

CHAPTER 1

Public Culture and Academic Culture

Despite significant changes since midcentury in American critical culture (the culture that flows from the serious review of books, ideas, and the arts), it continues to attract only a small minority of Americans, a circumstance widely considered inevitable and thus acceptable. However productive this culture has been, American society has not made significant progress toward realizing either Emerson's hope, expressed in "The American Scholar," that its "delegated intellects" might become "Man Thinking" or John Dewey's goal of an American cultural democracy. In both visions, critical culture becomes part of the processes of everyday life, and the average citizen, by cultivating imaginative and critical skills, takes an active part in discussions of ideas and the arts.

Literacy rates indicate that the United States continues to fall short of this ideal. Based on a series of studies done during the 1970s and 1980s, Stedman and Kaestle estimate that approximately 20 percent of the population, some 35 million people, have "serious difficulty" performing common reading tasks, and an additional 10 percent "are probably marginal in their functional-literacy skills."¹ These figures show no significant divergence from others accumulated since the 1940s. During this period, illiteracy has discouraged a large portion of the population from engaging in the public discussion of arts and ideas, despite their other competencies. According to the 2002 National Endowment for the Arts *Reading at Risk* report, nearly half of Americans eighteen years of age or older, 43.4 percent in 2002 (up from 39.1 percent in 1992), did not choose to read books of any kind. Of those who read books, the survey showed that the percentage of adult Americans reading literature dropped sharply since 1982. In that year, 56.9 percent read literature, compared to 46.7 percent in 2002, a decline that represented a loss of some 20 million potential readers. The survey established that the rate of decline in literary reading was accelerating, that women read more literature than men, and that literary reading by both groups was sharply declining, as was the rate of literary reading among all educational levels, age-groups, whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. The steepest decline in literary reading was among the youngest age-groups. The rate of decline for the youngest adults (18–24) was 55 percent

greater than that of the total adult population (–28 percent vs. –18 percent); thus, “over the past twenty years young adults (18–34) have declined from being those mostly likely to read literature to those least likely (with the exception of those age 65 and above).” As NEA chairman Dana Gioia observed, the survey “presents a detailed assessment for the decline of reading’s role in the nation’s culture.”² This decline seems to have been confirmed by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, given in 2003 by the Department of Education, which found that only 31 percent of college graduates scored at a proficient level when asked to read lengthy, complex English texts and draw complicated inferences. More recent studies by the NEA—*To Read or Not To Read* (2007) and *Reading on the Rise* (2009)—offer a slightly more optimistic picture. Neither study suggests a sea change in the reading (or lack of reading) habits of Americans, but both studies show that the rate of decline has ebbed in some areas and even turned into gains in other areas. In particular, rates of reading among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics increased, and, most important, reading rates among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds improved dramatically from a 20 percent decline in 2002 to a 21 percent increase in 2009. In his accompanying summary report, Gioia attributes at least some of this improvement to the aggressive high school literary initiatives led by his agency. As yet, it is too early to tell whether the increasing sales of electronic book readers, such as Amazon’s Kindle, Sony’s Reader, or Barnes & Noble’s Nook, will boost the reading rates of the general population.

Circulation figures for selected reviews and magazines of literary and political opinion underscore the relatively small number of highly literate readers from 1950 to 2005, notwithstanding minimal gains in the proportion of this readership to a total population that nearly doubled from 151 million to nearly 300 million. During that time span, circulation for the *Atlantic Monthly* went from 176,068 to 395,620; for *Commentary*, from 19,553 to 35,000; for *Esquire*, from 784,665 to 708,774; for *Harper’s*, from 159,357 to 226,425; for the *Nation*, from 35,106 to 188,982; for the *New Republic*, from 32,680 to 65,115 combined; for the *New York Times Book Review*, from 1,116,944 to 1,682,208; for the *New Yorker*, from 332,324 to 1,051,919; and for *Poetry*, from 4,000 to 10,000.³ The demise of several important periodicals, considered alongside others founded since 1950, reinforced this overall pattern. Lost were the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (675,105 in 1950), the *Saturday Review* (100,823 in 1950), and an avant-garde literary culture that had thrived through the teens and twenties and continued into midcentury in the pages of little magazines such as the *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, the *Sewanee Review*, *Poetry*, and *Evergreen*

Review. Most of these little magazines survive and have been joined by numerous literary reviews since the 1960s that have insured a steady stream of excellent, culturally resonant writing whose effects have nonetheless been less dramatic than those of their modernist predecessors. This said, it is noteworthy that the past several years have witnessed the demise of four distinguished publications: *Grand Street*, *Lingua Franca*, *Partisan Review*, and the *Public Interest*. Current literary reviews include the *American Poetry Review* (13,500 combined), *Granta* (96,000—including Britain and the United States), the *Hudson Review* (4,700), the *Paris Review* (10,000), *Ploughshares* (6,000), and the *Threepenny Review* (10,000 combined). Several dozen strictly academic journals and a host of other publications founded after 1950, especially online sites, have added new readers and vitality to critical culture. A selected list includes the *Baffler* (30,000), *Boston Review* (10,000 combined), *Dissent* (7,400), *First Things* (32,000), the *London Review of Books* (42,721—including Britain and the United States), *Monthly Review* (5,321), *Mother Jones* (240,764), *National Review* (160,896), the *New Criterion* (8,000 combined), the *New York Review of Books* (128,432), *Raritan* (3500 combined), *Reason* (40,550), *Salmagundi* (5100), *Tikkun* (20,000 combined), the *Times Literary Supplement* (35,204—including Britain and the United States), *Utne Reader* (225,540), *Vanity Fair* (1,208,644), the *Village Voice* (253,961 combined), and the *Weekly Standard* (80,395). In 2000, however, only *Vanity Fair* was among the top hundred by circulation in the United States, where total magazine circulation numbered nearly 250 million. Today, the vast majority of literate Americans continue to read other things, although, as mentioned, numerous new online sites, such as *Slate*, *Salon*, *ALDaily*, and *n+1*, have attracted large numbers of readers and browsers who may not have otherwise become as deeply involved with ideas and the arts.

