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## The Critic as Amateur

Saikat Majumdar

IN HIS MEMOIR-ESSAY, “Edmund Wilson in Benares,” Pankaj Mishra records a unique intellectual failure: his inability is to write an original piece on Edmund Wilson, a critic who had enthralled him for several years. This failure took place in 1995, the year of Wilson’s centenary, which had prompted Mishra to try to write something about the American critic, ideally an “exposition of Wilson’s key books.”<sup>1</sup> But he could not, he felt, come up with anything original: “What I wrote seemed to me too much like a reprise of what a lot of other people had already said about him” (EW 370). It becomes intriguingly clear that if Mishra had succeeded in writing the other piece, we would have never had his essay “Edmund Wilson in Benares,” a product of this very failure. A key reason for his inability to write the essay he had planned about Wilson, Mishra felt, was that he was “trying to write about him in the way an American or European writer would have” (EW 370). The essay he produced evokes, slowly but vividly, the meaning and the genealogy of this failure. But what does it offer instead?

It is one of the most remarkable pieces of writing that I have encountered anywhere: an account of four months Mishra spent in Benares in 1988. He was then twenty and had recently graduated from the nearby University of Allahabad. In Benares, he rented a room in the dilapidated house of an old, opium-addicted Brahmin musician and spent his days in and around the Benares Hindu University. He was not enrolled there as a student, but—naturally drawn to books—he fell into the habit of whiling away most of his daytime hours at the university library, reading the books and periodicals he could find there. “Edmund Wilson in Benares,” primarily, is a chronicle of that reading, of a range of things, but most obsessively of the works of Edmund Wilson, whom Mishra discovered purely by accident in the stacks. Almost immediately, he became absorbed in Wilson’s writing, enough to finish, over the next few months, all of Wilson’s books that the library had in its collection: “dust-laden, termite-infested, but beautifully, miraculously present: *The Shores of Light*, *Classics and Commercials*, *The Bit Between My Teeth*, *The Wound and the Bow*, *Europe Without Baedeker*, *A Window on Russia*, *A Piece of My Mind*” (EW 357).

An equally important theme in this essay is the city of Benares, especially the university campus, and the atmosphere of violence, corruption, and cynicism that perpetually hung in the air. It was a common enough atmosphere in most of north India in the 1980s, with its economic depression, caste-ridden politics, and widespread disenchantment among educated youth. As Mishra evokes this strange and disturbing environment, the protagonist of the piece emerges: Rajesh, a sometime student at the university but really a political thug of sorts, one who becomes Mishra's friend and, in an equally strange and disturbing way, his mentor and protector in that unstable and volatile atmosphere.

Still, more than anything else, the essay is about reading and, particularly, about engaging with literary criticism. This engagement happens in that unlikely environment of violence and depression, in an ambience where reading seemed an odd and eccentric sort of activity, even in the precincts of a university. Most of all, the essay chronicles the reading of books that seemed absurd in that milieu, books whose discoveries were pure accidents, and with which Mishra had little or no prior familiarity. But the thrust of the essay, and its narrative impulse, is provided by the utterly unexpected ways in which the quaint and distant universe of these books enter the quotidian violence of north Indian reality in the 1980s.

At the core of "Edmund Wilson in Benares" is an unlikely story of autodidacticism that, special as it is, is also the product of a curious historical exigency. It contains the vital spirit of a narrative—one that extends beyond these four months and into the larger arc of Mishra's growth as a writer and a thinker—of the development of the provincial intellectual as an autodidact. Such an intellectual experience could come to him only through the odd coupling of sheer serendipity and a ravenous hunger for books. The most meaningful growth of such a provincial intellectual, perhaps the only growth possible, is not as a professional scholar but as an amateur.

At the same time, the larger notion of cosmopolitan culture under which the provincial Mishra grew up remains conditioned by the nation's history of colonialism, which shapes the structure and ideology of humanistic, especially literary education, even forty years after decolonization. Whatever little of metropolitan culture is available to the provincial aspirant reflects this condition: "I had always lived in small towns where libraries and bookshops were few and far between, and did not stock anything except a few standard texts of English literature: Austen, Dickens, Kipling, Thackeray" (EW 357). The provincial seeker of intellectual cosmopolitanism knows that there are whole worlds beyond this tired scaffolding of a colonial literary curriculum. His life becomes a frantic quest for such worlds: "As for the rest, I read randomly, whatever

I could find, and with the furious intensity of a small-town boy to whom books are the sole means of communicating with, and understanding, the larger world" (EW 357).

His is, however, the autodidacticism of a young man who has just completed a perfunctory college degree at another provincial university nearby. This indifferent qualification, he feels, has not brought him any closer to the intellectual cosmopolitanism he so desperately seeks. "After three idle, bookish years at a provincial university," Mishra writes, "in a decaying old provincial town, I had developed an aversion to the world of careers and jobs which, having no money, I was destined to join" (EW 356). His autodidactic life in Benares, inactive and indolent on the surface but driven by a feverish intensity beneath, is, in some sense, an attempt to prolong his life as a student, as what seems to lie beyond holds neither promise nor excitement: "In Benares, with a tiny allowance, I sought nothing more than a continuation of the life I had led as an undergraduate" (EW 356). Autodidacticism it is, however, in every sense of the word: "I knew little of the social and historical underpinnings to the books I read: I had only a fleeting sense of the artistry and skill to which certain novels owed their greatness" (EW 358). The irregular and amateurish nature of Mishra's pursuit is shaped not only by the fact that he is doing it alone, outside of an institutional setting—he sits and reads in the library but is not allowed to borrow books, as he is not a student—but, more strikingly, by the absurd disconnect between his archive of study and his immediate atmosphere: "For a radically different world existed barely a few hundred metres from where I sat, reading about Santayana" (EW 360).

The intriguing generic hybridity of Mishra's essay comes alive not only in its immediate texture, but also in the nature of its final achievement: it tells a story just as any memoir or fragment of a bildungsroman might, but seamlessly meshed within this story is a passionate championship of the intellectual as an amateur and an autodidact. What is special about this essay is the utter inseparability of the life story from this assertion of faith. Faith rests here in the organic power of great literary thought to invite autodidacticism, and of the imaginative individual to respond to this invitation. These trajectories of storytelling and the attainment of faith come together in the author's relationship with Rajesh, the former student turned mercenary hooligan, and in the miraculous way Rajesh brings to life, in rural Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s, Wilson's reading of Gustave Flaubert's representation of the petit-bourgeois world of nineteenth-century France. The absence of scholarly aptitude that defines Mishra as an amateur reader—the lack of knowledge of "the social and historical underpinnings" of the books he read—enables a

literary humanism that the structure of professional scholarship would have very possibly inhibited. Lack of historical knowledge and, perhaps more acutely, of cultural affiliation prevented Mishra from entering the social context of nineteenth-century France. Unable to enter this world, Mishra instead sees Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau entering late twentieth-century rural Uttar Pradesh.

