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Scrutiny's *Virtue*:
Leavis, MacIntyre, and the Case for Tradition

Paul Andrew Woolridge

I. SCRUTINY AND THE MARXIAN LEGACY

What the catastrophe portends.

—F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, *Scrutiny* was one of the most influential literary journals in Anglophone letters; it is no surprise that its history and formation are well documented in the secondary literature. Most studies of F. R. Leavis give some account of *Scrutiny*'s critical program in its first decade.¹ Numerous appreciations have been passed down over the years from former students of Leavis, friends, and colleagues affiliated with the *Scrutiny* circle, a group that included F. R. Leavis, Q. D. Leavis, Denys Thompson, L. C. Knights, D. W. Harding, W. H. Mellers, and H. A.

¹ For traditional overviews, see R. P. Bilan, *The Literary Criticism of F. R. Leavis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); William Walsh, *F. R. Leavis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Ronald Hayman, *Leavis* (London: Heinemann, 1976). In relation to the public sphere, see Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984). For author studies, see Michael Bell, *F. R. Leavis* (London: Routledge, 1988); Anne Samson, *F. R. Leavis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography; with Q. D. Leavis' "Memoir" of F. R. Leavis* (London: Duckworth, 1995); Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1995); and John Ferns, *F. R. Leavis* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000).

Mason, among other notable contributors.² There has also been a fair amount of recent scholarship on the group, particularly in relation to Leavis and debates within cultural criticism.³ But it is their role as social critics working to resist the pervasive influence of emotivism on intellectual life in the “crisis” period of the 1930s that I would like to explore in this piece. Emotivism—a term drawn from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre—was a subjectivist moral theory prevalent in England between 1903 and 1939, a period that runs from the intuitionism of G. E. Moore to the logical positivism of A. J. Ayer.⁴ Emotivist thinking, as MacIntyre conceives it, is endemic to the failure of the modern moral tradition, a narrative of decline that offers a useful parallel for reexamining the significance of the *Scrutiny* project. Thus in recasting Leavis and *Scrutiny*’s critique of mass culture by way of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), I hope to show that “the moment of *Scrutiny*,” to use Francis Mulhern’s suggestive phrase, not only dramatizes the conflicts internal to emotivism, but points the way to a practice of criticism that heralds the communitarian ideal as one of tradition’s greatest virtues. This first section will consider *Scrutiny*’s fraught relation with Marxism in contradistinction with the pedagogical ethos underlying its critical mission. Section two will outline Leavis and *Scrutiny*’s campaign against the instrumental rationality of so-called machine civilization and the culture industry it produced, particularly in relation to the question of standards and discourses of manipulation. The final section will reflect on the significance of the *Scrutiny* project in light of MacIntyre’s theory of virtue and social practice, specifically in connection with *After Virtue*.

Scrutiny is often seen as an early harbinger of the style of cultural

² See *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions*, ed. Denys Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). On the reception of *Scrutiny*, see Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: Verso, 1979), 314–25 and, more generally, Maurice B. Kinch, William Baker, and John Kimber, eds., *F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1989).

³ See Stefan Collini, “The Critic as [Anti-] Journalist: Leavis after *Scrutiny*,” in *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower: Literary Journalism and Literary Scholarship from Fielding to the Internet*, ed. Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 151–76; Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 15–21; Gary Day, *Re-reading Leavis: Culture and Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Richard Storer, *F. R. Leavis. Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2009); Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ See G. E. Moore, *Ethica Principia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903); C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Gollantz, 1936); C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944).

criticism that arose with the New Left in Britain. The lineage here is telling. Leavis's critical influence has extended to many of the central figures associated with British Marxism and cultural studies on the Left, from Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall at the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies to their early efforts with Charles Taylor to launch and sustain the first phase of *New Left Review* in collaboration with E. P. Thompson, John Saville, and Raymond Williams, among others.⁵ *New Left Review* emerged in 1960 from the marriage of two upstart journals on the Left—*Universities and Left Review* and *The New Reasoner*—both founded in 1957, and both energized by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a unifying cause for the Left that worked to bridge the generational disparities between the burgeoning New Left clubs in metropolitan centers and the more entrenched Communist Party apostates like Thompson and Saville who, despite lingering doctrinal ties to the Party and formative experiences rooted in the Popular Front, sought to rally members of the Left who had grown disaffected with Soviet aggression.⁶ MacIntyre himself was a frequent contributor to *The New Reasoner* during these years, a period of engagement with currents in Marxist humanism that he recalls fondly in his preface to *After Virtue*.⁷ In the early 1960s, both Thompson and Williams were instrumental in the British Marxist appropriation of the humanist discourse of experience articulated in previous decades by Leavis and *Scrutiny* in their struggle to counter the threat of “machine civilization” to the modern world.⁸ *Scrutiny* was by no means

⁵ See Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1995), 184–86. For E. P. Thompson's reflections on this formation, see *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), i–v.

⁶ On the origin of *New Left Review*, see Ian Birchall, “The Autonomy of Theory: A Short History of *New Left Review*,” *International Socialism* 2, no. 10 (Autumn 1980): 51–91; also see “A Brief History of *New Left Review* 1960–2010,” *New Left Review*, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://newleftreview.org/history>. For a more recent study of the group, see Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?: A History of the New Left Review* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2006). For Birchall's review of Thompson, see “*New Left Review*: The Search for Theory,” *International Socialism* 2, no. 115 (Summer 2007). Also see Inglis, *Raymond Williams*, 152–54, 166. On the New Left Clubs, see Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left,” *New Left Review* 61 (January–February 2010): 177–96.

⁷ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (1981; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), ix. On his vexed relation with *New Left Review* in the sixties and seventies, see Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., “Introduction: The Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953–1974* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Also see MacIntyre, “The ‘New Left,’” in Blackledge and Davidson, *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, 87–93.