As for book readers, the increasing dominance of the market by best sellers and best-selling authors—between 1986 and 1996, sixty-three of the one hundred best-selling titles were written by only six writers⁴—suggests that reading has embraced a narrowing range of books despite a doubling of per capita books purchased in 2005 (ten) compared to 1955.⁵ A study published in 1949 directed by the Social Science Research Council revealed that these patterns established themselves as early as the immediate post–World War II era. Among the twenty top best-selling authors in fiction in 1947, for example, nineteen had been on a previous list. With the exception of Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck, all of the authors were producing undistinguished, popular fare for a broad audience.⁶ This trend has no doubt been encouraged by the diminish-

ing amount of fiction published by mass circulation magazines; recently, for instance, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, and *Esquire* have scaled back. Also diminished has been the number of books under review by competent critics writing for a general educated audience. At a time when struggling American newspapers are slashing coverage of the arts in general—according to a study conducted by the National Arts Journalism Project at Columbia University, from 1998 to 2003 the space given to cultural coverage in major American papers dropped roughly 25 percent⁷—newspapers continue to cut back on book reviewing in order to cut costs. The *New York Times Book Review*, for instance, averages thirty-four reviews per issue today compared to fifty per issue in 1950.⁸ The *Boston Globe*, continuing a national trend, reduced the size of its book review section, and in 2008, the Sunday *Los Angeles Times Book Review* folded. Although online Web sites have compensated for some of these losses, readers are finding fewer and fewer reviews that resist what Emerson in his notebooks called the “mush of concession” with sharp and eccentric discriminations between the achieved and the mediocre.⁹ Another indication that a smaller proportion of readers have access to critically acclaimed books is the steady decline of book clubs, which once provided good books to a large general readership. At its peak before the dominance of the chain stores, the Book-of-the-Month Club sold eleven million books a year, and a major selection could attract upwards of a million readers.¹⁰ Slightly smaller was the Literary Guild, followed by many more specialized clubs. These clubs provided books to vast numbers of readers without access to bookstores; moreover, committees of critics made the club selections with an eye toward quality as well as profitability. Today, Oprah’s Book Club offers guidance and suggestions to readers beleaguered by a marketplace that presents them with a bewildering array of books through publicity and advertising machines that make it difficult to know what is really good. Oprah provides a service that others have not provided for some time, and thus she attempts to fill a void left by the decline of the older clubs and the blunting of critical conversation as a whole.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the critical culture of the United States since midcentury has been that many critics no longer assume that such a culture exists, with some claiming that it never did. A plausible case can be made that until fifty years ago, educated citizens could turn to certain publications, intellectuals, and institutions and find there a public discussion of arts and ideas (albeit limited, in ways I will enumerate), but the consensus today is that, for better or worse, no such broad-based elevated and respected discourse exists. Because of diversification and segmentation, a smaller proportion of

the overall public reads the same publications and critics and thus participates in a common dialogue. The very notion of a “general public” served by a coherent critical culture has been described as “the silhouette of a phantom” by the critic Jacques Derrida, an allusion to Walter Lippmann’s famous characterization in *The Phantom Public* (1925).¹¹ Historians and critics attempting to explain the dispersal and decline of critical culture generally cite as reasons the rise of the academy, changes in the culture at large, and changes in the market.

The Rise of the Academy

In a memorable phrase from “A Critic’s Job of Work,” the redoubtable mid-century critic R. P. Blackmur once referred to criticism as “the formal discourse of an amateur.” For many readers today, such a description will seem quaint, for we are separated from Blackmur by seventy-five years during which many critics and much of the critical discourse they produced were absorbed into the academy, where the process of professionalization and specialization has taken place nearly unabated. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, between the years 1960 and 1990, the number of colleges and universities increased from 2,000 to 3,595, enrollment went from 3.5 million to 15 million, the number of doctoral degrees granted increased from 10,000 to over 38,000, and faculty numbers jumped from approximately 281,000 to more than 987,000.¹² These decades also saw a dramatic increase in the number of scholarly journals and books published by academic presses. In part motivated by efforts to close a perceived “technology gap” after the Soviet Union shocked the United States with the successful Sputnik flight in 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which greatly increased government involvement in higher education. Between 1960 and 1990, federal aid to students rose from \$5.1 to \$11.2 billion, and research and development funds increased from \$2 billion to \$12 billion. The demographics of American college students also changed considerably between the years 1960 and 1990, as the proportion of women increased from 37 percent to 51 percent and that of minorities from 12 to 28 percent.¹³ The greatest growth occurred in the new system of community colleges, which enrolled 400,000 students in 1960 compared to 6.5 million in 1990.¹⁴ Today, nearly half of all Americans have had at least some higher education, and nearly a quarter hold a degree. According to the Department of Education, the rate of college enrollment immediately after high school completion increased from 49 percent in 1972 to 67 percent by 1997 but has since fluctuated between 62 and 69 percent. According to education secretary Arne

Duncan, the United States now ranks tenth in the world in the rate of college completion for twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds. “A generation ago,” he asserts, “we were first in the world, but we’re falling behind. The global achievement gap is growing.”¹⁵