For the rest of the essay, Rajesh, Wilson, Mishra, and Frédéric Moreau are intimately entwined, in the landscape of intermittent poverty, desolation, and violence in Uttar Pradesh. The turning point of the narrative comes when Rajesh, who has maintained an attitude of skeptical amusement toward Mishra's obsession with Wilson, takes Mishra with him on a visit to his widowed mother in their village home. Seeing Rajesh's home for the first time, Mishra realizes the sheer poverty and precariousness of his life and that of his mother in a way he never realized in the university setting, where Rajesh's bullying leadership had set him apart as some sort of a prominent figure with a following of its own. The train ride back to Benares is largely silent, but Rajesh breaks that silence to tell Mishra that "he had read *Sentimental Education*, and that it was a story he knew well. 'Yeh meri duniya ki kahani hai. Main in logo ko janta hoon,' he said, in Hindi. 'It is the story of my world. I know these people well.' He gave me a hard look. 'Your hero, Edmund Wilson,' he added in English, 'he also knows them'" (EW 368).

Their lives part and Mishra leaves Benares. He returns two years later for a visit, to hear that Rajesh has become a contract killer: a well-paid profession, but not one where you expect to live for long, as murders tend to be avenged quickly in this world. Mishra never meets Rajesh again, nor does he find out what happened to him in the end. But he discovers Rajesh's last signature in an unexpected place. Going through an old, Xeroxed copy of Wilson's essay "The Politics of Flaubert," he sees lines marked in Rajesh's hand. Rajesh had underlined in red Wilson's analysis of Flaubert's distaste for the bourgeoisie and his sense of how the corrupting influence of this class threatens to bring about a decline of civilization.

"What did Rajesh," Mishra asks in this essay, "a student in a provincial Indian university in the late 1980s, have in common with Frédéric Moreau or any of the doomed members of his generation in this novel of mid-nineteenth-century Paris?" (EW 368). "Edmund Wilson in Benares" chronicles Mishra's experience of dwelling in this question even as it becomes his attempt to answer it. But no less miraculous for me is the way the question rebounds onto Mishra himself; how Rajesh's life, and its strange entanglement with the lives chronicled by Flaubert and Wilson, grapples with Mishra's own life and takes over his relationship

with books. It is the kind of epiphany unique to the experience of the provincial autodidact, for whom books are an attempt to engage with a culture as far removed from his immediate reality as possible. The essay holds within itself the poignant fragment of a life. But it is also the story of a reading that is a startling failure to harness the right apparatus for engagement with criticism. Indeed it is this very failure that holds the genesis of an unexpected engagement. The story that follows is that of the *bildung* of the critic as amateur.

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Autodidacticism, or self-education, is usually a process of amateur training. More often than not, it is conducted in private, often in isolation, outside of institutions, though it sometimes happens in and around their precincts, as in the story recounted in Mishra's essay. But calling it an amateur affair also necessarily invites the question: how does one read literature as a professional? What were the elements of the professional scholarly apparatus that Mishra lacked, when he sat down in Benares, a young man from small-town Uttar Pradesh, to read an American critic and public intellectual about whose archives and cultural legacy he knew next to nothing?

What is the skill or set of skills that can be accumulated through several years of systematic study in an institutional setting under a preset curriculum that is recognized by the state and the free market (howsoever indifferent that recognition might be) as a valid certification? The answers are many, and yet the skill that Mishra lacked most emphatically *vis-à-vis* his encounter with the work of both Wilson and Flaubert is what I would call a knowledge of a larger whole. This knowledge is the unique gift of a literary-historical training, supposed to enrich, rather than negate, the idiosyncratic pleasure of reading a single text, or the singularity of that experience. It stems from the realization that literary works, whatever their pleasures and challenges, do not exist in isolation, that they can be located not only in an author's life but in entire traditions of literature, art, and thought, in a larger community of ideas that is not generally available without scholarly training, as indeed it was unavailable to Mishra, in spite of his indifferent college degree, when he sat in the dusty library of Benares Hindu University reading Wilson's writing on Flaubert.

Of course, every reader of a literary work brings some context to her reading. No mind is a blank slate, and by the time we are old enough to read, we bring with us knowledges of various worlds of our own, worlds

from which literary works are themselves crafted. It can be any kind of knowledge—that of child-rearing, sports, furniture design, nature, banking, or, for that matter, the affective knowledge of love, grief, or boredom. In fact, it is the recognition of worlds known from the nonliterary realm that forms the ground for empathy, a vital element of engagement with the literary work. If literature is woven from life, no one alive does not bring some knowledge of the collective whole from which a work of literature is crafted, as that collective whole is founded in life itself. To Wilson and to Wilson's reading of nineteenth-century France, Mishra brought his own living knowledge of the criminal culture of small-town Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s, which led to the production of a wholly different kind of meaning. But professional training in literary study gives us the specifically literary context of a particular work, whether its relationship to questions of craft, genre, or technique, or a particular national or regional tradition of writing, or the material contexts of its production. And then there are larger historical, political, and economic contexts within which the works emerge and are read—we can adjust the scale of our reading as narrowly or as widely as suits our methodology or, for that matter, our ideology.

The professionally trained reader of literature comes from an organized community that has institutionalized elements and traditions of knowledge held to be essentially allied to its archive of study. Such alliances include the material-historical and the cultural-aesthetic, and even if there are debates about the relative importance of specific elements, the community is held together by a broad consensus about the overall relevance of this apparatus of knowledge to the literary text. The reader who lacks this professional training comes from no such community and hence lacks not only expertise in these forms of knowledge, but the means to access them and, moreover, a full sense of the importance of this very apparatus. And yet, if the text is linguistically available to her, it is essentially open to interpretation by her, and in this interpretation she brings to the text the knowledge of life as she possesses it, regardless of the relation of such knowledge to institutionalized scholarship.

The two modes of reading are separated not merely by quantitative differences in "expertise." In fact, both the notion of "expertise" and its quantifiability must remain open to question if we are to move beyond the disciplinary ideology of literary study. There exists, rather, a clear *qualitative* difference between them. It is the difference between the work of a subjective (usually but not necessarily idiosyncratic) self, and that of an organized community. It is the difference, in the end, between self and archive.