⁸ Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 192.

novel in voicing such complaint, of course. Many social critics in the twentieth century, as Stefan Collini points out, inherited “a catastrophist interpretation of English history in which the nineteenth century figured as a ‘new civilization’ desperately in need of some modern equivalent for the practices and values that had supposedly been lost.”⁹ In his widely influential *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams traces this tradition of thinking about culture and experience back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the time when that pivotal term—“culture,” which originally (and quite literally) meant a process of cultivation—began to signal a more general state of intellectual and aesthetic development, what Williams would ultimately refer to, in its most ordinary anthropological sense, as “a whole way of life.”¹⁰

Despite marked generational differences, *Scrutiny*’s appeal to the lived experience of culture and tradition held obvious power for Marxist humanists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As Martin Jay remarks, “Leavis allowed them to reconnect with native traditions of popular resistance to political oppression and the tyranny of the market that needed no inspiration from foreign theory.”¹¹ Throughout the 1950s Williams taught as an adult education tutor for the Workers’ Educational Association (much of the time in Essex, but also later in Oxford), eventually earning an appointment to a lectureship in the English Faculty at Cambridge in 1961, just prior to Leavis’s retirement.¹² The two figures could hardly have differed more in temperament and tone, and yet, as Fred Inglis suggests, Williams “became Leavis’s successor as a living example of high seriousness and political principle to the best young men and women coming to study his subject.”¹³ Terry Eagleton, who infamously attacked Williams in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) for his continued ties with Left-Leavisism after it had fallen out of favor, was a student of Williams at Cambridge in the early 1960s (they worked together, in fact, at Jesus College), as was Anthony Barnett, who assumed a lead role editorially at *New Left Review* after the Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn takeover, which shifted the theoretical direction of the journal in its second phase, one inspired by continental trends modeled on Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes*.¹⁴

⁹ See Collini, “The Literary Critic and the Village Labourer: ‘Culture’ in Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004): 93–116, at 98.

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958; London: Hogarth Press, 1987), xviii; on Leavis, see 252–64.

¹¹ Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 192.

¹² See Inglis, *Raymond Williams*, 176.

¹³ Inglis, *Raymond Williams*, 182.

¹⁴ See Birchall, “*New Left Review*: The Search for Theory,” 1 and “The Autonomy of Theory: A Short History of *New Left Review*,” 6–8. For criticism of Anderson and this

Francis Mulhern joined the editorial collective toward the end of the 1970s and is well known for his synoptic account of *Scrutiny's* formation and legacy, a cultural history of the group that seems politically torn between praising and reproving the critical movement it sets out to commemorate. In addition to *Scrutiny's* success in rearranging the modern canon of English literature and forging a new method of critical analysis (namely, practical criticism), Mulhern locates the group's wider influence in popularizing a distinctive discourse on community, which "underwrote the privileged status of education as a site of corrective social criticism." For the Left, as well, he continues, "*Scrutiny* had opened up an educational space within which the cultural institutions of bourgeois-democratic capitalism could be subjected to critical analysis."¹⁵ Echoing Perry Anderson's worry that the Leavisian attempt to hold on to a tradition in decline would lead to political impasse,¹⁶ Mulhern concludes that the moment of *Scrutiny*, oriented as it was around a dialectical struggle between the high culture of the past and the declining civilization of the present, tacitly militated against any kind of effective socialist politics whatsoever: "The journal elaborated a binary discourse that united a technicist conception of 'civilization' (the domain of quantities and means) with a complementarily idealist conception of 'culture' (the domain of qualities, values and ends). The 'community' so affirmed was a spiritual entity, incarnated not in social structures but in 'tradition.' And the principal effect of this discourse, manifest equally in its utterances and its practical policy, was a *categorical dissolution of politics*."¹⁷ The analysis that follows will show that this conclusion is one-sided at best. Mulhern's equivocation on "politics" is noteworthy here. It is not at all clear why *Scrutiny's* critical successes should be judged from the perspective of a socialist-rather than communitarian-inspired politics, especially when the group unambiguously renounced any foundational connection with Marxist thought. However we view it, *Scrutiny's* unremitting critique of mass culture and consumer society in the 1930s and 1940s has been an inspiration for many critics and educators across the political spectrum, one that has generated a rich and varied historiography of cultural criticism in the decades following the journal's collapse.¹⁸

new phase in *New Left Review*, see E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 245–98, and "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," 315, in *The Poverty of Theory*.

¹⁵ Mulhern, *Moment of Scrutiny*, 329.

¹⁶ See Perry Anderson, "Components of a National Culture," *New Left Review* 50 (May–June 1968): 3–57, esp. 50–56.

¹⁷ Mulhern, *Moment of Scrutiny*, 310–11.

¹⁸ See Hilliard, *English as a Vocation*, 215–47.

In many ways, *Scrutiny* does seem to be a proto-fellow traveler with the socialist cause. Its anti-commercialist edge, reverence for pre-industrial society, and skillful navigation of the radical ethos of the early 1930s all imply socialist leanings. All the same, by engaging directly with these Marxist currents, it does not follow, *pace* Perry Anderson, that the journal's critical agenda structurally replicated those same Marxian antinomies characteristic of the age.¹⁹ In fact, quite contrary to the politicized tenor of much of the criticism during this time, *Scrutiny* aspired, principally, to train a cadre of readers in one fairly modest pursuit—namely, to think intelligently about the “concrete human experience” reflected through literature.²⁰ This meant thinking about the way literature should be taught. On the question of *Scrutiny*'s social mission, Chris Baldick discusses its early campaign to establish “points of support in society” by tailoring its criticism to questions of pedagogy.²¹ Similarly, in relation to *Scrutiny*'s early audience, Ian MacKillop identifies a stratum of young teachers seeking “down-to-earth advice” about teaching literature and discussing matters of taste more generally in the humanities.²² “It is likely that the *Scrutiny* reader was a ‘practical’ intellectual,” MacKillop writes, “possibly a school teacher who wanted to sift dross from gold.”²³ As the editors put it in their opening manifesto, “Every year intelligent young men and women go down from the Universities and are swallowed by secondary and public schools. . . . [I]solation makes their efforts to keep themselves informed of ‘the best that is known and thought in the world’ unnecessarily depressing and difficult.”²⁴ For this faction of young *Scrutiny* readers, many of them unfamiliar with the scholar-gentleman ethos of the pre-war generation, and thus struggling in the midst of economic hardship to define the value of literature in far more practical ways, *Scrutiny* was a call to arms, and they, for *Scrutiny*, were the intellectual foot soldiers with the energy and dynamism to influence young minds.²⁵

All of this, to be sure, is covered (and celebrated) in Mulhern's study.