These developments have had several direct effects on critics and criticism. Beginning in the 1950s, when many leading critics took academic posts, the primary site from which critical culture emanated shifted from an urban and broadly public one, often connected to communities of writers and artists, to an institutional environment with particular affiliations, practices, and protocols. For academic critics coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, the model was no longer the public one of Emerson, Fuller, DuBois, or Dewey; the cosmopolitan, engaged criticism of the “Young Americans” Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, or Lewis Mumford; or that of the New York Intellectuals, who so powerfully shaped the public discussion of literature, culture, and politics from the 1940s through the 1960s. Instead, the ideal became theoretically informed criticism produced by professionals, many of whom were politically committed yet relatively detached from ongoing political movements, parties, or public debates. To be sure, much of this criticism was shaped, to varying degrees, by the transformative social movements of the period of the civil rights movement, the racial and ethnic nationalist and internationalist movements, the antiwar movement, the women’s movement, the environmental movement, and the gay rights movement. But the tendency was to retreat from the broader audience of educated readers that had previously sustained a semiacademic (and sometimes antiacademic) public critical culture. These developments changed the language of criticism, which on the whole became more self-reflexive, specialized, and obscure. Freed from the pressures of immediate political exigency, critics developed complex, sophisticated techniques for investigating the often tacit relationship between literature and power, language and ideology—offering new perspectives on what Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* once famously called “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.” Within the academy, criticism entered an exhilarating period during which the New Criticism, which had dominated during the 1950s and 1960s, gave way in the 1970s to various theories of interpretation that vied for supremacy: structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, New Historicism, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. Similar influences arose within the other humanities disciplines, particularly history and art history.

The results have changed critical culture in several ways. First, the literary and cultural traditions of previously neglected groups were given unprecedented attention, so that literary and artistic canons were expanded to include works by women, gays and lesbians, members of ethnic and racial minorities, and the working class. Anthologies, textbooks, and the range of books published all reflected this dramatic new interest in previously excluded authors and experiences. Second, the notion that literature and art should be free from political considerations was uniformly challenged. They were understood instead to have a close but complex relation to ideology and networks of social power. Third, questions of artistry, craft, taste, and value either gave way to inquiries into ideology or, in some cases, were considered to be essentially the preferences of elites and thus mechanisms of power and hierarchy. Instead of cultivating sensibilities and making value judgments, academic critics were intent on challenging the priority of mainstream over marginal cultural traditions, canonical over noncanonical texts, and highbrow over popular culture. Produced within an ideological ethos of multiculturalism, egalitarianism, anticapitalism, feminism, and a general skepticism of authority, academic critics replaced the New York Intellectuals' mandarinism of the streets, as it were, with the populism of the pedagogue. Gone was the widespread midcentury disdain for what many intellectuals had termed "mass culture" or what the Frankfurt critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called the "culture industry." Beginning in the 1960s, academic critics greatly expanded what counted as literature and culture worth taking seriously. Thus, a democratization of outlook accompanied the academic critics' narrowing conception of their audience.

However one weighs the consequences of criticism's specialized and ideological turn, changes in higher education by the early twenty-first century had undermined whatever promise of far-reaching influence academic affiliation had earlier held. Ironically, even though specialization made literary studies look more like the natural and social sciences and despite the critics' embrace of popular culture, the humanities (and the liberal arts generally) have continued to lose ground, and both undergraduate and graduate students. Currently, the most popular undergraduate major is business, which accounts for 20 percent of all degrees granted.¹⁶ Louis Menand has noted that "there are almost twice as many undergraduate degrees conferred every year in a field known as 'protective services'—largely concerned with training social workers—as there are in all foreign languages and literatures combined."¹⁷ Between 1966 and 1993, the percentage of bachelor's degrees granted in the humanities shrank

from 20.7 to 12.7, the proportion of doctoral degrees from 13.8 to 9.1.¹⁸ A concomitant decline in English majors has long caused concern in that discipline, with a fall from 7.6 percent of all college majors in 1970 to 4.2 percent in 1997, a drop in absolute numbers from 64,342 to 49,345.¹⁹ The latter development is one of the reasons for the shrinking market for literary scholars and for the diminished importance of literature for a generation reared on other media and trained in other skills.

No doubt, students' anxiety about job prospects in an economy increasingly ambivalent about the value of a humanities education has contributed mightily to this trend. For some critics, the shrinking popularity and authority of the humanities is to be attributed at least in part to the rise of theory and specialization in the academy, which discourages the development of reading skills necessary to a vital critical culture. What has been lost is what F. R. Leavis termed "a training of intelligence that is at the same time a training of sensibility. . . . I mean the training of perception, judgment and analytic skill."²⁰ Instead of learning alertness to the subtle forms and devices that distinguish a work of art from a social document, a generation of students and citizens has dispensed with aesthetic experience in favor of the hunt for a text's ideological propositions, conflicts, contradictions, and deficiencies. The goal has become "interrogating" the text rather than being challenged by it, mastering it through superior political awareness rather than surrendering temporarily to the author's world. The poet Billy Collins, for instance, writes of his students that "all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it. / They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means."²¹ They do this rather than submit to the pleasures and insights that arise when literal reality is suspended in favor of an imaginative virtual reality that paradoxically illuminates it. "What we fear," observes the literary critic Denis Donoghue, "is that our students are losing the ability to read, or giving up that ability in favor of an easier one, the capacity of being spontaneously righteous, indignant, or otherwise exasperated."²²

Although indifference to the insights and pleasures of verbal culture undeniably limits the scope of firsthand perception and thus limits critical culture in general, it is difficult to determine just how extensive the damage has been, especially if we consider that increased ideological sensitivity, regardless of how unimaginative or unliterary, has contributed to students' and thus to the public's awareness of the cultures and experiences of formerly neglected groups. Advocates of an ideological approach to literature and the arts argue that imaginative identification with the "other" is precisely what is required of

readers and audiences and that, without developed critical awareness of the social dynamics that both surround and inhere in art, the most cultivated sensibility will fail to contribute to the needs of an egalitarian society. Furthermore, the multiplicity and decentralization characteristic of American higher education have meant that a university-centered literary scene has permitted a greater geographic diffusion of literary culture than was the case when “intellectual” was synonymous with “New York.”