The two modes, I would suggest, approximate two kinds of relationship to the literary text as they might be understood today: that of the critic and that of the scholar. They remain ontologically entwined—scholarship must be critical in spirit, and there is much criticism that is deeply scholarly—but I would argue that they are epistemologically separable. The scholar is defined by his commitment to his archive of study. His subjective sense of self is subordinated to (though not effaced by) this commitment. The critic, on the other hand, celebrates and foregrounds his subjectivity; the archive, in his case, is subordinated to the self, through which it is processed and presented, the very personal color of that refraction remaining the most cherished element of the process. In this, the critic is more closely allied to the poet or the fiction writer than to the scholar. The provincial amateur, who charts his own relationship to a text without access to community, institution, or essential archive, can only aspire to be a critic, never a scholar.

What, then, is the relation between literary study and professionalism? Has the latter been historically central to the former? Has the consolidation of literary study as an academic discipline made the two synonymous?

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The terms “amateur” and “professional” have shared a shifting and contradictory relationship in the history of Western modernity. Marjorie Garber has outlined this relationship remarkably well, illustrating the rich confusion about the two terms that exists, for instance, in the world of sports and that of detective work, among other arenas. Her provocative but hard-to-refute argument is that the two terms “are always in each other’s pockets. They produce each other and they define each other by mutual affinities and exclusions.”<sup>2</sup> Their mutual relationship, in the end, is not so much oppositional as dialectical: “Not only are they mutually interconnected. Part of their power comes from the disavowal of the close affinity between them” (*AI* 5). Nowhere does the narrative of professionalization feel more embattled than in the field of study that takes culture as its object. “For if culture is defined as the wholeness of a valued past,” writes Bruce Robbins, “set against the fragmentation of the modern city and the division of labor, then a professional discipline that takes culture as its object must seem to have fallen from culture, to be untrue to culture, to be in a state of contradiction, from the very moment it *becomes* a discipline.”<sup>3</sup>

In early twentieth-century England, literary studies valiantly fought and finally overpowered some of this skepticism in order to entrench itself

as an academic discipline. But the importance of the amateur-versus-professional question has not vanished. Unlike merely recreational—and perhaps just a little ridiculous—figures like the amateur engineer or scientist, when the discipline in question is an aesthetic discourse such as literature, the amateur can even become an empowered figure of sorts, occasionally cheating the fully credentialed academic specialist of the glory of her authority. The professionalization of the literary academic, therefore, has an element of contradiction within it, insofar as the amateur may claim to exist in a more seamless continuity with literature than the relatively detached scholar. The rise of the literary critic as a figure of expertise, Robbins tells us, “is thus necessarily the rise of the *anti-professional* specialist.”<sup>4</sup>

The respective prestige of the amateur and the professional, Garber has likewise argued, has been more historically variable in the humanistic fields of knowledge than elsewhere. By way of a recapitulation of the changing prestige of the amateur and the professional in the Anglo-American world of letters, she returns to the term “virtuosi” (along with what she calls “its more abjected companion, dilettante”) as it was used in seventeenth-century England as a prestigious antecedent of the literary amateur. The term embodied a unique intersection of power, privilege, and cultural literacy: “Virtuosi were connoisseurs and collectors, gentlemen of wealth and leisure, identified with the aristocracy” (*AI* 12). Intellectual, social, and economic privilege came together to turn the virtuoso into a gentleman-scholar and distinguished him not only from those who did not have money, but also from the newly rich who could not claim an ancient family name. Throughout the eighteenth century, while the dilettante sat in a position of humility next to the “better-informed” virtuoso, neither term had the trivial or derogatory cast that they would earn with the increasing professionalization of literary studies. It was during the nineteenth century that the virtuoso, the dilettante, and the belletrist gradually came to be devalued, to the point where an Oxford don could measure academic success with the claim that “we have risen above the mere belletristic treatment of classical literature” (qtd. in *AI* 15). And by the 1920s, John Middleton Murray was articulating what had become a decisive dismissal of the amateur: “No amount of sedulous apery or word-mosaic will make a writer of the dilettante belletrist” (qtd. in *AI* 15).

The 1920s and '30s, it is now clear, are crucial decades for the institutionalization of the discipline of English studies on both sides of the Atlantic. At the University of Cambridge, the entrenchment of English as an academic discipline through the intellectual and entrepreneurial energy of canonical figures such as F. R. and Q. D. Leavis and I. A. Rich-

ards, was, to a great extent, dependent on its emergence as a specialized subject of definite academic rigor, as opposed to a domain of dilettantish debates about aesthetic taste. If *Scrutiny*, launched in 1932, was the celebrated platform for the Leavisite championship of this disciplinary rigor, a comparable stance was taken by the American poet and critic John Crowe Ransom, who likewise made a powerful case for literary criticism as a serious, significant, and specialized activity, and founded *The Kenyon Review* in 1939 as a platform for it. Ransom's famous 1937 essay "Criticism, Inc." argues for a rigorous and scientific model of criticism, an endeavor that requires a level of sustained collaboration that is only possible at the university: "Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities."<sup>5</sup> The development of criticism into a discipline of scientific rigor carries with it a rejection of amateur practitioners of the discourse, even though such a rejection may come with a muted admiration of the best such practitioners that history has produced. "It is strange, but nobody seems to have told us what exactly is the proper business of criticism. There are many critics who might tell us, but for the most part they are amateurs. So have the critics nearly always been amateurs; including the best ones. They have not been trained to criticism so much as they have simply undertaken a job for which no specific qualifications were required. It is far too likely that what they call criticism when they produce it is not the real thing."<sup>6</sup> Criticism becomes both realizable through, and answerable to, a collective enterprise of scholarship.

The scientific instinct would thrive in the academic development of criticism and reach its peak with structuralism in the mid-twentieth century, a methodological approach that drew its primary inspiration from the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology. The professionalizing trajectory of the discourse of literary thought, however, is worth close examination in terms of the ideological cast that it revealed from the very beginning. Garber gives the striking example of Charles Eliot Norton, who "in the antebellum period was an amateur intellectual in the best sense," but who in 1874 was appointed professor of art history at Harvard. Quickly, Norton became a champion of scholarly professionalism and "began to add footnotes and technical notations to his formerly more sociable and personal translations of Dante" (*AI* 17). This professionalism came with a distinct gendered performance, where credible scholarly authority belonged to the masculine mind, and the amateur sensibility, now suddenly trivialized, was identified with the feminine. Even as he emphasized the importance of teaching and of

a broad liberal education at the undergraduate level, Norton was enthusiastic about the rise of graduate schools, which were beginning to push the academic pursuit of knowledge from the conversational and the personal toward the scientific. Once symbolic of the confluence of intellectual and economic privileges embodied by the aristocratic man of leisure, the idea of the amateur had now relinquished its prestige to the new masculine paradigm of professionalism.

