In eighteenth-century England, the concept of literature was not confined as it sometimes is today to 'creative' or 'imaginative' writing. It meant the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays and letters as well as poems. What made a text 'literary' was not whether it was fictional – the eighteenth century was in grave doubt about whether the new upstart form of the novel was literature at all – but whether it conformed to certain standards of 'polite letters'. The criteria of what counted as literature, in other words, were frankly ideological: writing which embodied the values and 'tastes' of a particular social class qualified as literature, whereas a street ballad, a popular romance and perhaps even the drama did not. At this historical point, then, the 'value-ladenness' of the concept of literature was reasonably self-evident.

In the eighteenth century, however, literature did more than 'embody' certain social values: it was a vital instrument for their deeper entrenchment and wider dissemination. Eighteenth-century England had emerged, battered but intact, from a bloody civil war in the previous century which had set the social classes at each other's throats; and in the drive to reconsolidate a shaken social order, the neo-classical notions of Reason, Nature, order and propriety, epitomized in art, were key concepts. With the need to incorporate the increasingly powerful but spiritually rather raw middle classes into unity with the ruling aristocracy, to diffuse polite social manners, habits of 'correct' taste and common cultural standards, literature gained a new importance. It included a whole set of ideological institutions: periodicals, coffee houses, social and aesthetic treatises, sermons, classical translations, guidebooks to manners and morals. Literature was not a matter of 'felt
experience', 'personal response' or 'imaginative uniqueness': such terms, indissociable for us today from the whole idea of the 'literary', would not have counted for much with Henry Fielding.

It was, in fact, only with what we now call the 'Romantic period' that our own definitions of literature began to develop. The modern sense of the word 'literature' only really gets under way in the nineteenth century, Literature in this sense of the word is an historically recent phenomenon: it was invented sometime around the turn of the eighteenth century, and would have been thought extremely strange by Chaucer or even Pope. What happened first was a narrowing of the category of literature to so-called 'creative' or 'imaginative' work. The final decades of the eighteenth century witness a new division and demarcation of discourses, a radical reorganizing of what we might call the 'discursive formation' of English society. 'Poetry' comes to mean a good deal more than verse: by the time of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1821), it signifies a concept of human creativity which is radically at odds with the utilitarian ideology of early industrial capitalist England. Of course a distinction between 'factual' and 'imaginative' writing had long been recognized: the word 'poetry' or 'poesy' had traditionally singled out fiction, and Philip Sidney had entered an eloquent plea for it in his *Apology for Poetry*. But by the time of the Romantic period, literature was becoming virtually synonymous with the 'imaginative': to write about what did not exist was somehow more soul-stirring and valuable than to pen an account of Birmingham or the circulation of the blood. The word 'imaginative' contains an ambiguity suggestive of this attitude: it has a resonance of the descriptive term 'imaginary', meaning 'literally untrue', but is also of course an evaluative term, meaning 'visionary' or 'inventive'.

Since we ourselves are post-Romantics, in the sense of being products of that epoch rather than confidently posterior to it, it is hard for us to grasp just what a curious historically particular idea this is. It would certainly have seemed so to most of the English writers whose 'imaginative vision' we now reverently elevate above the merely 'prosaic' discourse of those who can find nothing more dramatic to write about than the Black Death or the Warsaw ghetto. Indeed it is in the Romantic period that the descriptive term 'prosaic' begins to acquire its negative sense of prosy, dull, uninspiring. If what does not exist is felt to be more attractive than what does, if poetry or the imagination is privileged over prose or 'hard fact', then it is a reasonable assumption that this says something significant about the kinds of society in which the Romantics lived.

The historical period in question is one of revolution: in America and France the old colonialist or feudalist regimes are overthrown by middle-
class insurrection, while England achieves its point of economic ‘take-off’, arguably on the back of the enormous profits it has reaped from the eighteenth-century slave trade and its imperial control of the seas, to become the world’s first industrial capitalist nation. But the visionary hopes and dynamic energies released by these revolutions, energies with which Romantic writing is alive, enter into potentially tragic contradiction with the harsh realities of the new bourgeois regimes. In England, a crassly philistine Utilitarianism is rapidly becoming the dominant ideology of the industrial middle class, fetishizing fact, reducing human relations to market exchanges and dismissing art as unprofitable ornamentation. The callous disciplines of early industrial capitalism uproot whole communities, convert human life into wage-slavery, enforce an alienating labour-process on the newly formed working class and understand nothing which cannot be transformed into a commodity on the open market. As the working class responds with militant protest to this oppression, and as troubling memories of revolution across the Channel still haunt their rulers, the English state reacts with a brutal political repressiveness which converts England, during part of the Romantic period, into what is in effect a police state.¹

In the face of such forces, the privilege accorded by the Romantics to the ‘creative imagination’ can be seen as considerably more than idle escapism. On the contrary, ‘literature’ now appears as one of the few enclaves in which the creative values expunged from the face of English society by industrial capitalism can be celebrated and affirmed. ‘Imaginative creation’ can be offered as an image of non-alienated labour; the intuitive, transcendental scope of the poetic mind can provide a living criticism of those rationalist or empiricist ideologies enslaved to ‘fact’. The literary work itself comes to be seen as a mysterious organic unity, in contrast to the fragmented individualism of the capitalist marketplace: it is ‘spontaneous’ rather than rationally calculated, creative rather than mechanical. The word ‘poetry’, then, no longer refers simply to a technical mode of writing: it has deep social, political and philosophical implications, and at the sound of it the ruling class might quite literally reach for its gun. Literature has become a whole alternative ideology, and the ‘imagination’ itself, as with Blake and Shelley, becomes a political force. Its task is to transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies. Most of the major Romantic poets were themselves political activists, perceiving continuity rather than conflict between their literary and social commitments.

Yet we can already begin to detect within this literary radicalism another, and to us more familiar, emphasis: a stress upon the sovereignty and autonomy of the imagination, its splendid remoteness from the merely prosaic
matters of feeding one’s children or struggling for political justice. If the ‘transcendental’ nature of the imagination offered a challenge to an anaemic rationalism, it could also offer the writer a comfortably absolute alternative to history itself. Indeed such a detachment from history reflected the Romantic writer’s actual situation. Art was becoming a commodity like anything else, and the Romantic artist little more than a minor commodity producer; for all his rhetorical claim to be ‘representative’ of humankind, to speak with the voice of the people and utter eternal verities, he existed more and more on the margins of a society which was not inclined to pay high wages to prophets. The finely passionate idealism of the Romantics, then, was also idealist in a more philosophical sense of the word. Deprived of any proper place within the social movements which might actually have transformed industrial capitalism into a just society, the writer was increasingly driven back into the solitariness of his own creative mind. The vision of a just society was often enough inverted into an impotent nostalgia for the old ‘organic’ England which had passed away. It was not until the time of William Morris, who in the late nineteenth century harnessed this Romantic humanism to the cause of the working-class movement, that the gap between poetic vision and political practice was significantly narrowed.²

It is no accident that the period we are discussing sees the rise of modern ‘aesthetics’, or the philosophy of art. It is mainly from this era, in the work of Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Coleridge and others, that we inherit our contemporary ideas of the ‘symbol’ and ‘aesthetic experience’, of ‘aesthetic harmony’ and the unique nature of the artefact. Previously men and women had written poems, staged plays or painted pictures for a variety of purposes, while others had read, watched or viewed them in a variety of ways. Now these concrete, historically variable practices were being subsumed into some special, mysterious faculty known as the ‘aesthetic’, and a new breed of aestheticians sought to lay bare its inmost structures. It was not that such questions had not been raised before, but now they began to assume a new significance. The assumption that there was an unchanging object known as ‘art’, or an isolatable experience called ‘beauty’ or the ‘aesthetic’, was largely a product of the very alienation of art from social life which we have already touched on. If literature had ceased to have any obvious function — if the writer was no longer a traditional figure in the pay of the court, the church or an aristocratic patron — then it was possible to turn this fact to literature’s advantage. The whole point of ‘creative’ writing was that it was gloriously useless, an ‘end in itself’ loftily removed from any sordid social purpose. Having lost his patron, the writer discovered a substitute in the poetic.³ It is, in fact, somewhat improbable that the Iliad was art to the ancient Greeks in the same sense that a cathedral was an artefact for the Middle Ages or Andy
Warhol's work is art for us; but the effect of aesthetics was to suppress these historical differences. Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish.