This debate extends to the question of the appropriate modality of cultural authority, for there are those who believe that the public is best served by the intellectual who consistently addresses his or her writing to a broad, educated audience, while others believe that the public is best served by the academic whose expertise is manifested within a narrower (though nonetheless public), professional and institutional setting. If democracy is fully realized, as Dewey believed, “when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving [public] communication,”²³ the public will need both public intellectuals and specialists. During the first half of the twentieth century, the American public benefited from a large and impressive corps of the former. Until the 1960s, leading critics and public intellectuals rarely held PhDs, were usually unaffiliated or intermittently affiliated with the university, and published in the commercial press. These figures included James Baldwin, Daniel Bell, Louis Brandeis, Randolph Bourne, William Buckley, Rachel Carson, Malcolm Cowley, Herbert Croly, Max Eastman, T. S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, Waldo Frank, Betty Friedan, Paul Goodman, Clement Greenberg, Elizabeth Hardwick, Michael Harrington, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Irving Howe, Jane Jacobs, C. L. R. James, Randall Jarrell, Alfred Kazin, Irving Kristol, Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, H. L. Mencken, Lewis Mumford, Ralph Nader, William Phillips, Norman Podhoretz, Philip Rahv, Ayn Rand, Harold Rosenberg, Gilbert Seldes, Susan Sontag, Edmund Wilson, and Tom Wolfe. Even those with doctorates and professorships often appealed to a nonacademic audience through the commercial press, including Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, W. E. B. DuBois, Felix Frankfurter, John Kenneth Galbraith, Richard Hofstadter, William James, C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Meyer Schapiro, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Lionel Trilling, and Thorstein Veblen, to name a few. Since the 1960s, some nonacademics gained prominence as public intellectuals, but there have been fewer of them, suggesting that the freelance or journalist public intellectual is on the wane. A selective list of these figures includes Renata Adler, William Bennett, David Brooks, Gregg Easterbrook, David Halberstam, Christopher Hitchens, Pauline Kael, Hilton Kramer, Anthony Lewis, Charles

Murray, Katha Pollitt, Andrew Sullivan, Gore Vidal, Leon Wieseltier, and George Will. A considerable number of academically trained and affiliated intellectuals have attempted to reach a wider public through books and articles with a commercial appeal. A partial list includes Robert Alter, Saul Bellow, Allan Bloom, Harold Bloom, Robert Bork, Noam Chomsky, Frederick Crews, Morris Dickstein, E. L. Doctorow, Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Frank, Milton Friedman, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Doris Kearns Goodwin, Gertrude Himmelfarb, June Jordan, Henry Kissinger, Christopher Lasch, Louis Menand, Toni Morrison, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Martha Nussbaum, Cynthia Ozick, Camille Paglia, Richard Posner, Richard Rorty, Edward Said, Elaine Showalter, George Steiner, Cornel West, Patricia Williams, Garry Wills, and James Wood.

Despite their significant contributions, these public intellectuals have not comprised a corps of independent intellectuals engaged in mutual public conversation. Ironically, the egalitarian and often subversive intent of much of the literary and cultural criticism that has emanated from the universities since the 1960s has been largely contained within academic culture. Despite admirable forays into broader sectors of the public sphere, and despite frequent appeals to transgress boundaries in general, most academics continue to be strongly encouraged by their circumstances to remain ensconced within their institutional networks. When academics are invited by the media to address a wider public, their time is severely curtailed, and the nature of their discourse is altered to enhance its entertainment value. When an academic addresses the public today, he or she usually does so as a “rent-an-intellectual.” The rates are daily, and they are low. By and large, the public conversation is dominated by ubiquitous media and political “pundits,” whose range of opinion and depth of thought are not sufficient to sustain a vital critical culture. The so-called culture wars of the 1980s and the post-9/11 public dialogue are cases in point.

The Larger Public Culture

The rise of the academy was not the only factor refashioning American critical culture in the middle and late twentieth century. Suburbanization, shifts in cultural values, technological change, alternative leisure activities, and increased corporate cultural prowess have all contributed substantially to what Michael Kammen has usefully termed “the decline of cultural authority and the rise of cultural power.”²⁴

Suburbanization was not only a centrifugal geographical force from the 1950s onward; along with academicization, it also led to intellectual decentral-

ization. Abandoned urban neighborhoods meant bereft cultural communities as big-city newspapers declined, theaters and cultural organizations went under, and independent bookstores began closing their doors. Despite the rise of New Age, left-wing, feminist, and children's bookstores beginning in the late 1960s, cities eventually saw many of their established independent bookstores disappear. The typical independent bookstore owner either owned his own building or paid low rent to keep down the overhead; moreover, easy access was rarely a problem, because in the city, stores did not have to rely on street traffic and a prominent location. Suburbanization, with its concentration of retail stores in the shopping mall, changed all that. Mall rents were prohibitively high, and this made it nearly impossible for independent bookstores to sustain a viable inventory. Thus, in the 1990s alone, the number of independent bookstores declined from 5,400 to 3,200.²⁵ Beginning in the 1970s, the first wave of chain stores—Waldenbooks and B. Dalton—took over the suburban bookselling market, only to be supplanted in the 1990s by the superstore chains Barnes & Noble and Borders, which until recently accounted for over 50 percent of all retail books sold. Despite the efforts of these stores to bring together readers and authors, as well as readers with one another, they have not been able to reproduce some important elements of the critical culture of former times—the sense of community, the shared readerly passions, and the bookseller's expertise.