¹⁹ See Anderson, “Components of a National Culture,” 53.

²⁰ F. R. Leavis, “The Literary Mind,” *Scrutiny* 1, no. 1 (May 1932): 22. All subsequent citations refer to the 1963 reprint, *Scrutiny: Reissued in 20 Volumes with an Index and Retrospect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

²¹ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism: 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 168.

²² MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis*, 208.

²³ MacKillop, 207.

²⁴ “Scrutiny: A Manifesto,” *Scrutiny* 1, no. 1 (May 1932): 5.

²⁵ On the social origins of Leavis's pupils at Downing in the 1930s, see Hilliard, *English as a Vocation*, chap. 3, esp. 79–90; on the educational influence of the Scrutineers at the secondary level, see chap. 4.

"*Scrutiny's* adherents," he writes, "were self-consciously (and notoriously) a *militant* cultural current, intellectually compact and, by the late forties, represented at every level of the national educational system, from professorial chairs to the class-rooms of unnumbered secondary schools."²⁶ Mulhern quite rightly highlights *Scrutiny's* influence and its combative, interventionist style of journalism. But this militancy was just as evident in the group's own attacks on the socialist politics that he ascribes, in the end, to their allegedly failed agenda. The group adamantly refused to adopt any political affiliation, taking pains to distance themselves from the various currents of socialist thought represented by critics like Edmund Wilson, Leon Trotsky (whom Leavis calls "that dangerously intelligent Marxist"),²⁷ Granville Hicks, Max Eastman, and others.²⁸ If anything, the Marxian theory of culture came under fire directly for its purported abstraction and complicity with bourgeois society.

Leavis's "Under Which King, Bezonian?" (December 1932) and "Restatements for Critics" (March 1933) make this case rather sharply. In "Restatements," for instance, Leavis complains "that in the matter of 'values' the Marxist is too bourgeois, too much the product of the material environment." "It is impossible," he continues, "to believe that he who is so obtuse to essential distinctions means anything when he speaks of the 'culture' that will supervene upon a politico-economic revolution: the finer human values have, so far as his sense of them goes, been left behind for good in capitalist Progress."²⁹ Leavis did tepidly endorse some inchoate form of economic communism very early on, but he fiercely rejected the dogmatic assumption in the cruder forms of Marxism that culture (in any "real" sense) is primarily determined by an economic base. He was, incidentally, fairly close to the anti-Stalinist New Left in this sense:

For it is true that culture in the past has borne a close relation to the "methods of production." A culture expressing itself in a tradition of literature and art—such a tradition as represents the finer consciousness of the race and provides the currency of finer living—can be in a healthy state only if this tradition is in living relation with a real culture, shared by the people at large. The

²⁶ Mulhern, *Moment of Scrutiny*, 312.

²⁷ Leavis, "Under Which King, Bezonian?," *Scrutiny* 1, no. 3 (December 1932): 208.

²⁸ On this period, see Bell, ed., *The Context of English Literature: 1900–1930* (London: Methuen, 1980) and Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

²⁹ Leavis, "Restatements for Critics," *Scrutiny* 1, no. 4 (March 1933): 322.

point might be enforced by saying (there is no need to elaborate) that Shakespeare did not invent the language he used.³⁰

A fascination with the complex interworkings of culture, tradition, and language would animate Leavis's thinking throughout his career. It would also inspire the discourse on community so central to the *Scrutiny* project. The communitarian ethos underlying Leavis's vision resides in one simple fact: we are born into social practices that we inherit from our culture and language, which, to a very significant degree, embody a certain shared way of life. Culture in any relevant—"real"—sense cannot replicate itself in the span of several generations. It needs both the time to mature and the guidance from a minority who knows how to maintain this "currency of finer living." The cultural and artistic achievements of the Roman Empire and Catholic Church took centuries to develop, a point Leavis is quick to make in criticizing nominal Marxists like John Dos Passos: "To hope that, if the mechanics of civilization (so to speak) are perfected, the other problems (those which Mr. Dos Passos is mainly preoccupied with) will solve themselves, is vain."³¹ This is why the revolutionary desire for a Marxist utopia, while admirable in its own way, was not the answer for Leavis, since it would wipe out all trace of the cultural heritage and tradition it sought to replace, an eclipsing of the past that was already well underway in the modern machine age.³²

Ultimately, Leavis rejected the cruder Marxian claim that values, as ideological constructs, could be imposed on society at will.³³ Rather, in believing that the continuity between past and present had been irreparably severed by the industrial revolution, Leavis endorsed an arguably more communitarian vision of rural culture as the basis for normative values. In the England of Shakespeare, Leavis writes, there "was an art of living, involving codes, developed in ages of continuous experience, of relations between man and man, and man and the environment in its seasonal rhythm. This culture the progress of the nineteenth century destroyed, in country and in town; it destroyed (to repeat a phrase now familiar) the organic community."³⁴ Leavis had no illusions about any grand return to

³⁰ Leavis, "Under Which King, Bezonian?," 207.

³¹ Leavis, review of *Manhattan Transfer*, *Scrutiny* 1, no. 2 (September 1932), 178.