At the centre of aesthetic theory at the turn of the eighteenth century is the semi-mystical doctrine of the symbol. For Romanticism, indeed, the symbol becomes the panacea for all problems. Within it, a whole set of conflicts which were felt to be insoluble in ordinary life - between subject and object, the universal and the particular, the sensuous and the conceptual, material and spiritual, order and spontaneity - could be magically resolved. It is not surprising that such conflicts were sorely felt in this period. Objects in a society which could see them as no more than commodities appeared lifeless and inert, divorced from the human subjects who produced or used them. The concrete and the universal seemed to have drifted apart: an aridly rationalist philosophy ignored the sensuous qualities of particular things, while a short-sighted empiricism (the 'official' philosophy of the English middle class, then as now) was unable to peer beyond particular bits and pieces of the world to any total picture which they might compose. The dynamic, spontaneous energies of social progress were to be fostered, but curbed of their potentially anarchic force by a restraining social order. The symbol fused together motion and stillness, turbulent content and organic form, mind and world. Its material body was the medium of an absolute spiritual truth, one perceived by direct intuition rather than by any laborious process of critical analysis. In this sense the symbol brought such truths to bear on the mind in a way which brooked no question: either you saw it or you didn't. It was the keystone of an irrationalism, a forestalling of reasoned critical enquiry, which has been rampant in literary theory ever since. It was a unitary thing, and to dissect it - to take it apart to see how it worked - was almost as blasphemous as seeking to analyse the Holy Trinity. All of its various parts worked spontaneously together for the common good, each in its subordinate place; and it is therefore hardly surprising to find the symbol, or the literary artefact as such, being regularly offered throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an ideal model of human society itself. If only the lower orders were to forget their grievances and pull together for the good of all, much tedious turmoil could be avoided.

To speak of 'literature and ideology' as two separate phenomena which can be interrelated is, as I hope to have shown, in one sense quite unnecessary. Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology. It
has the most intimate relations to questions of social power. But if the reader is still unconvinced, the narrative of what happened to literature in the later nineteenth century might prove a little more persuasive.

If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: 'the failure of religion'. By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and minds of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. This was particularly worrying for the Victorian ruling class, because religion is for all kinds of reasons an extremely effective form of ideological control. Like all successful ideolog- ies, it works much less by explicit concepts or formulated doctrines than by image, symbol, habit, ritual and mythology. It is affective and experien- tial, entwining itself with the deepest unconscious roots of the human subject; and any social ideology which is unable to engage with such deep-seated a-rational fears and needs, as T. S. Eliot knew, is unlikely to survive very long. Religion, moreover, is capable of operating at every social level: if there is a doctrinal inflection of it for the intellectual elite, there is also a pietistic brand of it for the masses. It provides an excellent social 'cement', encompassing pious peasant, enlightened middle-class liberal and theologi-
cal intellectual in a single organization. Its ideological power lies in its capacity to 'materialize' beliefs as practices: religion is the sharing of the chalice and the blessing of the harvest, not just abstract argument about consubstantiation or hyperdulia. Its ultimate truths, like those mediated by the literary symbol, are conveniently closed to rational demonstration, and thus absolute in their claims. Finally religion, at least in its Victorian forms, is a pacifying influence, fostering meekness, self-sacrifice and the contemplative inner life. It is no wonder that the Victorian ruling class looked on the threatened dissolution of this ideological discourse with something less than equanimity.

Fortunately, however, another, remarkably similar discourse lay to hand: English literature. George Gordon, early Professor of English Literature at Oxford, commented in his inaugural lecture that 'England is sick, and . . . English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.' Gordon's words were spoken in our own century, but they find a resonance everywhere in Victorian England. It is a striking thought that had it not been for this dramatic crisis in mid-
nineteenth-century ideology, we might not today have such a plentiful supply of Jane Austen casebooks and bluffer’s guides to Pound. As religion progressively ceases to provide the social ‘cement’, affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, ‘English’ is constructed as a subject to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards. The key figure here is Matthew Arnold, always preternaturally sensitive to the needs of his social class, and engagingly candid about being so. The urgent social need, as Arnold recognizes, is to ‘Hellenize’ or cultivate the philistine middle class, who have proved unable to underpin their political and economic power with a suitably rich and subtle ideology. This can be done by transfusing into them something of the traditional style of the aristocracy, who as Arnold shrewdly perceives are ceasing to be the dominant class in England, but who have something of the ideological wherewithal to lend a hand to their middle-class masters. State-established schools, by linking the middle class to ‘the best culture of their nation’, will confer on them ‘a greatness and a noble spirit, which the tone of these classes is not of itself at present adequate to impart’.  

The true beauty of this manoeuvre, however, lies in the effect it will have in controlling and incorporating the working class:

It is of itself a serious calamity for a nation that its tone of feeling and grandeur of spirit should be lowered or dulled. But the calamity appears far more serious still when we consider that the middle classes, remaining as they are now, with their narrow, harsh, unintelligent, and unattractive spirit and culture, will almost certainly fail to mould or assimilate the masses below them, whose sympathies are at the present moment actually wider and more liberal than theirs. They arrive, these masses, eager to enter into possession of the world, to gain a more vivid sense of their own life and activity. In this their irrepressible development, their natural educators and initiators are those immediately above them, the middle classes. If these classes cannot win their sympathy or give them their direction, society is in danger of falling into anarchy.

Arnold is refreshingly unhypocritical: there is no feeble pretence that the education of the working class is to be conducted chiefly for their own benefit, or that his concern with their spiritual condition is, in one of his own most cherished terms, in the least ‘disinterested’. In the even more disarmingly candid words of a twentieth-century proponent of this view: ‘Deny to working-class children any common share in the immaterial, and presently they will grow into the men who demand with menaces a communism of the material.’ If the masses are not thrown a few novels, they may react by throwing up a few barricades.
Literature was in several ways a suitable candidate for this ideological enterprise. As a liberal, 'humanizing' pursuit, it could provide a potent antidote to political bigotry and ideological extremism. Since literature, as we know, deals in universal human values rather than in such historical trivia as civil wars, the oppression of women or the dispossessing of the English peasantry, it could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives, and might even with luck come to render them oblivious of such issues in their high-minded contemplation of eternal truths and beauties. English, as a Victorian handbook for English teachers put it, helps to 'promote sympathy and fellow feeling among all classes'; another Victorian writer speaks of literature as opening a 'serene and luminous region of truth where all may meet and expiate in common', above 'the smoke and stir, the din and turmoil of man's lower life of care and business and debate'.

Literature would rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed – namely, that of their masters. It would communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action. It would give them a pride in their national language and literature: if scanty education and extensive hours of labour prevented them personally from producing a literary masterpiece, they could take pleasure in the thought that others of their own kind – English people – had done so. The people, according to a study of English literature written in 1891, 'need political culture, instruction, that is to say, in what pertains to their relation to the State, to their duties as citizens; and they need also to be impressed sentimentally by having the presentation in legend and history of heroic and patriotic examples brought vividly and attractively before them'.

All of this, moreover, could be achieved without the cost and labour of teaching them the Classics: English literature was written in their own language, and so was conveniently available to them.

Like religion, literature works primarily by emotion and experience, and so was admirably well-fitted to carry through the ideological task which religion left off. Indeed by our own time literature has become effectively identical with the opposite of analytical thought and conceptual enquiry: whereas scientists, philosophers and political theorists are saddled with these drably discursive pursuits, students of literature occupy the more prized territory of feeling and experience. Whose experience, and what kinds of feeling, is a different question. Literature from Arnold onwards is
the enemy of ‘ideological dogma’, an attitude which might have come as a surprise to Dante, Milton and Pope; the truth or falsity of beliefs such as that blacks are inferior to whites is less important than what it feels like to experience them. Arnold himself had beliefs, of course, though like everybody else he regarded his own beliefs as reasoned positions rather than ideological dogmas. Even so, it was not the business of literature to communicate such beliefs directly – to argue openly, for example, that private property is the bulwark of liberty. Instead, literature should convey timeless truths, thus distracting the masses from their immediate commitments, nurturing in them a spirit of tolerance and generosity, and so ensuring the survival of private property. Just as Arnold attempted in Literature and Dogma and God and the Bible to dissolve away the embarrassingly doctrinal bits of Christianity into poetically suggestive sonorities, so the pill of middle-class ideology was to be sweetened by the sugar of literature.