It is no coincidence that Sal Paradise, the narrator of the signature Beat novel *On the Road* (1957), left town at the same time and on the same road as the white American middle class. Paradise just kept driving. The Beats and their progeny within the counterculture represented a serious challenge to the established critical culture of the 1950s and to the idea of a homogeneous public sphere. This critical culture had been shaped by an array of dissident, independent intellectuals, many of whom were part of the New York intellectual milieu, who in the 1930s and 1940s had stood for a union of radical politics and avant-garde art (namely, literary modernism and abstract expressionism), but who were seen by many within the younger generation as having traded in their dissidence for influence, security, and accommodation. *Partisan Review's* famous 1952 symposium "Our Country and Our Culture" has often been cited as illustrative of this shift toward the political center—the "vital center," in the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—for among the two dozen respondents to four queries about the role of the writer and intellectual in America, none highlighted the threats to democracy posed by McCarthyism, the abuses of global corporate or military power, or domestic race relations. Nearly all of the

respondents commented on the threats to serious culture posed by the proliferation of “mass” culture, either marketed straightforwardly as “kitsch,” to use the term made famous by Clement Greenberg, or dressed up in high-culture disguise as “middlebrow.” Only Irving Howe, Norman Mailer, C. Wright Mills, and Philip Rahv warned of the waning of dissent among America’s increasingly respectable intellectual elite. If there were any doubts about the new status of the New York public intellectuals, they were dispelled in 1956 when *Time* magazine placed Jacques Barzun on its June 11 cover for a story entitled “Par-nassus—Coast to Coast,” in which it was observed that the “Man of Protest has to some extent given way to the Man of Affirmation.” Affirmation may be too strong a word, but certainly the shift from noncooperation to participation was palpable, in no small part because of the successful integration of avant-garde art and literature into key portions of the culture at large. The New York Intellectuals had developed a fruitful relationship with an important sector of the public in which appreciation for craft, quality, and nuance prevailed (an achievement not since duplicated), and they had helped open American culture to new forms, voices, and perspectives despite the fact that most Americans continued to be bewildered by much modern art and literature. But their efforts were not sufficiently reflective of America’s cultural variety, perhaps especially where the contributions of women and minorities were concerned, and thus the New Yorkers were increasingly seen as lacking the popular, multi-cultural, and international scope demanded by the new generation.

With their rejection of the authority of the New York critical world, the Beats and then the counterculture ushered in a new cultural era—first dubbed “postmodern” by the New York Intellectuals—in which established (and newly established) hierarchies, styles, and priorities of cultural criticism gave way to skepticism toward highbrow culture, redemptive modernism, established standards of taste, and, in many cases, taste itself. By doing away with distinctions between high and low, avant-garde and conventional, and artistic and commercial, both artists and critics encouraged vital new cultural hybrids. Pop artists and celebrities brought the visual arts down from the rarified heights of abstract expressionism by making elements of mass and popular culture central to their art. In the visual arts, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Roy Lichtenstein led the way. Authors such as Kathy Acker, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, and Robert Coover deliberately rejected what they regarded as somber, portentous modernism, in favor of the interplay of signs and texts that derived from all levels and walks of life, including fairy tales, advertisements, TV shows, comics, and the movies. In

dance, ballet—itself transformed by George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Agnes de Mille—gave ground to modern and jazz through the contributions of extraordinary choreographers such as Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp, and Merce Cunningham. Popular music experienced an era of unprecedented creativity and range, as previously marginalized musical traditions such as the blues, rock and roll, folk, bluegrass, and country, now in the hands of dozens of highly talented artists and producers, took over the radio waves and utterly transformed the musical tastes of millions. The Hollywood film industry refashioned itself by giving new power to independent directors, including Robert Altman, Peter Bogdanovitch, Stanley Kubrick, and the so-called movie brats Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg. Even television responded to the changing culture, with controversial new programming like *All in the Family*. In each of these arts, a corps of critics helped to fend off the inevitable uniformity and standardization, perennial problems in mass culture, and contributed to change by encouraging audiences to appreciate innovation and to demand and expect more of it.

What was unique about these changes in the cultural climate was that they were tied to dramatic technological developments that brought immediate access and more choices (within a limited range) to the vast majority of Americans. Television, of course, led the way. By the 1970s, the average amount of viewing time per day had reached four and a half hours, a number that has remained constant ever since.²⁶ The options made available by television—and thus its appeal—further increased with the widespread use of convenient remote control devices, cable, satellite transmission, the VCR, video games, and, more recently, the DVD. MTV forever changed the look and sound of the small screen. Changes in film technology were less dramatic but certainly consequential, including sophisticated sound systems and extraordinary advances in computer-generated special effects. Multiplex theater complexes replaced single-screen venues, providing a larger portion of the population with easier access to more films, although, again, within a range that excluded a large number of innovative, experimental, and foreign films. Technological change in recorded music, from the LP to the cassette to the CD, significantly improved sound quality and durability. Finally, the computer and Internet have led to an array of new cultural practices that involve some older ones (creating hypertext; screening films; downloading music, newspapers, magazines, and books) and some new ones (e-mailing, online chat rooms, blogging, texting, twittering, and so on).

These technological changes have generated much debate. So far as their effects on critical culture, they have been both large and small, depending on one's perspective. Although a Harris poll conducted as recently as 1998 identified reading as the single most popular leisure activity among Americans,²⁷ reading has nonetheless lost ground to its many alternatives in terms of frequency and importance in the lives of ordinary Americans.²⁸ It is unclear, though, whether this has had an adverse effect on the quality of critical culture, which has never relied on widespread participation in order to achieve high levels of accomplishment. Recent history has shown that to sustain a culture that produces, publishes, and discusses the very best fiction, poetry, and criticism, a community of ten to twenty thousand knowledgeable, critically discerning readers is sufficient. Despite the fears of post-World War II critics like Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg, the scope and popularity of mass culture alone have not diminished the creative output that is the foundation of a critical culture.