³² See Leavis, *Education & The University: A Sketch for an 'English School'* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), 21, 24.

³³ For Marxian rejoinders, see A. L. Morton, "Culture and Leisure," *Scrutiny* 1, no. 4 (March 1933) and Herbert Butterfield, "History and the Marxian Method," *Scrutiny* 1, no. 4 (March 1933).

³⁴ Leavis, "Under Which King, Bezonian?," 207.

a prelapsarian past.³⁵ But the realpolitik underpinnings of this belief did not preclude the invocation of the “organic community” as a useful trope for establishing historical connection with some past world—*some* community—whose tradition could still provide nourishment for a spiritually devitalized age. To reconnect with the finer forms of “lived experience” enshrined in the language and traditions of the past, a mode of criticism that tended to lionize the virtues internal to the practices of pre-industrial society, would come to be, then, *Scrutiny's* driving mission.

II. LEAVIS AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Scrutiny was launched in May 1932 on a simple premise: “The general dissolution of standards is a commonplace” in the modern world.³⁶ There was little room for ambiguity in these early *Scrutiny* pronouncements. Standards of both kinds, literary and living, had been hopelessly flattened by the commercial imperatives of machine civilization. For *Scrutiny*, the cultural disintegration and decline they perceived as endemic to their interwar milieu in the 1920s and 1930s, was in the end a lament for a lost way of life, one that materialized in a twenty-year campaign to preserve the tradition and language of pre-industrial England. At heart, their critical “programme for regeneration” was double-edged in this way:³⁷ on the one hand, they saw criticism as a center of resistance, a countervailing force to standardization and the cultural leveling brought on by mass culture and its litany of industry by-products; on the other, as an organizing intellectual principle for those allegedly few discerning minds—for the learned “minority”—still devoted to valuing and cultivating awareness of the arts. “It is only a small minority,” the editors assert, “for whom the arts are something more than a luxury product, who believe, in fact, that they are ‘the storehouse of recorded values’ and, in consequence, that there is a necessary relationship between the quality of the individual’s response to art and his general fitness for a humane existence.”³⁸ The stakes were high: for in cultivating the minds of intelligent readers, the *Scrutiny* project set out to save the intellectual foundations of civilization from nihilism itself.

Criticism was implicitly political in this sense, at least according to

³⁵ See Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933).

³⁶ “*Scrutiny: A Manifesto*,” 1.

³⁷ Leavis, “The Literary Mind,” 32.

³⁸ “*Scrutiny: A Manifesto*,” 5.

Scrutiny's early rationale, a form of cultural politics aimed at disrupting factions of partisanship from all quarters—capitalist, communist, and fascist—prevalent at the time. “The social and cultural disintegration that has accompanied the development of the vast modern machine,” proclaim the editors, “is destroying what should have been the control, and leaves a terrifying apparatus of propaganda ready to the hands of the more or less subtle, more or less conscious, more or less direct, emulators of Hitler and his accomplices. . . . [W]ithout an intelligent, educated and morally responsible public, political programmes can do nothing to arrest the process of disintegration—though they can do something to hasten it.”³⁹ Politics was the problem not the solution, particularly Marxian politics, which *Scrutiny* cavalierly rejected, as the numerous broadsides from Leavis and fellow editors make clear. In the early years, *Scrutiny* patiently (but persistently) made the case that criticism—the cultivation of discriminating judgment in the minds of a select group of readers—was, in principle and in practice, the most expedient form of resistance to the political and technological machine culture of the age.

Leavis had proffered a similarly bleak diagnosis of modern culture just prior to *Scrutiny*'s release, before officially joining the editorial board several issues after the journal's launch. In *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), his first significant publication, Leavis repeatedly denounces one allegedly obvious fact about the public sphere of the 1930s: that authoritative standards had slowly eroded under years of pressure from advertising, marketing, the popular press, broadcasting, and film. The debasement of language and mental acuity that ensued from exposure to these various forms of mass media represent a clear and harrowing symptom of this decline, according to Leavis. Few today, presumably, would endorse Leavis's claim that the waning sense of a predominantly English literary tradition means a severely diminished notion of “culture” in the sidereal sense of Matthew Arnold's “best” that has been thought and known across the ages, particularly in literature, since it is through language that the “consciousness of the race” is transmitted by means of a national culture. We need to clarify what Leavis means by “culture” to grasp his meaning here. In machine civilization, Leavis certainly found no trace of Arnold's much vaunted sweetness and light.⁴⁰ Tradition, culture, and language all pointed to one common denominator: a shared way of life

³⁹ “Editorial,” *Scrutiny* 2, no. 4 (March 1934): 332.

⁴⁰ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, in *Matthew Arnold: Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Collini (1869; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58–80.

with an implicit understanding of being that was quickly falling, he feared, into senescence.

Protecting the language of this tradition was the qualitative equivalent, then, to preserving the rich storehouse of values, habits, customs, and “fine living” that it purportedly embodied. Leavis and *Scrutiny* appointed this gatekeeping function rather narrowly, it might seem, to a strictly literary minority:

The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognizing their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time. . . . Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of the tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there. In their keeping, to use a metaphor that is metonymy also and will bear a good deal of pondering, is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” I mean the use of such a language.⁴¹

Far more than highbrow policing of one’s favorite books is at stake here. If Leavis is right, language signifies, in essence, culture in this world-defining sense. Without a central tradition to transmit and unify this lived experience, the epistemological center of the age, Leavis insisted, simply would not hold. It also follows that without some principled standard of orientation, without some common idiom based on shared practices, it is impossible to say that *anything at all* is worth more or less than anything else—impossible to engage, that is, in even the simplest evaluative judgments. This idea of an empty center at the heart of our critical discourse haunted Leavis’s criticism.