There was another sense in which the ‘experiential’ nature of literature was ideologically convenient. For ‘experience’ is not only the homeland of ideology, the place where it takes root most effectively; it is also in its literary form a kind of vicarious self-fulfilment. If you do not have the money and leisure to visit the Far East, except perhaps as a soldier in the pay of British imperialism, then you can always ‘experience’ it at second hand by reading Conrad or Kipling. Indeed according to some literary theories this is even more real than strolling round Bangkok. The actually impoverished experience of the mass of people, an impoverishment bred by their social conditions, can be supplemented by literature: instead of working to change such conditions (which Arnold, to his credit, did more thoroughly than almost any of those who sought to inherit his mantle), you can vicariously fulfil someone’s desire for a fuller life by handing them Pride and Prejudice.

It is significant, then, that ‘English’ as an academic subject was first institutionalized not in the Universities, but in the Mechanics’ Institutes, working men’s colleges and extension lecturing circuits. English was literally the poor man’s Classics – a way of providing a cheapish ‘liberal’ education for those beyond the charmed circles of public school and Oxbridge. From the outset, in the work of ‘English’ pioneers like F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, the emphasis was on solidarity between the social classes, the cultivation of ‘larger sympathies’, the instillation of national pride and the transmission of ‘moral’ values. This last concern – still the distinctive hallmark of literary studies in England, and a frequent source of bemusement to intellectuals from other cultures – was an essential part of the ideological project; indeed the rise of ‘English’ is more or less concomitant with an historic shift in the very meaning of the term ‘moral’, of which
Arnold, Henry James and F. R. Leavis are the major critical exponents. Morality is no longer to be grasped as a formulated code or explicit ethical system: it is rather a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself, with the oblique, nuanced particulars of human experience. Somewhat rephrased, this can be taken as meaning that the old religious ideologies have lost their force, and that a more subtle communication of moral values, one which works by 'dramatic enactment' rather than rebarbative abstraction, is thus in order. Since such values are nowhere more vividly dramatized than in literature, brought home to 'felt experience' with all the unquestionable reality of a blow on the head, literature becomes more than just a handmaiden of moral ideology: it is moral ideology for the modern age, as the work of F. R. Leavis was most graphically to evince.

The working class was not the only oppressed layer of Victorian society at whom 'English' was specifically beamed. English literature, reflected a Royal Commission witness in 1877, might be considered a suitable subject for 'women . . . and the second- and third-rate men who . . . become schoolmasters.'12 The 'softening' and 'humanizing' effects of English, terms recurrently used by its early proponents, are within the existing ideological stereotypes of gender clearly feminine. The rise of English in England ran parallel to the gradual, grudging admission of women to the institutions of higher education; and since English was an untaxing sort of affair, concerned with the finer feelings rather than with the more virile topics of bona fide academic 'disciplines', it seemed a convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies, who were in any case excluded from science and the professions. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, first Professor of English at Cambridge University, would open with the word 'Gentlemen' lectures addressed to a hall filled largely with women. Though modern male lecturers may have changed their manners, the ideological conditions which make English a popular University subject for women to read have not.

If English had its feminine aspect, however, it also acquired a masculine one as the century drew on. The era of the academic establishment of English is also the era of high imperialism in England. As British capitalism became threatened and progressively outstripped by its younger German and American rivals, the squalid, undignified scramble of too much capital chasing too few overseas territories, which was to culminate in 1914 in the first imperialist world war, created the urgent need for a sense of national mission and identity. What was at stake in English studies was less English literature than English literature: our great 'national poets' Shakespeare and Milton, the sense of an 'organic' national tradition and identity to which new recruits could be admitted by the study of humane letters. The reports of
educational bodies and official enquiries into the teaching of English, in this period and in the early twentieth century, are strewn with nostalgic back-references to the ‘organic’ community of Elizabethan England in which nobles and groundlings found a common meeting-place in the Shakespearian theatre, and which might still be reinvented today. It is no accident that the author of one of the most influential Government reports in this area, *The Teaching of English in England* (1921), was none other than Sir Henry Newbolt, minor jingoist poet and perpetrator of the immortal line ‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’ Chris Baldick has pointed to the importance of the admission of English literature to the Civil Service examinations in the Victorian period: armed with this conveniently packaged version of their own cultural treasures, the servants of British imperialism could sally forth overseas secure in a sense of their national identity, and able to display that cultural superiority to their envying colonial peoples.\(^\text{13}\)

It took rather longer for English, a subject fit for women, workers and those wishing to impress the natives, to penetrate the bastions of ruling-class power in Oxford and Cambridge. English was an upstart, amateurish affair as academic subjects went, hardly able to compete on equal terms with the rigours of Greats or philology; since every English gentleman read his own literature in his spare time anyway, what was the point of submitting it to systematic study? Fierce rearguard actions were fought by both ancient Universities against this distressingly dilettante subject: the definition of an academic subject was what could be examined, and since English was no more than idle gossip about literary taste it was difficult to know how to make it unpleasant enough to qualify as a proper academic pursuit. This, it might be said, is one of the few problems associated with the study of English which have since been effectively resolved. The frivolous contempt for his subject displayed by the first really ‘literary’ Oxford professor, Sir Walter Raleigh, has to be read to be believed.\(^\text{14}\) Raleigh held his post in the years leading up to the First World War; and his relief at the outbreak of the war, an event which allowed him to abandon the feminine vagaries of literature and put his pen to something more manly – war propaganda – is palpable in his writing. The only way in which English seemed likely to justify its existence in the ancient Universities was by systematically mistaking itself for the Classics; but the classicists were hardly keen to have this pathetic parody of themselves around.

If the first imperialist world war more or less put paid to Sir Walter Raleigh, providing him with an heroic identity more comfortably in line with that of his Elizabethan namesake, it also signalled the final victory of English studies at Oxford and Cambridge. One of the most strenuous
antagonists of English – philology – was closely bound up with Germanic influence; and since England happened to be passing through a major war with Germany, it was possible to smear classical philology as a form of ponderous Teutonic nonsense with which no self-respecting Englishman should be caught associating. England’s victory over Germany meant a renewal of national pride, an upsurge of patriotism which could only aid English’s cause; but at the same time the deep trauma of the war, its almost intolerable questioning of every previously held cultural assumption, gave rise to a ‘spiritual hungering’, as one contemporary commentator described it, for which poetry seemed to provide an answer. It is a chastening thought that we owe the University study of English, in part at least, to a meaningless massacre. The Great War, with its carnage of ruling-class rhetoric, put paid to some of the more strident forms of chauvinism on which English had previously thrived: there could be few more Walter Raleighs after Wilfred Owen. English Literature rode to power on the back of wartime nationalism; but it also represented a search for spiritual solutions on the part of an English ruling class whose sense of identity had been profoundly shaken, whose psyche was ineradicably scarred by the horrors it had endured. Literature would be at once solace and reaffirmation, a familiar ground on which Englishmen could regroup both to explore, and to find some alternative to, the nightmare of history.

The architects of the new subject at Cambridge were on the whole individuals who could be absolved from the crime and guilt of having led working-class Englishmen over the top. F. R. Leavis had served as a medical orderly at the front; Queenie Dorothy Roth, later Q. D. Leavis, was as a woman exempt from such involvements, and was in any case still a child at the outbreak of war. I. A. Richards entered the army after graduation; the renowned pupils of these pioneers, William Empson and L. C. Knights, were also still children in 1914. The champions of English, moreover, stemmed on the whole from an alternative social class to that which had led Britain into war. F. R. Leavis was the son of a musical instruments dealer, Q. D. Roth the daughter of a draper and hosier, I. A. Richards the son of a works manager in Cheshire. English was to be fashioned not by the patrician dilettantes who occupied the early Chairs of Literature at the ancient universities, but by the offspring of the provincial petty bourgeoisie. They were members of a social class entering the traditional Universities for the first time, able to identify and challenge the social assumptions which informed its literary judgements in a way that the devotees of Sir Arthur Quiller
Couch were not. None of them had suffered the crippling disadvantages of a purely literary education of the Quiller Couch kind: F. R. Leavis had migrated to English from history, his pupil Q. D. Roth drew in her work on psychology and cultural anthropology. I. A. Richards had been trained in mental and moral sciences.