Norton's ideological arc was in many ways symptomatic of the political climate surrounding the rise and consolidation of disciplinarity in the nineteenth century. The institutionalization of English as an academic discipline in England, Chris Baldick has demonstrated convincingly, was rooted in the aim of providing education to members of various subordinate social groups at home and overseas. The formative force was the figure of Matthew Arnold, who, both Baldick and Terry Eagleton have argued, looked to literature and its pedagogic application as a means of social cohesion in a world where both religion and the aristocracy were rapidly losing their authority and cohesive power.<sup>7</sup> Arnold, who significantly used the term "culture" as a translation of the German *Bildung* (more commonly translated as education or training), was a staunch champion of "the idea of formative training, of contact with good literary models in particular, in the hope that a new trained body of teachers could be brought 'into intellectual sympathy with the educated of the upper class.'"<sup>8</sup> Arnold's bold claim on behalf of the civilizing force of literary studies laid the ideological ground for the institutionalization of the discipline, but larger social and educational developments eventually made this institutionalization possible. Of these developments, Baldick lists three as most important: "First, the specific needs of the British empire expressed in the regulations for admission to the India Civil Service; second, the various movements for adult education including Mechanics Institutes, Working Men's Colleges, and extension lecturing; third, within this general movement, the specific provisions made for women's education."<sup>9</sup> If English was to be a "civilizing subject," its civilizing impact was to play the most crucial role in the education of women and the working classes and in the business of empire, in the training of its civil servants as well as of colonized subjects. "Arnold's conceptions of the humanizing and socially healing power of literary culture," writes Baldick, "had in fact quickly taken root where Homer was unavailable: among women, artisans, Indians, and their respective teachers."<sup>10</sup>

The professionalization of English studies had important ideological motivations and equally far-reaching ideological consequences. If the amateur signified an older world of aristocratic male privilege, then professionalization, while conferring on literary-critical discourse

a clear disciplinary identity and distinct institutional status, was also a pedagogic gesture toward social cohesion in an increasingly unstable world, nowhere more so than in late-Victorian England. This aim took its clearest form in providing an accessible and ideologically appropriate subject to new social groups that needed to be trained and educated in a professional way. The study of English literature was felt to possess not only adequate intellectual value but also ideological capital that allowed it to be designed as a disciplinary condition of professionalization for subjects who were key to imperial administration. Gauri Viswanathan has done pioneering work to reveal the symbiotic relation between the institutionalization of English studies and the British imperial project in India. She has reminded us that “English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country.”<sup>11</sup> It was in fact as early as the 1820s, when the classics still dominated the curriculum in England, that English literature had already become a curricular subject in British India. If the institutionalization of English literature was, in turn, to become a condition for the *bildung* of professional subjects, it had a twofold goal: to train and qualify British civil servants for service in India, and to educate a class of native Indians in English culture and values so that they became effectively English in their taste and sensibility while still Indian in flesh, a class of men who would be the intermediaries between the British rulers and the native masses. The study of literature was to occupy the central place in this education.

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A hundred years before figures like the Leavises and Richards were turning literary study into the academic subject that would occupy the heart of the liberal arts in the modern Anglo-American university, the discipline was thus curricularized in the colony, most prominently in India. But its institutionalization in the colony was hardly the intellectually vital affair that it was in Cambridge. It articulated a certain administrative ideology and was provided, more than anything else, to fill a professional-bureaucratic need in the colony.

In this, English was perfectly representative of the larger mission of the colonial university in India. André Bételle has pointed out that the colonial universities set up by the British in the nineteenth century could not have been more different from the centers of higher learning that had existed in Western Europe centuries earlier.<sup>12</sup> Neither did the mission of the research university—which originated with Wilhelm

von Humboldt's reformed University of Berlin in the early nineteenth century and was introduced in the US later in the century through the establishment of Johns Hopkins University—have any relation whatsoever with the universities set up in India by the British, where Thomas Babington Macaulay helped to institutionalize a curriculum of Western humanities. "The first universities that came into being in 1857 in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras," Bêteille writes, "were set up primarily for conducting examinations and awarding degrees, and not for undertaking research or even teaching."<sup>13</sup> Venues for research included specialized institutions such as the Asiatic Society or the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, and teaching was left to the colleges.

Clearly the British did not believe that the university as a place for higher learning and research—like those that had thrived in Western Europe since the medieval period—could take root in India. The Acts of Incorporation passed by the Governor-General and Viceroy, Lord Curzon, in 1857 provided for the establishment of three universities in the three presidencies: Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. The preambles to the three Acts, Suresh Chandra Ghosh has pointed out, were identical. They all defined the objects of the universities as "ascertaining by means of examination the persons who have acquired proficiency in different branches of Literature, Science and Art and rewarding them by Academic Degrees as evidence of their respective attainments."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Ghosh also indicates, two of the major criticisms against the university system—as early as in the State Paper on Education, which was issued as a Resolution of the Governor-General in Council on Indian Education on March 11, 1904—were that "higher education was pursued with too exclusive a view to entering government service, which unduly narrowed its scope, and those who failed to obtain employment under government were ill fitted for other pursuits," and also that "excessive importance was given to examinations."<sup>15</sup> This does not imply, as Bêteille has reminded us, that the universities had no salutary role in society. They were important venues of secular modernity and played a distinctive role in the shaping and sustaining of a civil society in India. Moreover, a few universities, such as those in Calcutta and Allahabad, had emerged as centers of intellectual and scholarly excellence by the beginning of the twentieth century. But by and large, "under colonial rule, the universities did mainly what they were set up to do, that is, produce increasing numbers of graduates of indifferent quality."<sup>16</sup>

Things promised to change after independence in 1947, but in spite of the best efforts of learned and sincere visionaries, such a change never arrived. Even the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's vision for higher education, which shaped the birth of the University Education Commis-

sion in 1948 under the leadership of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, failed to change the fundamental character of Indian universities. Decades after independence, the expansion of higher education continued to respond to social and political pressures rather than to the need for the advancement of knowledge. “Despite the best efforts of the leaders of the community of scientists and scholars,” writes Bêteille, “the universities have failed to free themselves from their older legacy of having to produce more and more graduates.”<sup>17</sup>

This, then, was the system within which English literary studies was institutionalized, where it first achieved status as an academic discipline. Let’s turn to the experience of a midcentury student at the University of Allahabad, one of the two institutions that, according to Bêteille, emerged as centers of excellence by the early 1900s. Interestingly, this was also the institution where Mishra studied English literature in the 1980s before his brief sojourn in Benares.

