and "moral," too close to the rhythms of polite society, and the taste of the public: "a clear head and acute understanding are not sufficient, alone, to make a poet; . . . the most solid observations on human life, expressed with the utmost elegance and brevity, are MORALITY and not POETRY" (iv–v). Modern poetry serves an audience that prefers only to read about itself. Older English poetry is, by comparison, bereft of an audience. Yet this bereavement turns out to disclose the frangible condition of elite culture. "For one person who can adequately relish, and enjoy, a work of imagination, twenty are to be found who can taste and judge of observations on familiar life, and the manners of the age" (v). The lament that readers of Pope or of novels had forsworn older poetry was thus rather calculated; it authenticated the difficult and rarefied value of the past.

The present understands itself in terms of a past from which it has broken and toward which it casts a longing glance. Modernity splits into a golden age of poetry and a commercial age of prose. The battle between the ancients and the moderns, now staged within English culture itself, was settled once more on the side of the ancients. To put it this way, however, is simply to suggest some of the points of debate and friction that impelled the reception of the canonical trinity during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The following chapters explore the terms in which the canon was described and the process of its formation.