In fashioning English into a serious discipline, these men and women blasted apart the assumptions of the pre-war upper-class generation. No subsequent movement within English studies has come near to recapturing the courage and radicalism of their stand. In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else. English was not only a subject worth studying, but the supremely civilizing pursuit, the spiritual essence of the social formation. Far from constituting some amateur or impressionistic enterprise, English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence – what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationship with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential values – were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny. Scrutiny was the title of the critical journal launched in 1932 by the Leavises, which has yet to be surpassed in its tenacious devotion to the moral centrality of English studies, their crucial relevance to the quality of social life as a whole. Whatever the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of Scrutiny, however, one might argue the toss between the anti-Leavisian prejudice of the literary establishment and the waspishness of the Scrutiny movement itself, the fact remains that English students in England today are ‘Leavisites’ whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic intervention. There is no more need to be a card-carrying Leavisite today than there is to be a card-carrying Copernican: that current has entered the bloodstream of English studies in England as Copernicus reshaped our astronomical beliefs, has become a form of spontaneous critical wisdom as deep-seated as our conviction that the earth moves round the sun. That the ‘Leavis debate’ is effectively dead is perhaps the major sign of Scrutiny’s victory.

What the Leavises saw was that if the Sir Arthur Quiller Couches were allowed to win out, literary criticism would be shunted into an historical siding of no more inherent significance than the question of whether one preferred potatoes to tomatoes. In the face of such whimsical ‘taste’, they stressed the centrality of rigorous critical analysis, a disciplined attention to the ‘words on the page’. They urged this not simply for technical or aesthetic reasons, but because it had the closest relevance to the spiritual crisis of modern civilization. Literature was important not only in itself, but because it encapsulated creative energies which were everywhere on the defensive in
modern 'commercial' society. In literature, and perhaps in literature alone, a vital feel for the creative uses of language was still manifest, in contrast to the philistine devaluing of language and traditional culture blatantly apparent in 'mass society'. The quality of a society's language was the most telling index of the quality of its personal and social life: a society which had ceased to value literature was one lethally closed to the impulses which had created and sustained the best of human civilization. In the civilized manners of eighteenth-century England, or in the 'natural', 'organic' agrarian society of the seventeenth century, one could discern a form of living sensibility without which modern industrial society would atrophy and die.

To be a certain kind of English student in Cambridge in the late 1920s and 1930s was to be caught up in this buoyant, polemical onslaught against the most trivializing features of industrial capitalism. It was rewarding to know that being an English student was not only valuable but the most important way of life one could imagine - that one was contributing in one's own modest way to rolling back twentieth-century society in the direction of the 'organic' community of seventeenth-century England, that one moved at the most progressive tip of civilization itself. Those who came up to Cambridge humbly expecting to read a few poems and novels were quickly demystified: English was not just one discipline among many but the most central subject of all, immeasurably superior to law, science, politics, philosophy or history. These subjects, Scrutiny grudgingly conceded, had their place; but it was a place to be assessed by the touchstone of literature, which was less an academic subject than a spiritual exploration coterminous with the fate of civilization itself. With breathtaking boldness, Scrutiny redrew the map of English literature in ways from which criticism has never quite recovered. The main thoroughfares on this map ran through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson, the Jacobean and Metaphysicals, Bunyan, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, George Eliot, Hopkins, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. This was 'English literature': Spencer, Dryden, Restoration drama, Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Browning, most of the Victorian novelists, Joyce, Woolf and most writers after D. H. Lawrence constituted a network of 'B' roads interspersed with a good few cul-de-sacs. Dickens was first out and then in; 'English' included two and a half women, counting Emily Bronte as a marginal case; almost all of its authors were conservatives.

Dismissive of mere 'literary' values, Scrutiny insisted that how one evaluated literary works was deeply bound up with deeper judgements about the nature of history and society as a whole. Confronted with critical approaches
which saw the dissection of literary texts as somehow discourteous, an equivalent in the literary realm to grievous bodily harm, it promoted the most scrupulous analysis of such sacrosanct objects. Appalled by the complacent assumption that any work written in elegant English was more or less as good as any other, it insisted on the most rigorous discrimination between different literary qualities: some works ‘made for life’, while others most assuredly did not. Restless with the cloistered aestheticism of conventional criticism, Leavis in his early years saw the need to address social and political questions: he even at one point guardedly entertained a form of economic communism. *Scrutiny* was not just a journal, but the focus of a moral and cultural crusade: its adherents would go out to the schools and universities to do battle there, nurturing through the study of literature the kind of rich, complex, mature, discriminating, morally serious responses (all key *Scrutiny* terms) which would equip individuals to survive in a mechanized society of trashy romances, alienated labour, banal advertisements and vulgarizing mass media.

I say ‘survive’, because apart from Leavis’s brief toying with ‘some form of economic communism’, there was never any serious consideration of actually trying to change such a society. It was less a matter of seeking to transform the mechanized society which gave birth to this withered culture than of seeking to withstand it. In this sense, one might claim, *Scrutiny* had thrown in the towel from the start. The only form of change it contemplated was education: by implanting themselves in the educational institutions, the Scrutineers hoped to develop a rich, organic sensibility in selected individuals here and there, who might then transmit this sensibility to others. In this faith in education, Leavis was the true inheritor of Matthew Arnold. But since such individuals were bound to be few and far between, given the insidious effects of ‘mass civilization’, the only real hope was that an embattled cultivated minority might keep the torch of culture burning in the contemporary waste land and pass it on, via their pupils, to posterity. There are real grounds for doubting that education has the transformative power which Arnold and Leavis assigned to it. It is, after all, *part* of society rather than a solution to it; and who, as Marx once asked, will educate the educators? *Scrutiny* espoused this idealist ‘solution’, however, because it was loath to contemplate a political one. Spending your English lessons alerting schoolchildren to the manipulativeness of advertisements or the linguistic poverty of the popular press is an important task, and certainly more important than getting them to memorize *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. *Scrutiny* actually founded such ‘cultural studies’ in England, as one of its most enduring achievements. But it is also possible to point out to students that
advertisements and the popular press only exist in their present form because of the profit motive. ‘Mass’ culture is not the inevitable product of ‘industrial’ society, but the offspring of a particular form of industrialism which organizes production for profit rather than for use, which concerns itself with what will sell rather than with what is valuable. There is no reason to assume that such a social order is unchangeable; but the changes necessary would go far beyond the sensitive reading of King Lear. The whole Scrutiny project was at once hair-raisingly radical and really rather absurd. As one commentator has shrewdly put it, the Decline of the West was felt to be avertible by close reading. Was it really true that literature could roll back the deadening effects of industrial labour and the philistinism of the media? It was doubtless comforting to feel that by reading Henry James one belonged to the moral vanguard of civilization itself; but what of all those people who did not read Henry James, who had never even heard of James, and would no doubt go to their graves complacently ignorant that he had been and gone? These people certainly composed the overwhelming social majority; were they morally callous, humanly banal and imaginatively bankrupt? One was speaking perhaps of one’s own parents and friends here, and so needed to be a little circumspect. Many of these people seemed morally serious and sensitive enough: they showed no particular tendency to go around murdering, looting and plundering, and even if they did it seemed implausible to attribute this to the fact that they had not read Henry James. The Scrutiny case was inescapably elitist: it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College. ‘Ordinary’ people seemed acceptable if they were seventeenth-century cowherds or ‘vital’ Australian bushmen.

But there was another problem, too, more or less the reverse of this. For if not all of those who could not recognize an enjambement were nasty and brutish, not all of those who could were morally pure. Many people were indeed deep in high culture, but it would transpire a decade or so after the birth of Scrutiny that this had not prevented some of them from engaging in such activities as superintending the murder of Jews in central Europe. The strength of Leavisian criticism was that it was able to provide an answer, as Sir Walter Raleigh was not, to the question, why read Literature? The answer, in a nutshell, was that it made you a better person. Few reasons could have been more persuasive than that. When the Allied troops moved into the concentration camps some years after the founding of Scrutiny, to arrest commandants who had whiled away their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe, it appeared that someone had some explaining to do. If reading literature did make you a better person, then it was hardly in the direct ways
that this case at its most euphoric had imagined. It was possible to explore the ‘great tradition’ of the English novel and believe that in doing so you were addressing questions of fundamental value – questions which were of vital relevance to the lives of men and women wasted in fruitless labour in the factories of industrial capitalism. But it was also conceivable that you were destructively cutting yourself off from such men and women, who might be a little slow to recognize how a poetic enjambement enacted a movement of physical balancing.