In *Partial Recall*, another exquisite hybrid of memoir, criticism, and literary history, the poet and critic Arvind Krishna Mehrotra narrates stories of his days as a student at the University of Allahabad in 1964. English was his main subject, along with history and economics, but his approach to academic study, even in fields that interested him, appears oddly instrumental and shows little intellectual passion. His choices of specific fields are shaped by pragmatic criteria: “because the subject was ‘scoring,’ which is to say the examiners were believed to be liberal, awarding high marks to every script they read.”<sup>18</sup> This did bring in some strange disappointments: “Scoring in ancient history was easier said than done, for next thing we learnt was that the marks awarded depended on the length of the answers rather than what was written in them” (*PR* 63). This in turn shaped a bizarre kind of instrumentalism, part clerical drudgery, part archival labor: “So making notes in fact meant copying at high speed whole chapters in longhand, the drudgery made worse by the condition of the books” (*PR* 64). Following such note-taking, studying simply implied committing vast swathes of this material to memory: “Quite apart from the hundreds of pages that had to be crammed, we had dates in history and quotations in English (Graham Hough and Maurice Bowra on the Romantics, A. C. Ward on Shaw) to commit to memory” (*PR* 67). It wasn’t, of course, merely a brutal labor of rote-learning; there was clever strategizing involved, in the attempt to guess likely exam questions based on the most crucial archive of all, the compendium of test papers from the past: “We studied selectively of course, like everyone else. There were parts of the syllabus we left out and others we mugged up, depending on the ‘guess papers’ in each subject. To make a guess paper we scrutinized the previous ten years’ questions, available

in inexpensive booklets with flimsy pink or yellow covers on University Road, and after taking into account the hints dropped by teachers and the gossip among students, and after listening to our inner voices, we drew up a list of questions that were likely to be asked" (*PR* 67). This essay, a poignant account of his adolescent *bildung* as a poet, shows that Mehrotra's literary education took on a vibrant life at exactly this time; and also that none of his education was really happening at the university. It seemed as if neither the curricula nor the pedagogy had been significantly reconceived since the institution of the examination-driven university system in 1857. In 1964, the heavily bureaucratized, rather oddly instrumental nature of humanistic education evoked in Mehrotra the same indifference, the university had evoked in another provocative public intellectual, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, during his student days in the early 1920s. Ironically, this happens at the other institution Bêteille identifies as a center of excellence, the University of Calcutta. Chaudhuri's relation with the university is also highlighted by his stark indifference to its curricula and instruction, and by his famous failure to pass the M.A. examination there. Chaudhuri's is, as I have argued elsewhere, another memorable *bildung* of autodidacticism and a rather fetching amateur attempt at becoming a polymath in pointed disregard of the curricular structure of the university.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, both of these writers are exceptional, deeply imaginative, and strongly idiosyncratic individuals who would have perhaps felt at least a little out of place in any academic institution. But that, I would argue, is only part of the story. The remarkable trajectories of autodidacticism through which these prominent intellectuals developed share a certain historical condition—that of a certain colonial system of curricularizing the humanities, especially with regard to literature and history. The legacy of that curricularization, it becomes clear, continues to be felt many decades after decolonization, ironically, just as tangibly as it was felt during the colonial period.

These reflections on amateurism and the history of teaching English literature in India bring us back to my topic: the amateur intellectual who evolves under a peculiar shadow of colonial and postcolonial history. Such an amateur emerges from the legacy of the professionalization of English literary studies that was part of the administrative ideology of the British Empire. I read here some remarkable trajectories of autodidacticism that ironically originate in the very shadow of the bureaucratic curricularization of literary studies. The celebration of a unique imaginative subjectivity, I suggest, shapes the development of these colonial and postcolonial amateurs as critics, but the lack of access to community and institution prevents them from becoming scholars. Perhaps the most

striking example of the failure of scholarly ambition is to be found in Chaudhuri. As a deviant, even truant student in the lecture halls of the University of Calcutta, he nevertheless nurtured the absurdly utopian desire to become a polymath scholar, disdaining the modern figure of the specialist that, as he recognized, had come to replace the polymath. And while Chaudhuri could agilely “pass from physics to Sanskrit literature or from novels to astronomy,” he writes in his autobiography, “the great adventure came to nothing . . . I failed to pass my M.A. examination.”<sup>20</sup> Academic failure is realized, soon enough, as the symptom of a greater intellectual failure: “I never became a scholar.”<sup>21</sup> The emergence of the critic of great subjective idiosyncrasy, in Chaudhuri’s case, necessarily follows the failure of the education of the scholar. While this example is the most striking and direct realization of such failure, I would argue that the development of (post)colonial amateurs as critics necessarily involves their disavowal of—or failure at—scholarship, which remains welded to institutions and communities far beyond their reach, at least in their crucial formative years.

The seductive and sometimes unsettling appeal of such figures, I argue, must be understood in relation to their autodidactic *bildung* against the institutionalization of English studies as part of the ruling ideology of late-colonial Britain. Here, as I have suggested, the professionalization of literary study means something quite different from the project imagined by Ransom as a way of moving away from literary-critical amateurism. Rather, professionalism is of a narrower, more instrumental kind, where the study of literature has assumed the structure of bureaucratic training, indeed, the preparation of prospective civil servants and the process of their qualification through a paraphernalia of examinations.

What fascinates me most is how this bureaucratic instrumentalization of literary study historically disenchanting a group of imaginative individuals and urged them into a striking pattern of autodidacticism that ended up in stark deviation, not only from the mission of the colonial university, but also from the modern professionalization of literary scholarship and criticism. They departed not merely from the version permitted within the narrow, bureaucratic space of the (post)colonial curriculum but also from the more viable model of critical professionalism as anticipated by Ransom and others. It is an intriguing narrative because the figures I have mentioned are no mere stories of aberration. Their very scholarly failures, I have come to realize, have also underwritten the peculiar conditions of their success as public intellectuals of wide and popular appeal. Emerging from a heavily bureaucratized system of postsecondary literary education, these thinkers developed in startling defection from most of the central tenets of professional literary criticism: not

merely the version permitted within the narrow, bureaucratic space of the (post)colonial curriculum, but even the more viable model of critical professionalism as anticipated by Ransom and others.