The fear was not just literary, but emphatically moral *because* political. For Leavis, establishing roots in a tradition meant far more than status-quo comfort and security. Tradition outlines an entire way of being for the culture, provides it with a moral blueprint for living, one enshrined in a form of consciousness that people internalize and reproduce in the mental

⁴¹ Leavis, *Mass Civilization*, 5.

practices of their everyday lives. If this is the case, the culture industry of machine civilization not only disrupted a vital connection to past modes of experience, but it co-opted inner lives by manufacturing wants, desires, and tastes in order to predict consumer buying and reading preferences with ever greater efficiency.⁴² Leavis and *Scrutiny* were very close to the Frankfurt School in resisting this key premise of modernization theory. The public could not possibly know what it *really* wants, according to the *Scrutiny*/Frankfurt rationale, because its standard for judgment was not its own.⁴³ Supposing that the public simply gets what it asks for was to turn a blind eye to the emergent practices of neoliberal salesmanship and efficiency, professional marketing techniques, and the subsequent effects of advertising and standardization on the press, on broadcasting, and in Hollywood, all of which held the power to transform, collectively, a national temperament one ad or broadsheet review at a time; cheap appeals to the baser instincts rendered viewers, according to this line of criticism, thoughtless and passive.⁴⁴ Consumers of popular media in the machine culture of late industrial capitalism thus find themselves driven by a manufactured telos that points to one mutually pernicious end: mental distraction via material consumption.⁴⁵

In this alleged dystopia of mental diminishment, the individual's ability to wield personal judgments falls short considerably, which means people are more readily susceptible to commercial and political imperatives in the form of advertising, propaganda, and the like. More worrisome still, a culture of emotivism arises in its stead, a world where manipulation and coercive assertion rather than meaningful disagreement becomes the norm. When rational grounds for disagreement vanish, people become more vulnerable to the much larger nexus of commercialized discursive exchange. *Scrutiny*'s strident denunciation of propaganda, the commercial press, and indeed the larger culture industry of taste production, finds a telling explanation here: namely, the need to counter the reified consciousness that these industries produce. Discourses of manipulation and mental control tend to work more efficiently when minds lack critical self-awareness. Disrupting the enabling conditions that produce false consciousness is another critical imperative *Scrutiny* shares with the Frankfurt School, even if both groups

⁴² See Leavis, *Mass Civilization*, 11, 20–24 and Day, *Re-reading Leavis*, 90–93.

⁴³ On “real interests,” see Raymond Guess, *The Idea of A Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 45–54.

⁴⁴ See Leavis, *Mass Civilization*, 8–12.

⁴⁵ Leavis, *Mass Civilization*, 18–22.

ultimately disagree about Marxism as a viable political project.⁴⁶ In commercial society, the mind of the distracted reader, and by extension the consciousness of the average citizen, becomes one more resource to be used, manipulated, reshaped, and exploited for commercial ends; hence *Scrutiny's* repeated calls for a critical minority to guide and reinforce intellectual standards, taste, and sensibility. Hence also the need for a programmatic method of instruction: the moral imperative driving practical criticism was, in this sense, a clear response to the emotivist dead end of machine civilization *and* a clear rejection of its model of selfhood as a life passively administered, a life that culminates, predictably, in a vacuous form of moral relativism and submission to the more coercive forms of bureaucratic control and authority associated with the culture industry.⁴⁷ In order to flesh out these claims about emotivism and its implications for the *Scrutiny* project, it will help to turn to Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of contemporary moral argument in *After Virtue*.

III. MACINTYRE, EMOTIVISM, AND TRADITION'S INTERNAL VIRTUE

MacIntyre presents an even darker vision of the modern crisis of values than the one described by Leavis and *Scrutiny*. The latter group held on to a remnant of value embodied in the language that could still be invoked, if for no other reason than to *provoke* a trained minority (a vanguard) to uphold critical standards rooted in the literature and traditions of the past. They framed their critical program as a call to arms in this way. The ability to read critically was necessary training for democratic citizenship. The fate of the culture depended on it, in *Scrutiny's* view. MacIntyre's critique of modernity, in contrast, presents us with fragments of a moral tradition suspended somewhere between functional incoherence and incommensurability. The absence of rational standards in MacIntyre's view gestures to a much deeper moral decay in contemporary life. What the two critiques of modernity do share, however, is worth exploring for several reasons.

First, there is a symbiotic connection between critical reading, tradition, and morality. We learn how to read in much the same way that we

⁴⁶ On the culture industry, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; New York: Continuum, 1997).

⁴⁷ On parallels between Leavis and Adorno, see Day, *Re-reading Leavis*, 18, 40–42, 179–83, 224–26.

internalize the moral codes that allow us to distinguish right from wrong. Critical judgment is transmitted by way of a tradition of learning (in Leavis's case, by way of the humane tradition of letters), just as moral awareness is inherited, generationally, from social practices that help us orient ourselves in relation to one another and in relation to the world. All traditions imply, in this way, an argument about what constitutes the "good life." We employ criticism as a kind of meta-language to help us reflect on this fact, to help us see that our lives gain meaning and coherence through the larger narratives we tell about ourselves, an intelligibility that can only be realized, according to MacIntyre, through the social practices that make virtuous living within a tradition possible. In MacIntyre's words,

A living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. . . . Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life . . . the history of each of our own lives is . . . embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions.⁴⁸

The crucial notion of goods "internal to practices," which we will examine shortly, underlies arguments central to the communitarian moral vision espoused, in varying degrees, by both MacIntyre and *Scrutiny*. And second, MacIntyre's analysis of emotivist culture and social practices establishes a philosophical warrant for one of the recurring criticisms of the *Scrutiny* project: namely, the group's seemingly irrational exuberance for the language and literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, a preoccupation often interpreted as mere elitism or blind nostalgia for a pre-industrial golden age. Before looking at this criticism directly, however, we need to get a better sense of why critics like MacIntyre find the doctrine of emotivism so unappealing.

