

in intrinsic moral terms, by the formal language in which s/he is judged. The space may be a difficult one, and it may be contracted or expanded depending upon how liberal a liberal regime actually is, but the separation of formal actor from concrete act permits a limited sense of the human being beyond the deed. The point is seen when a more rhetorical, morally thick, conception of violence is given greater political currency. Ideas of “men of violence” or of “terrorism” are of dubious value given that today’s “terrorist” may be yesterday’s “freedom fighter” or tomorrow’s “father of the nation.” Yet, when law incorporates a concept such as that of “the terrorist,” it reduces the philosophico-juridical gap between actor and act. Fusing the person with the crime, it essentializes and dehumanizes the former.

While the responsible legal subject may be guilty of terrible crimes, s/he retains the form of subjectivity s/he brought into the social contract. The same person represented as a terrorist already stands outside it. The invidious choice between a forced abstraction of humanity, which holds violence at a distance, and an equally forced concretization, which identifies some humans as essentially violent, appears increasingly to be placed before those living in western societies.

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## Work

Definitions of “work” take up a number of pages even in the *OED*, reflecting the multiple and complicated networks in which some version or another of its meanings has a role. But for literary studies in the university the central meaning would seem to be simply a literary composition (often plural, the *OED* notes) viewed in relation to its author (e.g., the works of Virginia Woolf). The *OED* follows with its usual samples of usage, in this case dating back into the 14th century. Things are rarely that simple, however, and certainly not the world of work(s) in literary studies. Early 20th-century modernism emerges as more complicated as more studies proliferate, and within that complexity one strand in particular had a great deal to do with overloading the usages of work as a name for literary compositions. Largely in reaction against industrialization and the “industrialized” imagination of a rapidly growing “mass culture,” the connection between literary composition and work reacquired a whole range of meanings involving *labour*. More specifically, the range pointed toward a kind of handcrafted artisan labour

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that could stand in dramatic contrast to the culture industry’s repetitive, anonymous, banal, machine-made proliferation of cultural goods. Crudely, “the work of literature” also came to mean the idea that making *literature* took one hell of a lot of work in contrast to this other stuff.

Modernism in some of its many versions at least remains the matrix of institutionalized literary study in the U.S., and the elaboration of literary works into the work of literature as I’m describing above had a central role in that development. To some great extent it helped determine everyday practices in the classroom—the work one does as a student of literature in the university. If it takes a lot of work—artisan and individualized—to make a work of literature, correspondingly one can expect that the encounter with one of these much worked on works will also require a lot of work. Back when I was an undergraduate, somewhere around the 14th century when *OED* recorded usages commence, we learned a de facto ranking of literary works by how long they took to write. We knew the *Wake* was better than *Ulysses* not only because it was harder to read, but more importantly because it took longer to write. Lot of work went into that one. There were anomalies in that ranking of course—Faulkner’s famous six weeks at *As I Lay Dying* for example, which continued to trouble a number of my teachers. Unlike industrial mass culture production, however, artisan labour could allow differential intensities of effort. And after all it was still hard to read, if not quite in the same class as the *Wake*.

Hard to read suggests work, but it also helps in identifying what kind of work exactly. “Hard” in this instance means difficult, something you can’t get right away. You have to work to understand the meanings. That’s how you know this stuff *is* work, standing in contrast to mass culture mass produced texts. After all you couldn’t really distinguish it on the basis of immediate emotional impact, memorability, or finally even on the basis of visible skills. Some kind of complicated meaning (or some meaningfully complicated refusal of either meanings or complications) seemed about all that was left. For perhaps all too obvious reasons this emphasis on meanings sat very well indeed with the institutional development of literary studies since a) it made available something to do in class, the work of figuring out meanings; b) it yielded a way of determining the required evaluative hierarchy—some people could figure out meanings better than others and did more work than others, starting at the top with the instructor and moving on down through the grading scale for students; c) it suggested a rationale for the continued production of literary scholarship, i.e., of the potentially endless individualized artisan labor of figuring out the potentially endless meanings of “the work.”

A lot has changed since the heyday of the New Criticism that seems an obvious referent for the classroom/scholarship instanced above. But a lot of the basics remain: if in different ways, nevertheless we're still figuring out meanings in class, still grading students, still producing individual scholarship as artisan labor. At the same time, however, other usages of "work" have become more visible in university departments. To take some random examples, the end of term evaluation forms that students fill out often ask whether "the amount of work" assigned seemed appropriate, a nice instance of the immediate collision of quantity and quality that happens so often in *OED* definitions of work. Universities must often agree contractually with graduate student unions on the total amount of work hours that TAs can be responsible for, where work doesn't seem to mean reading Milton. Administrators at a number of big city universities, and of course every campus in the University of California system where I (ummm) work, have begun to worry more and more about how a great many people who work at the university—particularly clerical-technical staff and often junior faculty—can no longer afford to live where they work.

Even if against all these meanings and usages of work (of which I've instanced only a few above) you want to cling to some central meaning of "work" as the "literary composition" (often *pl.*) of the *OED*, there are still signs of trouble. More often than not the "literary" and the "composition" are going their own ways as separate departments or programs. One immediate reason involves work, as in jobs. Composition as instruction in basic writing almost always used to be the lowest form of work in departments of English, primarily done by graduate assistants, temporary faculty, and very low tenure-track junior faculty. While there aren't a lot of good jobs around now, increasingly the good tenure-track jobs that do exist are in composition—whether in circumstances where composition has remained a part of English or has separated into a Writing Program. They have proliferated to the point that over the last few years they outnumber almost every category in the annual Modern Language Association Job Listings. That shift in available jobs involves other and more large scale changes in research universities. In the entrepreneurial university dominated by the academic capitalism of the technosciences, writing instruction seems one of the few marketable products in the humanities.

Academic capitalism, however, isn't exactly about teaching anyway, and over the last decade universities have outsourced more and more of the actual work of instruction to grad assistants, temporary and part-time instructors, community colleges, and lower prestige state universities when possible. Among other things this means a great many people who earned

PhDs doing the work of interpreting literary compositions can expect to be moving from one temp position to another, constantly searching for any job, composition or not. Of course this search isn't all that different from what an increasingly large percentage of the general population does. But in the post-'90s and now Bush-led New Economy what searching for jobs is made to mean is shopping for work—work as consumption. You don't desperately look for a better position, you go shopping for work like shopping for anything else. It's fun, and sometimes you can get a really good deal.

In this new set of circumstances “work” then begins to take on all the affective dynamics familiar from the world of consumption, and correspondingly all kinds of things—say, exploitation and income inequalities—begin to disappear from public view. Ideologically the central structural building block of a capitalist wage labour system had been the freedom for workers to sell the labour power one owned. The result of work reemerging as consumption, however, is an ideological shift from the freedom of selling one's labour power to the power of choice. Like any form of shopping in a capital-driven consumer marketplace work as consumption foregrounds agency as choice among seemingly endless possibilities. Despite the much talked about “values divide” after the 2004 US election, both liberals and conservatives urge the power of choice as crucial to a democracy. After all there's always too few shopping days before Christmas when you're saturated with choices.

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