Strikingly similar trajectories of development also define literary intellectuals from other parts of the global British Empire, especially those who hail from backgrounds where the curricularization of English literature and European humanities formed part of the administrative strategy of colonialism. V. S. Naipaul's early *bildung*, for instance, is an evocative colonial antecedent of Mishra's intellectual self-making of the postcolonial figure at the end of the twentieth century. Naipaul's earliest, and in some ways most important, model for a reader and a writer was his father, Seepersad: in Naipaul's own words, "a self-educated man who had made himself a journalist."<sup>22</sup> The longing for colonial modernity as a viable space for the literary is germane to Naipaul's *bildung*, not only in his actual journey to Oxford to study English literature but in his abstract aspiration from early youth: "I wished to be a writer. But together with the wish there had come the knowledge that the literature that had given me the wish came from another world, far away from our own."<sup>23</sup> The immediate vehicle of that wish was his autodidact father, who also wrote stories, stories that were more sketches than stories—stories that had a vague and unfinished feel about them. "The ambition to be a writer," Naipaul writes elsewhere, "was given to me by my father."<sup>24</sup> This disembodied ambition belonged to a burgeoning intellectual self that scarcely had professional or disciplinary training, but that was obtained from the kind of eclectic mix that typically exists at a colonial periphery with an embattled history framed within an imperially structured pedagogy: the usual fare of Victorian fiction and romance, Shakespeare via Charles and Mary Lamb, J. Nesfield's grammar, right next to regular performances of *Ramlila*, the pageant-play based on the Hindu epic *Ramayana*.

Above and beyond the idiosyncratic imagination of the individual subject, autodidacticism in such a context embodies a peripheral position in relation to a colonial narrative of professional development. For Naipaul, the Trinidad Government Scholarship that he won was a way of leaving the province for the metropolis. However, he decided to use the scholarship not as the standard avenue of upward mobility through professional training or public service, as was indeed the case for most of his peers. Instead, he left for Oxford to pursue the rather vague and unformed ambition to become a writer, even though the meaning of that ambition was scarcely clear to him at that time.

Perhaps more often than not, the amateur is politically upsetting, to the progressive no less than to the conservative. Naipaul glories in his professional-amateur status as a cultural or historical critic, perhaps most

obviously in his wildly controversial political statements about the non-Western world. In his provocativeness, Naipaul is similar to his rough contemporary, Chaudhuri, who grew up in late-colonial India and who also followed, though much later in life, the trajectory of migration to Oxford. Like Naipaul, Chaudhuri sits at an uneasy angle to the responsible narrative of postcolonial writing, most blatantly to the liberatory image of the empire writing back. His anglophilia, though very different from Naipaul's, conjures an older model of the colonial mimic man; socially and intellectually, he shares biographical space with the Bengali liberal middle class, but throughout his writing life he seems to survive on the prickly delight of disrupting almost every value and belief upheld by this social group. Tempted by the illusion of Chaudhuri's pro-Hindu, Sanskritic sensibility, Hindu nationalist groups would occasionally try to court him, only to meet with the same frustration that he inspired in the liberal and progressive segment of the Indian middle class. At the heart of these infuriating anomalies, I would suggest, is a way of perceiving the world. This is the way of the engaged amateur, of an eccentric talent who trains himself to read cultural phenomena through the inspired and eclectic self-making of the autodidact. Following the failure of his scholarly aspirations, Chaudhuri becomes a critic, not only of literature and the arts, but also of social history. But his criticism is, more often than not, a celebration of his own self and the story of his adventures among his eclectic range of archives, be they houses in Calcutta or the sporting or dining habits of the English. They scarcely embody a subordination of the self to the archive, nor do they enact affiliation with any collectively agreed upon or institutionalized paradigms of scholarship.

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In some ways, the autodidactic bildung of such amateur intellectuals evokes the literary self-tutelage of the English working class. Jonathan Rose's account of this phenomenon in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* is especially illuminating here, not only because it focuses on the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, overlapping with the period of the academic institutionalization of English literature, but also because its autodidactic subject is the British industrial working class, whose education was a significant goal for this very institutionalization.<sup>25</sup> Rose reminds us that a passionate, self-driven study of English literature thrived within the working class even as English continued to be entrenched as an academic discipline within the universities. As Stefan Collini, one of England's most noted theorists and champions of

intellectual life beyond the academy, points out, at the heart of Rose's ambitious attempt at the history of working-class reading lie deeply moving individual stories: "weavers propping books up on their looms, miners disputing the merits of their favourite poets while digging coal deep underground, office boys reading far into the night to sustain themselves through the tedium of another day in the counting-house."<sup>26</sup> The curricularization of English literary studies unites the pedagogic history of subordinated social groups at home and abroad, to a certain extent. But though their experiences share certain features, in the end the English and the colonial contexts tell radically different stories.

The typical colonial autodidact, however provincial and poor, is more likely to come from the indigenous bourgeoisie or petit-bourgeoisie. To a large extent, it is the separation of class and caste positions, a common feature of Indian society, that explains the Indian autodidact's difference from similar figures from the English working class. Crucial here is the figure of the poor Brahmin, high in caste and in spiritual and intellectual aspirations, but also defined by his poverty—indeed, one might say, adorned by it, as material poverty is traditionally read as the very mark of the Brahmin's spiritual and intellectual richness. Mishra's socioeconomic lineage is to be found in this gulf between intellectual and material privilege. This radical severance of intellectual makeup and economic agency was deepened, as Mishra points out, by the socialist land-reform act of 1951, and subsequently by the quota system for government employment; both were measures intended to provide economic and professional support to lower-caste populations, and both ended up radically disadvantaging Brahmin families like Mishra's.

Notwithstanding their idiosyncratic individualism, the personal trajectories of the development and maturation of colonial and postcolonial public intellectuals simultaneously allegorize a complex narrative of colonial modernity. This narrative is often rooted in autobiography, the self-crafted story of one's *bildung*, which articulates itself in a wide and complex range of prose—personal essay, memoir, novel, autobiographical fiction, criticism, lecture, and forms of prose that break the barriers between genres and, from time to time, reveal the fissures between the discursive genres inherited from European modernity and those shaped by local traditions. It is a personal narrative that often also contains a troubled yearning for modernity, both temporal and spatial, which idiosyncratically refracts the national longing for modernity and, often, the complex regional entanglement with such modernities bequeathed by colonialism and its afterlife. But at the same time, the fractured manner of the education of these intellectuals variously indicates the imperfect and incomplete nature of this modernity, the irregular consequences of

its pedagogic enterprise—and sometimes, the poor and uneven quality of provincial educational institutions. In the end, it also points to the strange impact left by the colonial legacy of academic humanities on the idiosyncratic sensibility of imaginative individuals. The amateurism of their intellectual identity is therefore partly rooted in the flawed realization of the colonial pedagogic enterprise.