The problem for MacIntyre in *After Virtue* begins with the Enlightenment project, a tradition that rejected the teleological framework of Aristotle and the divine command theory of medieval theology, which was, to a significant degree, an extension of Greek virtue ethics reframed in Christian terms through the work of Thomas Aquinas. For example, to be a

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

“good” man, according to this classical *telos*, meant simply to live well or, more specifically, to live in accord with one’s social role (the function was built into the practice). Empirically speaking, a good farmer was simply someone who farmed well, a good soldier someone who fought well, a good citizen someone who served his polis well, and so on. Duty and social function were inextricable. It is easy to see how this conception of man was extended to a Christian context: to be a good man was to serve God well—through obedience, prayer, or charitable deeds. In both scenarios, man’s essence was determined by how well he embodied the virtues that guided his behavior. With the theological voluntarism of Luther and Calvin in Protestant northern Europe, however, coupled with the growing secularism of the West, this Graeco-Christian *telos* gave way to a narrower psychological emphasis on the faith of the individual. Lutheran soteriology severed the connection between good deeds and spiritual redemption, lessening the need for an ecclesiastical authority to regulate matters of the guilty heart. The Scottish-German enlightenment of Smith, Hume, and Kant, primed by the mechanistic view of the new science, brought the final sledgehammer to the teleological conception of man. In rejecting the dual authorities of Aristotle and the church, then, the Enlightenment project conspicuously situated the individual subject—the rational, autonomous agent—at the center of moral life. Kant’s *sapere aude* (“Have the courage to use your own reason”) stands as the emancipatory model here.⁴⁹ For this reason, MacIntyre casts the history of the Western moral tradition in terms of a fall, a gradual decline of communal virtues that runs from Homer to Hume.

Subsequent appeals to reason and utility further precipitated this decline, however unwittingly. Enlightenment thinkers sought to anchor individual moral action using impersonal criteria: in Kant’s case by way of a self-legislator for universal dignity and rights (via the categorical imperative), and in Mill’s as a kind of good shepherd for general welfare (via the greatest happiness principle). The idea was that any *rational* person would have to assent to principles that reflect the property of universality, and that a rational justification for morality therefore could be established. Whether inspired by rights or utility, these twin theories of modern liberalism grafted a discourse of rational choice theory onto moral concepts derived, ultimately, from theistic premises. The inevitable result, MacIntyre claims, had to be failure. If the post-Enlightenment West has indeed inherited moral concepts from rival traditions that are in practice incompatible with the

⁴⁹ See Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1995), 1.

premises of liberal individualism, then any attempt to synthesize these disparate traditions will merely obfuscate the gap between the two frameworks. As MacIntyre puts it, in terms that echo Elizabeth Anscombe's influential 1958 critique of modern moral philosophy, "moral judgments are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices."⁵⁰ Lacking the cultural authority of a divine lawgiver, moral judgments "lose any clear status and the sentences which express them . . . become available as forms of expression for an emotivist self which lacking the guidance of the context in which they were originally at home has lost its linguistic as well as its practical way in the world."⁵¹ This is why MacIntyre refers to concepts like natural "rights" and "utility" as "moral fictions" that "purport to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion" but in fact give us no more than illusory grounds for our own preferences and beliefs.⁵² Moral judgments based on these concepts lack rational justification outside of the purposes for which they were originally devised. Consequently, we are left with a culture of moral argument in which interlocutors debating the most heated issues of the day tend to speak past one another because each side begins with incommensurable premises warranted by some such conceptual fiction.

Politically and morally speaking, then, the post-Enlightenment tradition of classical liberalism has not only exhausted itself, on MacIntyre's reading, but has given rise to a culture of emotivism in which debate over value judgments—whether moral, intellectual, or aesthetic—presents itself as hopelessly interminable: "Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." Unlike factual judgments, he continues, moral considerations "are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others. Emotivism is thus a theory which professes to give an account of *all* value judgments whatsoever. Clearly if it *is* true, *all* moral disagreement *is* rationally interminable."⁵³ MacIntyre does

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 60. For Elizabeth Anscombe, see "Modern Moral Theory," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 1–19.

⁵¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 60.

⁵² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 70.

⁵³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 12.

not accept this conclusion (emotivism, he thinks, falters by conflating a theory of meaning with use), but he does argue that our culture nonetheless behaves as if it were true. Without a shared basis for practices and standards grounded in a tradition of rationality—that is, in a common way of arguing about which goods we deem important—moral exchanges inevitably take on this characteristic of interminability. The larger fear in this is not simply an unpalatable form of relativism (however unappealing that may very well be);⁵⁴ more problematically, without rational grounds for disagreement, argument inevitably turns manipulative, which means that, as a culture, we have begun to lose the distinction between what counts as a manipulative and a non-manipulative discursive practice. “Contemporary moral experience as a consequence has a paradoxical character. For each of us is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent; but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationships with others.”⁵⁵ MacIntyre invokes the specter of a Weberian bureaucratic state fueled by the worst excesses of corporate power and social anomie as one consequence of this development, whereas the culture industry’s sweeping usurpation of aesthetic standards, in Leavis’s account, clearly points to another. Implicit in both cases is a logic of exploitation made all the worse by the competitive nature of capitalist society. “Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize,” he continues, “we aspire ourselves *not* to be manipulated by others; seeking to incarnate our own principles and standpoint in the world of practice, we find no way open to us to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case.”⁵⁶

Of the three cultural roles (or stock “characters” in the drama of modern life) to arise from this emotivist paradox—the manager, aesthete, and therapist—MacIntyre views the manager as potentially most harmful: “For beside rights and utility, among the central moral fictions of the age we have to place the peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality.”⁵⁷ The notion of “effectiveness” (and, for that matter, its neoliberal

⁵⁴ On relativism, see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 350–69. Also see Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), chap. 3.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 68.