The degree to which ordinary Americans practice critical understanding and judgment is another question. It is quite clear that since the 1960s, any clearly discernible intellectual elite with significant taste-making authority has since given way to something else. Whether that something else has been increasing standardization and a more vulgar, controlled, and passive public has been a matter of dispute, although those advocating this view no longer prevail. Most scholars of popular and mass culture—the field now has a name, *cultural studies*—argue that consumers of mass culture enjoy a significant degree of choice and, beyond that, participate in shaping their experiences and the very forms, styles, and content of the cultural products they consume. Many of the same critics acknowledge the erosion of popular culture (culture generated by ordinary people) in the face of the ubiquity of mass culture (culture produced for vast numbers by anonymous but responsive corporate entities), but they stress that forms of popular culture still manage to play an important role in shaping mass culture. Indeed, many critics maintain that the critical culture has come to play a similar role, for its initially unpopular innovations and insights have been gradually absorbed into the wider culture and have given rise to changes in what Wallace Stevens in “A Postcard from the Volcano” termed “the look of things.” In this view, critical culture has not so much been destroyed or diminished as refashioned and redistributed; that is, mass culture has exposed vast numbers to an array of cultural art forms and practices and, in so doing, has empowered and equipped ordinary people to make their own choices about what to experience and how to respond to those ex-

periences. The critic William Phillips, echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, observed some seventy years ago in *Horizon* that “culturally what we have is a democratic free-for-all in which every individual, being as good as every other one, has the right to question any form of intellectual authority.” Michael Kammen adds, “For many Americans, that ‘free-market’ attitude toward cultural authority would persist right down to the present.”²⁹

After World War II, European and American artists and intellectuals alike were appalled at the vulgarity and conformity of American culture, with its Spam, bubble gum, Disneyland, Tupperware, and literature and arts that were less than world-class. By the 1980s, however, American culture had greatly expanded its appeal, in part by raising its standards and incorporating elements of style and technique from numerous and diverse sources, including high culture itself. Some discerning critics, such as James Agee, Leslie Fiedler, David Riesman, Gilbert Seldes, and Robert Warshow, noted these trends even earlier. For example, in his classic study of American society, *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman observed, “The speed with which the gradient of taste is being climbed has escaped many critics of the popular arts who fail to observe not only how good American movies, popular novels, and magazines frequently are but also how energetic and understanding are some of the comments of the amateur taste-exchangers who seem at first glance to be part of a very passive, uncreative audience.”³⁰ Riesman went on to cite the critical competence of aficionados of jazz, movies, and comic strips. Since the 1960s, similar claims have been made regarding a host of audience sectors, including informed, passionate, and opinionated enthusiasts of jazz, blues, alternative rock, spectator sports, wine, gardening, antique cars, film, and so on. In this view, the practices of critical culture have been widely distributed to encompass larger populations and their cultural interests. Critical culture, it might be said, has multiplied and now manifests itself as the more discriminating element within a range of American subcultures.

Some critics argue that this interaction of “high” and “low,” of “high” and “middlebrow,” or of popular and mass culture represents a process of leveling and amalgamation that renders the former categorical distinctions among taste levels unworkable. Whereas a movement like abstract expressionism was at one time thought to embody the purest, most sublime forms of high modernism, critics today are more apt to explore connections to mass culture, as, for instance, Robert Hughes does in his discussion of Marilyn Monroe and Willem de Kooning’s fondness for cigarette ads. The process of using styling to create and enhance desire among the masses intensified during the 1950s and

has proliferated ever since. What Robert Hughes aptly termed the “cataract of styling” that began in the 1950s, “fridges, toasters, Formica countertops, juicers, microwaves—gaudy, lush, avocado-colored and hot pink, chrome everything, and big,”³¹ continues to grow exponentially as dynamic retail, design, and packaging industries produce Michael Graves tea kettles for Target, modernist furniture for Ikea, and haute couture for the masses. This has had the effect of both equalizing and raising taste levels across the board. Advertising has contributed enormously to this process: today, the Gap cites Jack Kerouac in its ads, Levi’s cites Walt Whitman, and Microsoft cites Gandhi. We see a similar development if we look at the changing role of the museum in American society. Once the repository of traditional art for the elite, museums have opened their doors to hoi polloi since the 1960s with blockbuster exhibitions. Equally important, since the 1960s, they have actively transformed the market for art, buying up contemporary art objects at an extraordinary rate, thereby institutionalizing the avant-garde or, at least, significant sectors of it and perhaps suffocating it with its sometimes awkward embrace. What had once been art’s signature values of aloofness and defiance can now have the look of gratuitous, self-dramatizing posturing.

The mainstreaming of erstwhile controversial, countercultural values and styles has not gone unrecognized. Several recent popular sociological studies have stressed the humanizing and democratizing effects of this process. With titles like *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* and *Bobos in Paradise* (“bobos” are *bourgeois bohemians*), these books witness America’s cultural egalitarianism and widespread improvements in quality and taste. However, there is reason to be wary of such Panglossian diagnoses. It is one thing to argue that members of a new elite, empowered by education and high test scores and shaped by the values of the 1960s, have swept away the WASP establishment, with its rigid, puritanical culture, thereby bringing to American popular culture a new diversity, spontaneity, and engaging informality. This may indeed constitute a significant achievement. But it is not the equivalent of giving priority to the best that writers, artists, crafters, and critics produce for both the “high” and the popular arts. Nor is it the same as devoting significant social resources to creating a public eager for the best because they have valued it since childhood, when they attended schools that fueled an expectation of excellence. If some of the passion and appreciation for the exceptional in sports, let us say, were to be found elsewhere in our culture, we would perhaps have more cause for self-congratulation.