The trajectory of their growth proceeds along the narrative arc of the bildungsroman and along the negotiation of the personal with the social that is usually understood to define this arc. Franco Moretti has interpreted the bildungsroman as the symbolic form of modernity, and more recently, Pheng Cheah, Joseph Slaughter, and Jed Esty have defined the bildungsroman as the narrative genre where not only the contested relation of the private and the public, but also that of western and colonial modernity, is uneasily enacted. The bildungsroman, Esty reminds us, not only narrates the growth and education of the individual protagonist, but epitomizes “mainstream developmental discourses of self, nation, and empire,” which, in Esty’s provocative formulation, is disrupted by the modernist novel of endlessly delayed and thwarted growth—its “unseasonable youth.”<sup>27</sup> Idiosyncratic and exceptional as these protagonists are, their longing for modernity, spatialized in their trek from the province to the metropolis, contains the germ of a national longing that characterizes a colonial or a decolonized nation.

Cheah and Slaughter have both thematized the connections between Hegelian *Bildung* and the phenomenon of postcolonial nationalism. However, a national urge for modernity and cosmopolitanism—as that which characterizes colonial or postcolonial social reality—is idiosyncratically refracted, rather than allegorically reflected, by the trajectories of autodidactic bildung embodied in the lives of these intellectuals. A full understanding of their critical intervention cannot be achieved without carefully attending to the manner in which such figures negotiate a private, fiercely idiosyncratic world, often located on the remote outpost of empire, with a wider public world of colonial modernity usually situated in the imperial center. Migrating to metropolitan centers of learning and culture from a small, peripheral place, they possess a scale of ambition and a dreaminess of vision that urge them toward utopian intellectual goals. The dream of cosmopolitanism conceived in the provincial periphery, we come to see, promises to come to life only through the eclectic routes of amateur and autodidactic learning.

The narratives of growth and self-discovery that emerge through the criticism, correspondence, memoirs, and literary journalism of a range of leading colonial and postcolonial literary intellectuals such as C. L. R. James, Chaudhuri, Naipaul, and Mishra are strikingly similar with regard

to this negotiation of the private and the public, the provincial and the metropolitan, across the vast stretch of the British Empire. The colonial adolescent migrating from the provincial backwaters to the nearest town or city, the youthful hunger for a wider world, the autodidactic scavenging through dusty bookshops and abandoned bookshelves, are shared features that point to a common pattern of development. It is always a miracle when the protagonist stumbles upon chronicles of metropolitan culture in semifunctional provincial libraries and bookshops. "Miraculously," writes Mishra, "the library at Benares had remained well stocked. Subscription to foreign magazines had been renewed on time: you could find complete volumes of the *TLS*, *Partisan Review* and *The New York Review of Books* from the sixties in the stacks" (*EW* 359). In the provinces, of course, the chronicles of metropolitan culture from the past are preserved much better than current ones, which always arrive late. Such a delay, clearly a feature of the pre-digital world, accounts for the perpetual time lag between the metropolis and the periphery. Mishra says nothing about the more recent issues of the journals that he could find in the library, but we have good reason to think they were no more current than in James's Trinidad in the early decades of the twentieth century, where *Times*, the *Daily Herald*, the *New Statesman* and the *TLS* arrived "all in a bunch two weeks at a time," unlike in London, where "you get them as they come and take them in your stride."<sup>28</sup>

Mapping the structure of the bildungsroman onto the genealogy of the colonial literary intellectual allows us to see not only how the yearning for growth and fulfillment articulated in this bildung mirrors a colonized or newly decolonized nation's yearning for metropolitan modernity, but also the eventually disruptive fate of that yearning. Amateurism, I am proposing, is the epistemological articulation of the arrival of metropolitan modernity in the colony in an incomplete and fragmented form. This is clearly illustrated in the idiosyncratic and nonnormative use of scholarship, unrealistic and anachronistic intellectual ambitions, and a great paucity of historical-contextual knowledge. Yet it is also the fragmented, eclectic, and amateurish use of modes of knowledge that enables the wide and provocative appeal of certain postcolonial writers and intellectuals later in their careers, while marking them as the products of the ideologically rifted systems of colonial and postcolonial education. Though he laments the lack of the "right" kind of cultural knowledge, to say nothing of the proper scholarly apparatus, Mishra scarcely knows that it is the very amateurism of his attempt to make sense of the texture and lineage of Western modernism that will eventually provide him with insights that he would not have reached through the methods of professional scholarship: "I had problems, too, with those

books of Edmund Wilson I had found at the library, some of which I read in part that winter, others from cover to cover. They constantly referred to other books I hadn't heard of; many of them were collections of reviews of books I could not possibly read at that time. Proust, Joyce, Hemmingway, Waugh, yes; Malraux and Silone, probably; but where in India could one find John Dos Passos? Wilson's books also assumed a basic knowledge of politics and history I did not have. They were a struggle for me, and the ignorance I felt before them was a secret source of shame, but it was also a better stimulus to the effort Wilson's books demanded than mere intellectual curiosity" (*EW* 358).

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Perhaps the most famous example of how the paucity of traditional resources of scholarship helped shape a classic of criticism is Erich Auerbach writing *Mimesis* in wartime Istanbul. The paucity was forced by circumstances; Auerbach wrote his influential book when he had no access to research libraries like those available in the metropolitan west. "Had he been able to use references from the extremely voluminous secondary literature," writes Edward W. Said, "the material would have swamped him and he would never have written the book."<sup>29</sup> All he had with him were primary texts. Armed with these texts, "Auerbach relied mainly on memory and what seems like an infallible interpretative skill for elucidating relationships between books and the world they belonged to."<sup>30</sup> Auerbach, however, could not have been more different from the provincial amateurs who stumbled their accidental trail through books they knew little about. He had received, as Said puts it, "a classic Prussian education,"<sup>31</sup> which comprised a doctorate in law at Heidelberg and a doctorate in romance languages at the University of Greifswald, leading to a distinguished academic career in Europe and finally in the US. But a far greater difference was the German critic's relationship to his archive, the manner in which he received it as an intellectual inheritance, not only in his professional training but also in the cultural affinity he shared with it. If Mishra had no connection to the cultural contexts of European modernism and was bewildered by his utter lack of knowledge of an archive merely thrust upon him by a colonial curriculum, Auerbach, as Said reminds us, was the son of a German-Jewish family living in Berlin, whose excellent education started at the elite high school of the city "where the German and the Franco-Latin traditions were brought together in a very special way."<sup>32</sup> It is clear that the only thing Auerbach lacked at the time of the writ-

ing of *Mimesis* was the material apparatus of scholarship; much of the intellectual apparatus was internal to him, both by gift and by training.