⁵⁶ MacIntyre, 68.

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, 74.

cousin “efficiency”), MacIntyre argues, is not a morally neutral value. Yet in practice managers base their expertise on their ability to get people to achieve institutional ends. In short, they use their authority to “motivate” workers to pursue external goods they themselves have not chosen. MacIntyre interprets this as just one more way to manipulate people in the name of a purportedly neutral moral fiction, which he claims we should, of course, reject. “For the whole concept of effectiveness is . . . inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior; and it is by appeal to his own effectiveness in this respect that the manager claims authority within the manipulative mode.”⁵⁸ The culture of emotivism invariably produces, then, an environment of manipulation and control, one in which people use one another in pursuit of external goods (“goods of effectiveness”) such as status, power, money, prestige, and fame. It is generally true that institutions like hospitals and universities must exercise prudence in looking after material goods and resources in order for the practices they sustain (namely, medicine and teaching) to flourish. But at their very worst, when institutions succumb to a crudely utilitarian means-end conception of securing social goods—what MacIntyre calls *pleonexia*, or acquisitiveness—they tend to fuse the potentially exploitative nature of managerial expertise with the competitive impetus of machine civilization. Our relationship to social goods (and with each other) correspondingly suffers. The result more often than not is a world dominated by outcomes, deliverables, and the bottom line. Subordinating practices to institutions in this way is one of MacIntyre’s gravest worries. He duly warns that “the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.” Without a firm commitment to higher virtues, therefore, the practices we value most “could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, this is just one more symptom of the Enlightenment project’s failure, on MacIntyre’s reading—it is the culture industry played out on an interpersonal level. Since we now inhabit a commercial economy where work has shifted from the private household to the public sphere, the pursuit of external goods is, invariably, for individuals and institutions alike, “the driving force of modern productive work.”⁶⁰ A hint of his Marxian

⁵⁸ MacIntyre, 74.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, 94.

⁶⁰ MacIntyre, 227.

past seems to resurface here, more a worry than a warning about our exploitative complicities with the zero-sum material goods that we inevitably tend to pursue in modern capitalist economies.⁶¹

MacIntyre's account of goods "internal to a practice," in contrast, strikes a far less dystopian note, one that suggestively links his redemptive hope for the post-Enlightenment world with *Scrutiny's* quest to ground critical judgment on standards internal to the practices of the English literary tradition. A practice for MacIntyre "involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of . . . [one's] own performance as judged by them."⁶² Practices, in other words, involve skilled activities in which people cooperate or compete (with each other or in dialogue with a tradition of practitioners) to achieve some specified end. Sports, chess, eighteenth-century portrait painting, physics, farming, and architecture are all *practices* in MacIntyre's sense (as is perhaps literature and criticism). Achieving a level of excellence by participating in such practices is built into the activity itself, so that "the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment."⁶³ In order to excel in these practices we must be willing to subordinate ourselves to the higher authority of more accomplished practitioners, who then constitute, cumulatively, a tradition of practice. Moreover, "we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized thus far."⁶⁴ This is what characterizes goods as "internal" rather than "external": the measure of excellence "can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods."⁶⁵ Interestingly, this resonates with Mill's famous test for higher and lower pleasures in *Utilitarianism*, which privileges of course those who have experienced both.

MacIntyre uses a similar notion as the basis for developing a normative theory of virtue, which he claims is essential for realizing goods internal to the practices we should aspire to cultivate. Traditions decay without proper

⁶¹ On MacIntyre's early Marxist writings, see Blackledge and Davidson, eds., "Introduction: The Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre," in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*.

⁶² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.

⁶³ MacIntyre, 190.

⁶⁴ MacIntyre, 190.

⁶⁵ MacIntyre, 188–89.

attention to the virtues required for ensuring their integrity. As MacIntyre puts it, “The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.”⁶⁶ Virtues help keep traditions active and alive, in this way, and traditions—which embody the social practices that reflect the identity of our own best selves—give to our lives a certain unity and purpose. The relevance of this arguably communitarian vision of moral life to the *Scrutiny* project, a group who clearly championed the goods of the literary tradition as higher virtues, should be evident by now.

The training of an educated public in standards internal to the practices of the English tradition was not mere elitism on *Scrutiny*'s part, but one way to cultivate the intellectual virtues of discrimination and critical intelligence in a world steeped in the emotivist uncertainty of machine civilization. The good critic displayed competence by being privy to experiences drawn from both realms, and by appealing to standards internal to a sustained tradition of practice. For a culture thought to be moving in the wrong (commercialized, mechanical) direction, engaging directly with the traditional forms of living “memorialized” in the “organic” speech idioms, as Leavis would say, of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature thus became a practical expedient for dealing with the broader cultural amnesia of modern readers. In this way, *Scrutiny* combined the rather recent trend of quotation-led analysis with their own embattled sense of having to stand for and point to values thought lost, resuscitating along the way a tradition of excellence with standards internal to the idiom of the organic community, one that needed to be shown, they thought, to a society perceived to be in rapid decline. This was, in fact, one of the primary functions of *Scrutiny*'s early social criticism: to remind readers that maintaining continuity with their literary tradition places them in living relation with works of art that, culturally and linguistically, thematize the virtues and standards of shared social goods evident in a prior age. The inability to recognize this fact, *Scrutiny* feared, was a critical practice that machine civilization (dominated as it was by an emotivist ethos for external goods) had almost entirely lost.