The lower-middle-class origins of the architects of English are perhaps relevant here. Nonconformist, provincial, hard-working and morally conscientious, the Scrutineers had no difficulty in identifying for what it was the frivolous amateurism of the upper-class English gentlemen who filled the early Chairs of Literature at the ancient Universities. These men were not their kind of men: they were not what the son of a shopkeeper or daughter of a draper would be especially inclined to respect, as a social elite who had excluded their own people from the ancient Universities. But if the lower middle class has a deep animus against the effete aristocracy perched above it, it also works hard to discriminate itself from the working class set below it, a class into whose ranks it is always in danger of falling. Scrutiny arose out of this social ambivalence: radical in respect of the literary-academic Establishment, coterie-minded with regard to the mass of the people. Its fierce concern with ‘standards’ challenged the patrician dilettantes who felt that Walter Savage Landor was probably just as charming in his own way as John Milton, at the same time as it posed searching tests for anyone trying to muscle in on the game. The gain was a resolute singleness of purpose, uncontaminated by wine-tasting triviality on the one hand and ‘mass’ banality on the other. The loss was a profoundly ingrown isolationism: Scrutiny became a defensive elite which, like the Romantics, viewed itself as ‘central’ while being in fact peripheral, believed itself to be the ‘real’ Cambridge while the real Cambridge was busy denying it academic posts, and perceived itself as the vanguard of civilization while nostalgically lauding the organic wholeness of exploited seventeenth-century farm labourers.

The only sure fact about the organic society, as Raymond Williams has commented, is that it has always gone. Organic societies are just convenient myths for belabouring the mechanized life of modern industrial capitalism. Unable to present a political alternative to this social order, the Scrutineers offered an ‘historical’ one instead, as the Romantics had done before them. They insisted, of course, that there was no literal returning to the golden age, as almost every English writer who has pressed the claims of some historical utopia has been careful to do. Where the organic society lingered
on for the Leavisites was in certain uses of the English language. The language of commercial society was abstract and anaemic: it had lost touch with the living roots of sensuous experience. In really ‘English’ writing, however, language ‘concretely enacted’ such felt experience: true English literature was verbally rich, complex, sensuous and particular, and the best poem, to caricature the case a little, was one which read aloud sounded rather like chewing an apple. The ‘health’ and ‘vitality’ of such language was the product of a ‘sane’ civilization: it embodied a creative wholeness which had been historically lost, and to read literature was thus to regain vital touch with the roots of one’s own being. Literature was in a sense an organic society all of its own: it was important because it was nothing less than a whole social ideology.

The Leavisian belief in ‘essential Englishness’ – its conviction that some kinds of English were more English than others – was a kind of petty-bourgeois version of the upper-class chauvinism which had helped to bring English to birth in the first place. Such rampant jingoism was less in evidence after 1918, as ex-servicemen and state-aided middle-class students began to infiltrate the public-school ethos of Oxbridge, and ‘Englishness’ was a more modest, home-spun alternative to it. English as a subject was in part the offshoot of a gradual shift in class tone within English culture: ‘Englishness’ was less a matter of imperialist flag-waving than of country dancing; rural, populist and provincial rather than metropolitan and aristocratic. Yet if it excoriated the bland assumptions of a Sir Walter Raleigh on one level, it was also in complicity with them on another. It was chauvinism modulated by a new social class, who with a little straining could see themselves as rooted in the ‘English people’ of John Bunyan rather than in a snobbish ruling caste. Their task was to safeguard the robust vitality of Shakespearian English from the Daily Herald, and from ill-starred languages such as French where words were not able concretely to enact their own meanings. This whole notion of language rested upon a naive mimeticism: the theory was that words are somehow healthiest when they approach the condition of things, and thus cease to be words at all. Language is alienated or degenerate unless it is crammed with the physical textures of actual experience, plumped with the rank juices of real life. Armed with this trust in essential Englishness, latinate or verbally disembodied writers (Milton, Shelley) could be shown the door, and pride of place assigned to the ‘dramatically concrete’ (Donne, Hopkins). There was no question of seeing such re-mapping of the literary terrain as simply one arguable construction of a tradition, informed by definite ideological preconceptions: such authors, it was felt, just did manifest the essence of Englishness.
The literary map was in fact already being drawn elsewhere, by a body of criticism which influenced Leavis greatly. In 1915 T. S. Eliot had come to London, son of an ‘aristocratic’ St Louis family whose traditional role of cultural leadership was being eroded by the industrial middle class of their own nation. Repelled like Scrutiny by the spiritual barrenness of industrial capitalism, Eliot had glimpsed an alternative in the life of the old American South – yet another candidate for the elusive organic society, where blood and breeding still counted for something. Culturally displaced and spiritually dispossessed, Eliot arrived in England, and in what has rightly been described as ‘the most ambitious feat of cultural imperialism the century seems likely to produce’, began to carry out a wholesale salvage and demolition job on its literary traditions. The Metaphysical poets and Jacobean dramatists were suddenly upgraded; Milton and the Romantics were rudely toppled; selected European products, including the French Symbolists, were imported.

This, as with Scrutiny, was much more than a ‘literary’ revaluation: it reflected nothing less than a whole political reading of English history. In the early seventeenth century, when the absolute monarchy and the Anglican church still flourished, poets like John Donne and George Herbert (both conservative Anglicans) displayed a unity of sensibility, an easy fusion of thought and feeling. Language was in direct touch with sensory experience, the intellect was ‘at the tip of the senses’, and to have a thought was as physical as smelling a rose. By the end of the century, the English had fallen from this paradisal state. A turbulent civil war had beheaded the monarch, lower-class puritanism had disrupted the Church, and the forces which were to produce modern secular society – science, democracy, rationalism, economic individualism – were in the ascendant. From about Andrew Marvell onwards, then, it was downhill all the way. Somewhere in the seventeenth century, though Eliot is unsure of the precise date, a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ set in: thinking was no longer like smelling, language drifted loose from experience, and the upshot was the literary disaster of John Milton, who anaesthetized the English language into an arid ritual. Milton was also, of course, a puritan revolutionary, which may not have been entirely irrelevant to Eliot’s distaste; indeed he was part of the great nonconformist radical tradition in England which produced F. R. Leavis, whose quickness to endorse Eliot’s judgement of Paradise Lost is thus particularly ironic. After Milton, the English sensibility continued to dissociate itself into separate halves: some poets could think but not feel, while others could feel but not think. English literature degenerated into Romanticism and Victorianism: by now the heresies of ‘poetic genius’,...
'personality' and the 'inner light' were firmly entrenched, all anarchic doctrines of a society which had lost collective belief and declined into an errant individualism. It was not until the appearance of T. S. Eliot that English literature began to recuperate.

What Eliot was in fact assaulting was the whole ideology of middle-class liberalism, the official ruling ideology of industrial capitalist society. Liberalism, Romanticism, protestantism, economic individualism: all of these are the perverted dogmas of those expelled from the happy garden of the organic society, with nothing to fall back on but their own paltry individual resources. Eliot's own solution is an extreme right-wing authoritarianism: men and women must sacrifice their petty 'personalities' and opinions to an impersonal order. In the sphere of literature, this impersonal order is the Tradition. Like any other literary tradition, Eliot's is in fact a highly selective affair: indeed its governing principle seems to be not so much which works of the past are eternally valuable, as which will help T. S. Eliot to write his own poetry. This arbitrary construct, however, is then paradoxically imbued with the force of an absolute authority. The major works of literature form between them an ideal order, occasionally redefined by the entry of a new masterpiece. The existing classics within the cramped space of the Tradition politely reshuffle their positions to make room for a newcomer, and look different in the light of it; but since this newcomer must somehow have been in principle included in the Tradition all along to have gained admission at all, its entry serves to confirm that Tradition's central values. The Tradition, in other words, can never be caught napping: it has somehow mysteriously foreseen the major works still unwritten, and though these works, once produced, will occasion a revaluation of the Tradition itself, they will be effortlessly absorbed into its maw. A literary work can be valid only by existing in the Tradition, as a Christian can be saved only by living in God; all poetry may be literature but only some poetry is Literature, depending on whether or not the Tradition happens to flow through it. This, like divine grace, is an inscrutable affair: the Tradition, like the Almighty or some whimsical absolute monarch, sometimes withholds its favour from 'major' literary reputations and bestows it instead on some humble little text buried in the historical backwoods. Membership of the club is by invitation only: some writers, such as T. S. Eliot, just do discover that the Tradition (or the 'European mind', as Eliot sometimes calls it) is spontaneously welling up within them, but as with the recipients of divine grace this is not a question of personal merit, and there is nothing much you can do about it one way or the other. Membership of the Tradition thus permits you to be at once authoritarian and self-abnegatingly humble, a
combination which Eliot was later to find even more possible through membership of the Christian Church.