The only thing we can take away from Auerbach's story is the manner in which a kind of forced amateurism shaped a relationship between the world, the text, and the critic that might have gone missing if Auerbach had written *Mimesis* with full access to bibliographic and scholarly resources. Still, the sixty-one-year-old, prodigiously gifted and learned European scholar was on one extreme, and the provincial youths just beginning to stake out the autodidactic path of their own *bildung* embodied another. But if a version of critical amateurism helped shape a unique vision for all of them, perhaps it's worth asking whether the critic, especially of aesthetic discourse, may have something to gain from a *lack* of scholarship. When interpretation of literature is far removed from collectively conceived standards of scholarship and intimately allied to the personal and idiosyncratic act of criticism by the imaginative individual, when criticism is far closer to the private voice of the poet or the fiction writer than to the collective disciplinary conscience of the scholar, does it deepen the richness of literary study or dilute it?

At the same time, it is no secret that amateur status as a critic can just as effectively be a postprofessional as a pre- or unprofessional state. Often in reality, Garber reminds us, intellectuals who gain public status do so by displaying such "magisterial unprofessionalism" (AI 46). Garber's example here is Harold Bloom, who can leave a long trajectory of scholastic professionalism behind him to do "amateurism like an old pro" in the twilight of his career as a literary intellectual, to write books about Shakespeare that he claims he wants no teacher of Shakespeare to "even look at" (AI 42). Bloom's might be an act of radical reinvention of the self—and an equally radical denial of his own, younger self—as Garber suggests, but it is also true that criticism, and especially criticism in the arts and the humanities, has always contained a powerful antiprofessional strain that has militated against the institutionalization of critical activity as an academic discipline. Robbins has reminded us of this contradiction repeatedly in the last couple of decades, pointing out the narrative of regret—of the "sad fall of the man of letters into professionalization" that has often accompanied accounts of the academization of literary study.<sup>33</sup> Not that this has actually deterred the professionalization of critical discourse, nor has it made it compromised or deficient. Rather, Robbins argues, this skepticism or sense of loss has been health-giving, instilling a permanent critique of professionalism within the academic study of literature.

It is obvious that there is a teasing, if sometimes deceptive, connection between amateur status and the public reach of a humanist

critic. That being said, the criticism attempted by the young provincial intellectuals as part of their anxious, hesitant self-making could not be further removed from the virtuoso performance of the consummate postprofessional public intellectual. Yet it is no coincidence that many colonial amateurs, such as Chaudhuri, C. L. R. James, and Mishra, while avoiding the academic trajectory altogether, became public intellectuals and literary-cultural critics of wide and popular appeal later in their career. Some, like Naipaul, achieved fame through established literary genres such as the novel (James and Mishra also published novels), but also attained wide and provocative reputations as essayists and cultural chroniclers through which they intervened as public intellectuals of transnational status. What sets critics like Chaudhuri, James, and Mishra apart from figures like Bloom and Richard Rorty is that the former group never gained full academic credentials and never became part of the university system.<sup>34</sup> An organic link seems to run through their early, faltering *bildung* as aesthetic critics and their later achievement as popular humanists, which continues to be marked by the provocative image of the public intellectual as an amateur.

There is no doubt that the intellectuals who make the arduous trek from the province to the metropolis are also virtuoso performers, capable of playing shifting roles and assuming a range of strategic positions. (Mishra, these days, seems to have become the *Guardian's* answer to the postcolonial critic at the metropolitan Western university, rather less interesting than the Mishra who read Edmund Wilson in Benares.) But I do believe the link between their stumbling early *bildung* and later popular success is a real one. The early amateurism of the provincials was not an act of choice. They would have been happy to avail themselves of the resources of professional scholarship if they had had access to them. If they were driven by idiosyncratic, amateur aspirations (such as becoming a polymath) that bore the evidence of their exceptional sensibilities, their isolation was not merely the consequence of their exceptional individualism but also of the sheer lack of a community of peers and a satisfactory institutional affiliation. If, to become professional, criticism needs to enter a collective sustainable only at the university, as Ransom argued in 1937, such a collective was never available to them as they sat thumbing through dusty volumes by forgotten shelves of libraries while utterly different realities raged outside the library window.

But what is no less interesting is that these libraries did exist, and the books were there, miraculously catalogued and preserved, even if no one seemed to have bothered to take them out before these unique provincial aspirants stumbled upon them. It was partly by serendipity that they chanced on them, but it was also true that they were hunting

. . . for what exactly, they did not know, but they were hunting for sure, driven by an urge unclear even to themselves. The dusty scaffolding of these university libraries, and the vague but ineluctable nature of their desire to read, conspired to create another chapter of history that makes the bildung of these amateurs especially significant. The libraries were there, during the colonial years, even decades after decolonization, as material repositories of the curricularization of Western humanities, and especially of the study of English literature. If the bureaucratized articulation of this curriculum at colonially structured universities pushed these colonial and postcolonial amateurs away from institutions, this literary culture still claimed them within its ideological purview and provided much of the narrative impetus in their self-making. Their story remains unique. It is one where the earliest enterprise to professionalize a discipline—driven by the programmatic needs of empire—creates a climate that ends up nurturing some of its most memorable amateurs.

## ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

## NOTES

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- 32 Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 88.
- 33 Robbins, *Secular Vocations*, 76.
- 34 Robbins, however, has warned us against the romantic nostalgia about the "free-floating" intellectuals of the past that has, for instance, tended to accompany the lamentation for the disappearance of nonacademic critics. Nonacademic intellectuals must have significant platforms (usually media outlets) if they are to be heard, and means of livelihood unless they are independently wealthy. The notion that such nonacademic intellectuals are not tied to "the wheel of a career or a profession," therefore, necessarily needs to be qualified according to circumstances. For nonacademic intellectuals, Robbins reminds us, the most significant sites of institutional membership tend to be the publications for which they regularly write. Critiquing James Atlas's article, "The Changing World of New York Intellectuals," Robbins points to the fact that Irving Howe, one of the intellectuals Atlas mentions, wrote for *Time*, which is part of a "large and aggressive corporation." Robbins's inevitable response is: "Why is working for a university less 'independent' than working for *Time*?" See Robbins, *Secular Vocations*, 9.