Recasting *Scrutiny* by way of MacIntyre's theory of virtue helps bring

⁶⁶ MacIntyre, 223.

out the force of this communitarian ideal.⁶⁷ It provides a suggestive insight, moreover, about the lineage of MacIntyre's own role as social critic. MacIntyre began his career as a committed socialist fixed on reconciling Marxism with Christianity, a political outlook very much in line with the Marxist humanists of the 1950s, especially Thompson and Williams, who both harbored deep ties with the rural communitarianism of English social history, as did Leavis and *Scrutiny* prior to them. MacIntyre aligns well with this vein of English cultural criticism, one that appeals to a tradition of practices and communal living as a foil to a post-industrial (or post-Enlightenment) age. This is particularly true in his second anti-Marxian phase, which culminates with *After Virtue* (1981), as outlined above, and its sequel *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988).⁶⁸ Unlike Leavis, MacIntyre's analysis stretches back to ancient Greek and medieval culture—Aristotle and Aquinas were in many ways his Shakespeare and Donne—but his appeal to a tradition of communal virtues, at least during this phase of his career, resonates quite tellingly with the Leavisian faith in the redemptive powers of a literary (or, in MacIntyre's case, political) culture rooted in a tradition of shared social practice.

Reading the *Scrutiny* project by way of MacIntyre also helps us deflate one of the major criticisms of *Scrutiny* repeated over the years: namely, that the group wildly exaggerated the virtues of pre-industrial rural life, adopting a form of nostalgia that merely reproduced a belated nineteenth-century agon with commercial society in twentieth-century terms. To be sure, *Scrutiny* rather uncritically revered writers like George Sturt in *Change in the Village* (1912), who lauded the craftsmanship ideal of pre-industrial communal life. "The 'peasant' tradition in its vigour," Sturt writes, "amounted to nothing less than a form of civilization—the home-made civilization of the rural English." Denys Thompson, *Scrutiny's* most outspoken education critic, adds this: "The lives of the peasants were fulfilled, their relation to each other and their environment adjusted, in a way now unattainable by anyone."⁶⁹ Critics of *Scrutiny* have, of course, been quick to point to the

⁶⁷ On communitarianism, see *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael J. Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984). For a contrary view of MacIntyre's politics, see Kelvin Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) and "Aristotelianism versus Communitarianism," *Analyse & Kritik* 27 (2005): 259–73, esp. 271.

⁶⁸ On the different phases of MacIntyre's career, see Tony Burns, "Revolutionary Aristotelianism?," in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism*, ed. Blackledge and Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), chap. 3, esp. 36–43.

⁶⁹ Denys Thompson, "A Cure For Amnesia," *Scrutiny* 2, no. 1 (June 1933): 3.

darker side of village life. Terry Eagleton, for instance, pokes fun at *Scrutiny* for “nostalgically lauding the organic wholeness of exploited seventeenth-century farm labourers.”⁷⁰ John Gross is similarly tongue-in-cheek: “When I turn to *Culture and Environment* and read the idyllic account, quoted without qualification, of life in a self-sufficient, ‘organic’ fourteenth-century Rhine village, I am afraid my first impulse is to recall that the fourteenth-century Rhineland also means the Black Death and misery and pogroms. The truth is that the search for a golden age always has to be pushed further and further back in time, until we reach the Garden of Eden.”⁷¹ These criticisms have considerable sting when we account for the obvious advances in science and technology. But any such focus on a material index of goods (goods, in short, of effectiveness) was not *Scrutiny*’s primary measure for excellence. Rather, in the spirit of MacIntyre, *Scrutiny* worried that, with the rise of machine civilization, goods internal to shared local practices, particularly those internal to the language and practices of folk culture, had been severely compromised by the advance of modernity. The journal’s longtime editor and contributor L. C. Knights captures this point nicely: “The tale of common and inescapable miseries in the early seventeenth century . . . does not alter the fact that this was the time when Shakespeare and Jonson were writing for the popular stage. . . . No one would wish to be treated by the medical methods of that time. But advances in medicine or of technology, however welcome, are certainly no guarantee of ‘culture’ in any significant sense—of, that is, a shared responsiveness to nonmaterial values.”⁷²

Of the major literary periodicals in the first half of the twentieth century, *Scrutiny* made the strongest case for literature as “culture” in precisely this sense: as a good internal to the social practices of a humane tradition of letters. There were other periodicals of course—the short-lived *Calendar of Modern Letters* and T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion* come to mind, as does *Partisan Review*—that touted the social importance of literature, but *Scrutiny* elevated the study and practice of literature, criticism, and, by extension, liberal education, to that of a unifying narrative for the critical sensibility of a culture in crisis. This amounted to a tradition of values and practices that a minority of informed critics could appeal to in order to counter the instrumental and relativizing logic of emotivist culture.⁷³ The group had its

⁷⁰ Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 31.

⁷¹ John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life since 1800* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), 295.

⁷² L. C. Knights, “Remembering *Scrutiny*,” *Sewanee Review* 89 (Fall 1981): 560–85, at 575.

⁷³ See Leavis, *Education & The University*, 15–32, esp. 18.

limitations, most certainly. Their scope was slightly restricted by the ethnocentric undercurrents of their own folk traditions, which reinforced a strain of parochial self-importance in their writing. And their criticism, disproportionately at times, relied on a manner of ad hominem incivility that reflected this bias in its narrowest form. For this reason, their mode of pronouncement affected a kind of Nietzschean hyper-assertion: if critical standards could not be politely adduced in the emotivist world of metropolitan letters (as they were, presumably, during the age of Samuel Johnson), then they would be asserted rhetorically through sheer force of will. An educated public would have to be spoken into existence by fiat, conditions of possibility notwithstanding. Fortunately, the more abrasive tenor of this discursive will was mediated by *Scrutiny's* insistent belief in the tempering virtues of a humane tradition, an idiom of social and moral value with redemptive possibilities that, more than ever (they thought), needed to be cultivated and preserved in an age that had forgotten what shared responsiveness to standards could potentially mean for intellectual life. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* concludes with a simple but arresting question: Nietzsche or Aristotle? Virtue ethics or *Übermensch* fantasy? Perhaps *Scrutiny's* greatest virtue was its unfaltering attempt to negotiate the complicated dialectic linking these two seemingly incommensurable realms.

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