In the political sphere, Eliot's advocacy of authority took various forms. He flirted with the quasi-fascistic French movement Action Française, and made a few rather negative references to Jews. After his conversion to Christianity in the mid-1920s he advocated a largely rural society run by a few 'great families' and a small elite of theological intellectuals much like himself. Most people in such a society would be Christian, though since Eliot had an extremely conservative estimate of most people's ability to believe anything at all, this religious faith would have to be largely unconscious, lived out in the rhythm of the seasons. This panacea for the redemption of modern society was being offered to the world roughly at the time when Hitler's troops were marching into Poland.

The advantage of a language closely wedded to experience, for Eliot, was that it enabled the poet to bypass the deadly abstractions of rationalist thought and seize his readers by the 'cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts'. Poetry was not to engage the reader's mind: it did not really matter what a poem actually meant, and Eliot professed himself to be quite unperturbed by apparently outlandish interpretations of his own work. Meaning was no more than a sop thrown to the reader to keep him distracted, while the poem went stealthily to work on him in more physical and unconscious ways. The erudite Eliot, author of intellectually difficult poems, in fact betrayed all the contempt for the intellect of any right-wing irrationalist. He shrewdly perceived that the languages of middle-class liberal rationalism were exhausted: nobody was much likely to be convinced by talk of 'progress' or 'reason' any more, not least when millions of corpses lay on the battlefields of Europe. Middle-class liberalism had failed; and the poet must delve behind these discredited notions by evolving a sensory language which would make 'direct communication with the nerves'. He must select words with 'a network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires', suggestively enigmatic images which would penetrate to those 'primitive' levels at which all men and women experienced alike. Perhaps the organic society lived on after all, though only in the collective unconscious; perhaps there were certain deep symbols and rhythms in the psyche, archetypes immutable throughout history, which poetry might touch and revive. The crisis of European society – global war, severe class-conflict, failing capitalist economies – might be resolved by turning one's back on history altogether and putting mythology in its place. Deep below finance capitalism lay the Fisher King, potent images of birth, death and resurrection in which human beings might discover a common
identity. Eliot accordingly published *The Waste Land* in 1922, a poem which intimates that fertility cults hold the clue to the salvation of the West. His scandalous avant-garde techniques were deployed for the most arrière-garde ends: they wrenched apart routine consciousness so as to revive in the reader a sense of common identity in the blood and guts.

Eliot’s view that language had become stale and unprofitable in industrial society, unsuitable for poetry, had affinities with Russian Formalism; but it was also shared by Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme and the Imagist movement. Poetry had fallen foul of the Romantics, become a mawkish, womanly affair full of gush and fine feeling. Language had gone soft and lost its virility: it needed to be stiffened up again, made hard and stone-like, reconnected with the physical world. The ideal Imagist poem would be a laconic three-line affair of gritty images, like an army officer’s rapped-out command. Emotions were messy and suspect, part of a clapped-out epoch of high-flown liberal-individualist sentiment which must now yield to the dehumanized mechanical world of modern society. For D. H. Lawrence, emotions, ‘personality’ and the ‘ego’ were equally discredited, and must give way to the ruthlessly impersonal force of spontaneous-creative Life. Behind the critical stance, once again, was politics: middle-class liberalism was finished, and would be ousted by some version of that tougher, masculine discipline which Pound was to discover in fascism.

The *Scrutiny* case, at least at first, did not take the road of extreme right-wing reaction. On the contrary, it represented nothing less than the last-ditch stand of liberal humanism, concerned, as Eliot and Pound were not, with the unique value of the individual and the creative realm of the interpersonal. These values could be summarized as ‘Life’, a word which *Scrutiny* made a virtue out of not being able to define. If you asked for some reasoned theoretical statement of their case, you had thereby demonstrated that you were in the outer darkness: either you felt Life or you did not. Great literature was a literature reverently open to Life, and what Life was could be demonstrated by great literature. The case was circular, intuitive, and proof against all argument, reflecting the enclosed coterie of the Leavisites themselves. It was not clear what side Life put you on in the General Strike, or whether celebrating its vibrant presence in poetry was compatible with endorsing mass unemployment. If Life was creatively at work anywhere then it was in the writings of D. H. Lawrence, whom Leavis championed from an early date; yet ‘spontaneous-creative life’ in Lawrence seemed happily to co-exist with the most virulent sexism, racism and authoritarianism, and few of the Scrutineers seemed particularly disturbed by the contradiction. The extreme right-wing features which Lawrence shared with Eliot and Pound – a raging contempt for liberal and democratic values, a slavish
submission to impersonal authority – were more or less edited out: Lawrence was effectively reconstructed as a liberal humanist, and slotted into place as the triumphant culmination of the ‘great tradition’ of English fiction from Jane Austen to George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad.

Leavis was right to discern in the acceptable face of D. H. Lawrence a powerful critique of the inhumanity of industrial capitalist England. Lawrence, like Leavis himself, was among other things an inheritor of the nineteenth-century lineage of Romantic protest against the mechanized wage-slavery of capitalism, its crippling social oppressiveness and cultural devastation. But since both Lawrence and Leavis refused a political analysis of the system they opposed, they were left with nothing but talk about spontaneous-creative life which grew more stridently abstract the more it insisted on the concrete. As it became less and less apparent how responding to Marvell around the seminar table was to transform the mechanized labour of factory workers, the liberal humanism of Leavis was pressed into the arms of the most banal political reaction. Scrutiny survived until 1953, and Leavis lived until 1978; but in these later stages Life evidently entailed a fierce hostility to popular education, an implacable opposition to the transistor radio and a dark suspicion that ‘telly-addiction’ had much to do with demands for student participation in higher education. Modern ‘technologico-Benthamite’ society was to be condemned unreservedly as ‘cretinized and cretinizing’: this, it seemed, was the final consequence of rigorous critical discrimination. The later Leavis was to regret the passing of the English gentleman; the wheel had come full circle.

Leavis’s name is closely associated with ‘practical criticism’ and ‘close reading’, and some of his own published work ranks with the most subtle, pioneering English criticism that the century has seen. It is worth pondering this term ‘practical criticism’ a little further. Practical criticism meant a method which spurned belle-litteristic waffle and was properly unafraid to take the text apart; but it also assumed that you could judge literary ‘greatness’ and ‘centrality’ by bringing a focused attentiveness to bear on poems or pieces of prose isolated from their cultural and historical contexts. Given Scrutiny’s assumptions, there was really no problem here: if literature is ‘healthy’ when it manifests a concrete feel for immediate experience, then you can judge this from a scrap of prose as surely as a doctor can judge whether or not you are sick by registering your pulse-beat and skin-colour. There was no need to examine the work in its historical context, or even discuss the structure of ideas on which it drew. It was a matter of assessing
the tone and sensibility of a particular passage, 'placing' it definitively and then moving on to the next. It is not clear how this procedure was more than just a more rigorous form of wine-tasting, given that what the literary impressionists might call 'blissful' you might call 'maturely robust'. If Life seemed altogether too broad and nebulous a term, the critical techniques for detecting it seemed correspondingly too narrow. Since practical criticism in itself threatened to become too pragmatic a pursuit for a movement concerned with nothing less than the fate of civilization, the Leavisites needed to underpin it with a 'metaphysic', and found one ready to hand in the work of D. H. Lawrence. Since Life was not a theoretical system but a matter of particular intuitions, you could always take your stand on these in order to attack other people's systems; but since Life was also as absolute a value as you could imagine, you could equally use it to lambaste those utilitarians and empiricists who could see no further than their noses. It was possible to spend quite a lot of time crossing from one of these fronts to another, depending on the direction of the enemy fire. Life was as remorseless and unquestionable a metaphysical principle as you could wish, dividing the literary sheep from the goats with evangelical certainty; but since it only ever manifested itself in concrete particularities, it constituted no systematic theory in itself and was consequently invulnerable to assault.

'Close reading' is also a phrase worth examining. Like 'practical criticism' it meant detailed analytic interpretation, providing a valuable antidote to aestheticist chit-chat; but it also seemed to imply that every previous school of criticism had read only an average of three words per line. To call for close reading, in fact, is to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to this rather than to something else: to the 'words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them. It implies a limiting as well as a focusing of concern – a limiting badly needed by literary talk which would ramble comfortably from the texture of Tennyson's language to the length of his beard. But in dispelling such anecdotal irrelevancies, 'close reading' also held at bay a good deal else: it encouraged the illusion that any piece of language, 'literary' or not, can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation. It was the beginnings of a 'reification' of the literary work, the treatment of it as an object in itself, which was to be triumphantly consummated in the American New Criticism.