Market Forces

Indeed, the cultural improvements previously described bring with them serious problems. A half-dozen multinational corporations—whose size and influence have grown substantially during a decade of government-sanctioned mergers and acquisitions—now wield the power to produce, distribute, and promote culture in the United States. The entertainment sector in general is dominated by General Electric, parent company of the vast NBC radio, TV, and cable network; Disney, whose holdings include ABC and major interests in film, theme parks, magazines, music, newspapers, and sports; Westinghouse, owner of CBS and telephone, wireless, and satellite communications systems; and, largest of all, Time Warner, which controls AOL, the Turner Broadcasting System (CNN, TBS, TNT, and much more), large holdings in book and magazine publishing, home video, TV programming, and an array of music and motion picture and cable companies, not to mention its influence over the home computer through AOL. The situation is the same in publishing. Despite total book sales in 1998 of more than \$28 billion, the numbers go from large to small when we look at who controls the industry. Aside from the university presses, a dwindling number of independents, and an increasing number of struggling minor presses, trade publishing in America is controlled by seven media conglomerates. The largest is Time Warner (\$43 billion in sales),³² owner of the Book-of-the-Month Club and Time-Life Books. The second largest is Disney (\$32 billion), which owns Hyperion Books. Next is Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (\$24 billion), which owns Basic Books, Harper-Collins, and William Morrow. The German Bertelsmann (\$23 billion) owns Random House, which includes Ballantine (Del Rey, Fawcett, and Ivy), the Bantam Dell Group, Crown, Doubleday, the Knopf Group (Anchor, Everyman's Library, Pantheon, Schocken, Vintage), the Modern Library, Villard, and the Literary Guild. The CBS Corporation (\$14 billion; until recently, part of Viacom) owns Simon & Schuster, Scribner, the Free Press, and Pocket Books, among many others. The British Pearson PLC (\$7 billion) is owner of Dutton, Macmillan, Mentor, Penguin, Perigee, Plume, Prentice Hall, Putnam, Signet, and Viking. Finally, Holtzbrinck (\$2.3 billion) controls Farrar, Straus and Giroux; St. Martin's Press; Hill & Wang; and Henry Holt and Company. Major independents include Wiley, Rodale, Tyndale, W. W. Norton (\$100 million in 2001), Workman Publishing (\$25 million), Grove/Atlantic (\$13.5 million in 1999), Beacon (\$4.5 million in 1999), New Left Books (\$3.5 million in 1999), the

New Press (\$3.5 million in 1999), and the nonprofit Library of America (\$2 million in 1999). According to Andre Schiffrin, “Today the five largest conglomerates control approximately 80 percent of American book sales. In 1999 the top twenty publishers accounted for 93 percent of sales, and the ten largest had 75 percent of the revenues.”³³

Certainly, these conglomerates have produced stylish and engaging cultural products whose excellence has helped raise standards for consumers of mass culture. The view that the “culture industry” systematically suppresses innovation by selling the public recurrent and invariable forms or types and that its variety is merely “calculated mutation,” in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer,³⁴ is no longer credible. Nonetheless, the limited degree of innovation and extent of experimentation and the high level of cautious control over the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products all result from a highly competitive, market-driven cultural field in which the public’s participation, taste, and critical involvement are often discouraged and curtailed, in part because they lead to unpredictable results. Corporations crave predictability; that is why they go to such great lengths to shape the desires and needs of the public. The larger the conglomerate is, the more opportunities there are to fashion the market. In 2001, for example, Time Warner marshaled its resources for the release of the film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Before the release, Harry Potter books had sold nearly \$120 million worldwide. AOL users—who numbered approximately thirty-one million, half of all home Internet users—were led through numerous links to Harry Potter merchandise. Another Time Warner company, Moviefone, promoted and sold tickets. The company’s phalanx of magazines—more than 160 titles, including *Time*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated*—featured cover stories, ads, and contests. Warner Bros. Studio advertised on Time Warner cable systems, which entered some 20 percent of wired American homes; and the Turner Broadcasting System, which included four of the top ten cable networks, aired promotions. Warner Music Group produced the soundtrack and sold CDs and cassettes. Advertising sold the worldwide rights to promote the film, along with its sequel, to Coca-Cola for \$150 million. Online purchasers had their choice among Harry Potter toothbrushes, T-shirts, and much more.³⁵

In the face of such corporate strategies, what power does Walter Lippmann’s elusive “sovereign and omniscient citizen” of *The Phantom Public* have to actively shape his own culture? If market pressures, demands from investors, and capital-intensive, high-production cultural projects are shaping

the cultural experiences and tastes of ordinary citizens, what room is left for a critical culture that might afford them greater insight and satisfaction? The seeming variety of consumer choices available obscures the fresher sources of cultural innovation associated with a critical culture that remains invisible and mysterious for a majority and elitist to many. Paradoxically, corporate intervention and academic indifference combine to leave the public sphere misshapen by corporate influence and imbued with a deep suspicion of educated classes, who seem to be guardians of a remote and exclusive culture and who seem to discourage popular cultural and political participation. The only major means at the public's disposal for "participating" in the cultural conversation are consumer choice, intermittent voting, and polls (as much a means of persuasion as a measure of opinion), all of which offer the public a subordinate and belated role in an often limited discourse.

Meanwhile, public opinion is formed by a privatized mass media whose news, analysis, and public service programming are shaped by operatives with an eye toward overall corporate profitability. Anxiety over ratings and concerns about alienating a public thought to require a daily dosage of affirmative news place limits on the broadest possible public conversation. That discourse is further constricted by the widespread acceptance of paradigms unduly shaped by the two major political parties, the corporate sector and its legion of influential lobbyists, government bureaucracies, the polling industry, and think tanks. The latter, as research centers that do not teach and are usually unaffiliated with the university, generally influence the critical culture indirectly. Only occasionally, in fact, do they directly address the public; their main audience, through which their considerable influence accrues, is made up of legislators, government bureaucrats, lobbyists, and other members of the political establishment. Think tanks tend to be conservative because they are usually funded by corporate sponsors seeking alternatives to universities that tend to be liberal and independent. With their disproportionate influence, think tanks provide expertise, specialization, and policy-making strategies to the elite; less frequently do their members contribute as public intellectuals to a broad and vital critical culture.

Finally, mergers and acquisitions within the publishing industry have, in some cases, threatened the critical culture. Although some determined publishers and their staffs have successfully struggled to maintain standards against bottom-line thinking, there is cause for concern that quality publishing, so vital to a thriving creative and critical culture, may be on the wane. Chains and online bookselling may have increased the number of excellent

books published, but these same chains have shortened the shelf life and life expectancy that slow the turnover rate for all books. Indeed, the percentage of books returned has steadily increased from 20 percent in the 1960s to over 40 percent in 2000.³⁶ Despite the unprecedented quantity of books sold in the United States—over 2.5 billion are now sold yearly, far more than in any other country—the number of per capita new books published each year, approximately seventy thousand, is small compared to many other countries. England, for example, with one-fifth the population, publishes the same number of new books; and France, with one-quarter the population, issues twenty thousand titles.³⁷ There are other effects as well. Increasing concentration on best sellers and their authors means that beginning writers suffer when sales do not meet expectations and that publishers are reluctant to plan future projects. Pay-for-display programs, which increasingly dictate which books receive prominent placing in the chain bookstores, is yet another way that innovative, risky writing is discouraged. Even more ominously, an increasing number of articles have been pulled from magazines and books or withheld because they are perceived by their corporate publishers to be unfavorable to themselves or their advertisers.

If critical culture is in some ways threatened by these changes in commercial publishing, have the university presses provided refuge? Unfortunately, this sector has been subject to increasing commercial pressure, and the results have caused grave concern. Since 1990, for example, annual subsidies from universities have in general decreased, libraries have diverted funds for book and journal purchases to computer hardware and online services, chain stores have demanded higher discounts that small presses can ill afford, and the cost of publishing a monograph has increased disproportionately. Nearly all university presses have responded by scaling back operations; Oxford University Press, for example, discontinued its publication of contemporary poetry, its Clarendon imprint, and its *Opus* and *Modern Masters* series. Other university presses have opted for more commercial titles or have stressed their regional ties. In general, university presses have been forced to struggle to sustain the level of scholarly, critical, and creative production of the past several decades. Thus far they are barely staying afloat in the strong countervailing market currents. Many are turning to electronic publishing as a way of adapting to the challenges and opportunities of a changing marketplace.

The same, in general, can be said for the traditional sources of critical culture: commercial publishing, the domain of journalistic and general criticism,

and the small nonacademic press. Beginning with the latter, American fiction and poetry continue to be well served by a handful of small distinguished literary houses like New Directions, Dalkey Archive, Archipelago, Coffee House, Copper Canyon, Four Walls Eight Windows, Graywolf, Milkweed, and Seven Stories. These intensely devoted presses continue to thrive, seemingly on little capital other than the quality of their editors' firsthand perception. Journalistic and general criticism, still a large and influential domain despite the erosion of its cultural authority, continues to supply small but essential sectors of the public with discerning considerations of books, ideas, and the arts. Despite the pressures of the academy, a talented corps of critics—some independent and some academically affiliated—has served the public and the arts well since 1950. These critics have encouraged artists and cultivated audiences for a growing range of cultural endeavors. They include literary critics and book reviewers like William Deresiewicz, Ralph Ellison, Elizabeth Hardwick, Michiko Kakutani, John Leonard, John Updike, and James Wood; drama critics like Claudia Cassidy, Brendan Gill, and Walter Kerr; film critics like Richard Corliss, Roger Ebert, Pauline Kael, Stanley Kaufman, Anthony Lane, and Richard Schickel; dance critics like Joan Acocella, Jack Anderson, Clive Barnes, Jennifer Dunning, Lawrence van Gelder, and Anna Kisselgoff; music critics like Robert Christgau, Gary Giddins, Albert Murray, John Pereles, Charles Rosen, Martin Williams, and David Yaffe; art critics like John Canady, Arthur Danto, Robert Hughes, Michael Kimmelman, Lucy Lippard, Peter Schjeldahl, and Sanford Schwartz; and critics of culture and politics like David Brooks, Joan Didion, E. J. Dionne, Todd Gitlin, Murray Kempton, and Frank Rich.

Any significant revitalization of critical culture through processes of cultural democratization will need to extend the critical work of these public intellectuals to encompass a greater portion of the general public they now serve well but incompletely. Key to this endeavor would be a general reorientation of the academic humanities so that a place is made for publicly engaged scholarship, by which I mean an active, reciprocal relationship with nonacademic constituencies that generates new knowledge. Such reorientation would of course accompany traditional outreach through inclusive programming, inviting community members onto campus, and so on. It would necessarily entail a change in academic culture so that professors interested in engaging with the public would actually be encouraged to do so by a revamped tenure and rewards system that recognizes the value of such work. Even were a small proportion of the humanities professoriat to choose such a path, it would

mean many thousands of highly trained experts newly involved in shaping an improved, critical cultural conversation. This would be an enormous contribution to the public life of the nation.

Equally important, the critical culture will need to encompass a global perspective, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent intensification of American political and military involvement abroad. In the past, attention to foreign literatures and cultures has been uneven at best—a perennial problem for American culture. In recent history, it has been limited to a taste for the magic realist novelists of Latin America in the 1970s, a focus on the dissident cultures and writers of Eastern Europe during the 1980s, and an enthusiasm for Indian writers in English in the late 1990s. Clearly, increased efforts will need to be made to inform the public more comprehensively about global intellectual and artistic developments.

No doubt, such changes will need to be preceded by a serious national commitment to eradicating illiteracy, by educational reform that places due emphasis on reading good books, on finding ways to use the Internet creatively, on more sustained encounters with the arts, and on reciprocal partnerships between amateur and professional critics. Whether corporate America can afford such a renaissance remains to be seen. A thriving democracy can ill afford anything less.