A major link between Cambridge English and the American New Criticism was the work of the Cambridge critic I. A. Richards. If Leavis sought to redeem criticism by converting it into something approximating a religion, thus carrying on the work of Matthew Arnold, Richards sought in his
works of the 1920s to lend it a firm basis in the principles of a hard-nosed 'scientific' psychology. The brisk, bloodless quality of his prose contrasts suggestively with the tortuous intensity of a Leavis. Society is in crisis, Richards argues, because historical change, and scientific discovery in particular, has outstripped and devalued the traditional mythologies by which men and women have lived. The delicate equipoise of the human psyche has therefore been dangerously disturbed; and since religion will no longer serve to retrim it, poetry must do the job instead. Poetry, Richards remarks with stunning off-handedness, 'is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos'. Like Arnold, he advances literature as a conscious ideology for reconstructing social order, and does so in the socially disruptive, economically decaying, politically unstable years which followed the Great War.

Modern science, Richards claims, is the model of true knowledge, but emotionally it leaves something to be desired. It will not satisfy the mass of the people's demand for answers to the questions 'what?' and 'why?', contenting itself instead with answering the question 'how?'. Richards himself does not believe that 'what?' and 'why?' are genuine questions, but he generously concedes that most people do; and unless some pseudo-answers are supplied to such pseudo-questions society is likely to fall apart. The role of poetry is to supply such pseudo-answers. Poetry is an 'emotive' rather than 'referential' language, a kind of 'pseudo-statement' which appears to describe the world but in fact simply organizes our feelings about it in satisfying ways. The most efficient kind of poetry is that which organizes the maximum number of impulses with the minimum amount of conflict or frustration. Without such psychic therapy, standards of value are likely to collapse beneath the 'more sinister potentialities of the cinema and the loud-speaker'.

Richards's quantifying, behaviourist model of the mind was in fact part of the social problem to which he was proposing a solution. Far from questioning the alienated view of science as a purely instrumental, neutrally 'referential' affair, he subscribes to this positivist fantasy and then lamely seeks to supplement it with something more cheering. Whereas Leavis waged war on the technologico-Benthamites, Richards tried to beat them at their own game. Linking a defective utilitarian theory of value to an essentially aestheticist view of human experience (art, Richards assumes, defines all the most excellent experiences), he offers poetry as a means of 'exquisitely reconciling' the anarchy of modern existence. If historical contradictions cannot be resolved in reality, they can be harmoniously conciliated as discrete psychological 'impulses' within the contemplative mind. Action is not
especially desirable, since it tends to impede any full equilibrium of impulses. 'No life,' Richards remarks, 'can be excellent in which the elementary responses are disorganized and confused.' Organizing the lawless lower impulses more effectively will ensure the survival of the higher, finer ones; it is not far from the Victorian belief that organizing the lower classes will ensure the survival of the upper ones, and indeed is significantly related to it.

The American New Criticism, which flourished from the late 1930s to the 1950s, was deeply marked by these doctrines. New Criticism is generally taken to encompass the work of Eliot, Richards and perhaps also Leavis and William Empson, as well as a number of leading American literary critics, among them John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Monroe Beardsley and R. P. Blackmur. Significantly, the American movement had its roots in the economically backward South — in the region of traditional blood and breeding where the young T. S. Eliot had gained an early glimpse of the organic society. In the period of American New Criticism, the South was in fact undergoing rapid industrialization, invaded by Northern capitalist monopolies; but 'traditional' Southern intellectuals like John Crowe Ransom, who gave New Criticism its name, could still discover in it an 'aesthetic' alternative to the sterile scientific rationalism of the industrial North. Spiritually displaced like T. S. Eliot by the industrial invasion, Ransom found refuge first in the so-called Fugitives literary movement of the 1920s, and then in the right-wing Agrarian politics of the 1930s. The ideology of New Criticism began to crystallize: scientific rationalism was ravaging the 'aesthetic life' of the old South, human experience was being stripped of its sensuous particularity, and poetry was a possible solution. The poetic response, unlike the scientific, respected the sensuous integrity of its object: it was not a matter of rational cognition but an affective affair which linked us to the 'world's body' in an essentially religious bond. Through art, an alienated world could be restored to us in all its rich variousness. Poetry, as an essentially contemplative mode, would spur us not to change the world but to reverence it for what it was, teach us to approach it with a disinterested humility.

Like Scrutiny, in other words, New Criticism was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality. Poetry was the new religion, a nostalgic haven from the alienations of industrial capitalism. The poem itself was as opaque to rational enquiry as the Almighty himself: it existed as a self-enclosed object, mysteriously intact in its own unique being. The poem was that which could not be paraphrased, expressed in any language other than itself:
each of its parts was folded in on the others in a complex organic unity which it would be a kind of blasphemy to violate. The literary text, for American New Criticism as for I. A. Richards, was therefore grasped in what might be called 'functionalist' terms: just as American functionalist sociology developed a 'conflict-free' model of society, in which every element 'adapted' to every other, so the poem abolished all friction, irregularity and contradiction in the symmetrical cooperation of its various features. 'Coherence' and 'integration' were the keynotes; but if the poem was also to induce in the reader a definite ideological attitude to the world – one, roughly, of contemplative acceptance – this emphasis on internal coherence could not be pushed to the point where the poem was cut off from reality altogether, splendidly revolving in its own autonomous being. It was therefore necessary to combine this stress on the text's internal unity with an insistence that, through such unity, the work 'corresponded' in some sense to reality itself. New Criticism, in other words, stopped short of a full-blooded formalism, awkwardly tempering it with a kind of empiricism – a belief that the poem's discourse somehow 'included' reality within itself.

If the poem was really to become an object in itself, New Criticism had to sever it from both author and reader. I. A. Richards had naively assumed that the poem was no more than a transparent medium through which we could observe the poet's psychological processes: reading was just a matter of recreating in our own mind the mental condition of the author. Indeed much traditional literary criticism had held this view in one form or another. Great literature is the product of Great Men, and its value lies chiefly in allowing us intimate access to their souls. There are several problems with such a position. To begin with, it reduces all literature to a covert form of autobiography: we are not reading literary works as literary works, simply as second-hand ways of getting to know somebody. For another thing, such a view entails that literary works are indeed 'expressions' of an author's mind, which does not seem a particularly helpful way of discussing Little Red Riding Hood or some highly stylized courtly love lyric. Even if I do have access to Shakespeare's mind when reading Hamlet, what is the point of putting it this way, since all of his mind that I have access to is the text of Hamlet? Why not just say instead that I am reading Hamlet, as he left no evidence of it other than the play itself? Was what he 'had in mind' different from what he wrote, and how can we know? Did he himself know what he had in mind? Are writers always in full possession of their own meanings?

The New Critics broke boldly with the Great Man theory of literature, insisting that the author's intentions in writing, even if they could be recovered, were of no relevance to the interpretation of his or her text. Neither
were the emotional responses of particular readers to be confused with the poem's meaning: the poem meant what it meant, regardless of the poet's intentions or the subjective feelings the reader derived from it. Meaning was public and objective, inscribed in the very language of the literary text, not a question of some putative ghostly impulse in a long-dead author's head, or the arbitrary private significances a reader might attach to his words. We shall be considering the pros and cons of this viewpoint in Chapter 2; meanwhile, it should be recognized that the New Critics' attitudes to these questions were closely bound up with their urge to convert the poem into a self-sufficient object, as solid and material as an urn or icon. The poem became a spatial figure rather than a temporal process. Rescuing the text from author and reader went hand in hand with disentangling it from any social or historical context. One needed, to be sure, to know what the poem's words would have meant to their original readers, but this fairly technical sort of historical knowledge was the only kind permitted. Literature was a solution to social problems, not part of them; the poem must be plucked free of the wreckage of history and hoisted into a sublime space above it.

What New Criticism did, in fact, was to convert the poem into a fetish. If I. A. Richards had 'dematerialized' the text, reducing it to a transparent window on to the poet's psyche, the American New Critics rematerialized it with a vengeance, making it seem less like a process of meaning than something with four corners and a pebbledash front. This is ironic, since the very social order against which such poetry was a protest was rife with such 'reifications', transforming people, processes and institutions into 'things'. The New Critical poem, like the Romantic symbol, was thus imbued with an absolute mystical authority which brooked no rational argument. Like most of the other literary theories we have examined so far, New Criticism was at root a full-blooded irrationalism, one closely associated with religious dogma (several of the leading American New Critics were Christians), and with the right-wing 'blood and soil' politics of the Agrarian movement. Yet this is not to suggest that New Criticism was hostile to critical analysis, any more than was Scrutiny. Whereas some earlier Romantics tended to bow low in reverent silence before the unfathomable mystery of the text, the New Critics deliberately cultivated the toughest, most hard-headed techniques of critical dissection. The same impulse which stirred them to insist on the 'objective' status of the work also led them to promote a strictly 'objective' way of analysing it. A typical New Critical account of a poem offers a stringent investigation of its various 'tensions', 'paradoxes' and 'ambivalences', showing how these are resolved and integrated by its solid structure. If poetry was
to be the new organic society in itself, the final solution to science, materialism, and the decline of the ‘aesthetic’ slave-owning South, it could hardly be surrendered to critical impressionism or soggy subjectivism.

New Criticism, moreover, evolved in the years when literary criticism in North America was struggling to become ‘professionalized’, acceptable as a respectable academic discipline. Its battery of critical instruments was a way of competing with the hard sciences on their own terms, in a society where such science was the dominant criterion of knowledge. Having begun life as a humanistic supplement or alternative to technocratic society, the movement thus found itself reproducing such technocracy in its own methods. The rebel merged into the image of his master, and as the 1940s and 1950s drew on was fairly quickly coopted by the academic Establishment. Before long, New Criticism seemed the most natural thing in the literary critical world; indeed it was difficult to imagine that there had ever been anything else. The long trek from Nashville, Tennessee, home of the Fugitives, to the East Coast Ivy League universities had been accomplished.

There were at least two good reasons why New Criticism went down well in the academies. First, it provided a convenient pedagogical method of coping with a growing student population.\textsuperscript{27} Distributing a brief poem for students to be perceptive about was less cumbersome than launching a Great Novels of the World course. Second, New Criticism’s view of the poem as a delicate equipoise of contending attitudes, a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses, proved deeply attractive to sceptical liberal intellectuals disoriented by the clashing dogmas of the Cold War. Reading poetry in the New Critical way meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was ‘disinterestedness’, a serene, speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular. It drove you less to oppose McCarthyism or further civil rights than to experience such pressures as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by their complementary opposites. It was, in other words, a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo. There were, naturally, limits to this benign pluralism: the poem, in Cleanth Brooks’s words, was a ‘unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude’.\textsuperscript{28} Pluralism was all very well, provided that it did not violate hierarchical order; the varied contingencies of the poem’s texture could be pleasurably savoured, so long as its ruling structure remained intact. Oppositions were to be tolerated, as long as they could finally be fused into harmony. The limits of New Criticism were essentially the limits of liberal democracy: the poem, John Crowe Ransom wrote, was ‘like
a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens'.

It would be interesting to know what the Southern slaves would have made of this assertion.

The reader may have noticed that 'literature', in the work of the last few critics I have discussed, has imperceptibly slid over into 'poetry'. The New Critics and I. A. Richards are almost exclusively concerned with poems; T. S. Eliot stretches to the drama but not to the novel; F. R. Leavis deals with the novel but examines it under the rubric of 'dramatic poem' – that is, as anything but the novel. Most literary theories, in fact, unconsciously 'foreground' a particular literary genre, and derive their general pronouncements from this; it would be interesting to trace this process through the history of literary theory, identifying the particular literary form which is being taken as a paradigm. In the case of modern literary theory, the shift into poetry is of particular significance. For poetry is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history, the one where 'sensibility' may play in its purest, least socially tainted form. It would be difficult to see *Tristram Shandy* or *War and Peace* as tightly organized structures of symbolic ambivalence. Even within poetry, however, the critics I have just reviewed are strikingly uninterested in what might rather simplistically be called 'thought'. The criticism of Eliot displays an extraordinary lack of interest in what literary works actually *say*: its attention is almost entirely confined to qualities of language, styles of feeling, the relations of image and experience. A 'classic' for Eliot is a work which springs from a structure of shared beliefs, but what these beliefs are is less important than the fact that they are commonly shared. For Richards, bothering with beliefs is a positive obstacle to literary appreciation: the strong emotion we feel on reading a poem may *feel* like a belief, but this is just another pseudo-condition. Only Leavis escapes this formalism, with his view that the complex formal unity of a work, and its 'reverent openness before life', are facets of a single process. In practice, however, his work tends to divide between 'formal' criticism of poetry and 'moral' criticism of fiction.

I have mentioned that the English critic William Empson is sometimes included in New Criticism; but he is in fact much more interestingly read as a remorseless opponent of their major doctrines. What makes Empson seem a New Critic is his lemon-squeezing style of analysis, the breathtaking off-hand ingenuity with which he unravels ever finer nuances of literary meaning; but all this is in the service of an old-fashioned liberal rationalism deeply at odds with the symbolist esotericism of an Eliot or Brooks. In his major works *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) and *Milton's God* (1961), Empson turns a
cold douche of very English common sense on such fervid pieties, evident in
his deliberately flattened, low-keyed, airily colloquial prose style. Whereas
New Criticism sunders the text from rational discourse and a social context,
Empson impudently insists on treating poetry as a species of ‘ordinary’
language capable of being rationally paraphrased, a type of utterance in
continuity with our usual ways of speaking and acting. He is an unabashed
‘intentionalist’, reckoning into account what the author probably meant and
interpreting this in the most generous, decent, English sort of way. Far from
existing as an opaquely enclosed object, the literary work for Empson is
open-ended: understanding it involves grasping the general contexts in
which words are socially used, rather than simply tracing patterns of internal
verbal coherence, and such contexts are always likely to be indeterminate. It
is interesting to contrast Empson’s famous ‘ambiguities’ with New Criti-
cism’s ‘paradox’, ‘irony’ and ‘ambivalence’. The latter terms suggest the
economic fusion of two opposite but complementary meanings: the New
Critical poem is a taut structure of such antitheses, but they never really
threaten our need for coherence because they are always resolvable into a
closed unity. Empsonian ambiguities, on the other hand, can never be finally
pinned down: they indicate points where the poem’s language falters, trails
off or gestures beyond itself, pregnantly suggestive of some potentially
inexhaustible context of meaning. Whereas the reader is shut out by a locked
structure of ambivalences, reduced to admiring passivity, ‘ambiguity’ solici-
ts his or her active participation: an ambiguity as Empson defined it is ‘any
verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to
the same piece of language’.30 It is the reader’s response which makes for
ambiguity, and this response depends on more than the poem alone. For
I. A. Richards and the New Critics, the meaning of a poetic word is radically
‘contextual’, a function of the poem’s internal verbal organization. For
Empson, the reader inevitably brings to the work whole social contexts of
discourse, tacit assumptions of sense-making which the text may challenge
but with which it is also in continuity. Empson’s poetics are liberal, social
and democratic, appealing, for all their dazzling idiosyncrasy, to the likely
sympathies and expectations of a common reader rather than to the technoc-
ocratic techniques of the professional critic.

Like all English common sense, Empson’s has its severe limitations. He is
an old-style Enlightenment rationalist whose trust in decency, reasonableness,
common human sympathies and a general human nature is as winning as it is suspect. Empson engages in constant self-critical questioning of the gap between his own intellectual subtlety and a simple common humanity: ‘pastoral’ is defined as the literary mode in which both can genially co-exist,
though never without an uneasy ironic self-consciousness of the incongruity. But the irony of Empson, and of his favoured form of pastoral, are also signs of a deeper contradiction. They mark the dilemma of the liberal-minded literary intellectual of the 1920s and 1930s, aware of the gross disparity between a now highly specialized form of critical intelligence and the ‘universal’ preoccupations of the literature on which it goes to work. Such a baffled, ambiguous consciousness, aware of the clash between pursuing ever finer poetic nuances and the economic depression, is able to resolve those commitments only by faith in a ‘common reason’ which may in fact be less common and more socially particular than it looks. Pastoral is not exactly Empson’s organic society: it is the looseness and incongruity of the form, rather than any ‘vital unity’, which attracts him, its ironic juxtapositions of lords and peasants, the sophisticated and the simple. But pastoral does none the less provide him with a kind of imaginary solution to a pressing historical problem: the problem of the intellectual’s relation to ‘common humanity’, the relation between a tolerant intellectual scepticism and more taxing convictions, and the social relevance of a professionalized criticism to a crisis-ridden society.

Empson sees that the meanings of a literary text are always in some measure promiscuous, never reducible to a final interpretation; and in the opposition between his ‘ambiguity’ and New Critical ‘ambivalence’ we find a kind of early pre-run of the debate between structuralists and post-structuralists which we shall explore later. It has also been suggested that Empson’s concern for authorial intentions is in some ways reminiscent of the work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Whether or not this is true, it provides a convenient transition to the next chapter.