

BERTRAND RUSSELL MEETS HIS MUSE: THE IMPACT OF LADY OTTOLINE MORRELL (1911–12)

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Although Lady Ottoline Morrell is best remembered for her encouragement of writers and artists, her profound effect on Bertrand Russell could not result in the development of his talents in literary channels, as they both expected at first. When they became lovers in March 1911, Russell had been labouring for nearly a decade with Alfred North Whitehead on *Principia Mathematica*. He assessed for her the importance of his contribution to this monumental work with no false modesty:

It is not an easy thing to move the world. I have put into the world a great body of abstract thought, which is moving those whom one might hope to move by it, and will ultimately, probably, move many people who have never heard of philosophy. (#429, 30 April 1912)

While he gained international renown and well-deserved satisfaction from his technical work, he experienced intermittent discontent about its constraints. Perseverance allied to genius could overcome contradictions in the intellectual sphere but no such remedy could settle difficulties in his private life. Also, when he allowed himself to brood about it, he felt a disquieting sense of irrelevance about his rational pursuits. His life at the time they met was therefore marked by the contrasting experience of triumphant achievement in the purely rational realm and an accompanying impression of inadequacy both as a private individual and as a provider of wisdom and solace to suffering humanity. Since at least 1901, when he realized that he no longer loved his wife, Alys, his life had been empty of romantic fulfilment.

Lady Ottoline caused a great erotic awakening and she made him count how much else he had sacrificed in his devotion to the exactness and analysis of his professional labours. Far too flamboyant to submit to the discipline of systematic thought, she challenged him to reevaluate the limits and the benefits of his commitment to technical work.

A placid domestic contentment was inconceivable for them, even had this been their dearest mutual goal. As the wife of Philip Morrell (a lawyer and Liberal politician), Lady Ottoline was not free to marry Russell, who was in any case still legally tied to Alys. With a good deal of will, these limitations might perhaps have been overcome. But the irreconcilable dissimilarities in their personalities ensured that their relationship would be a passionate alternation of ecstasy and discord until their affair gradually mellowed into a friendship that lasted to her death in 1938. The task of tracing in detail all the raptures and distresses of their intense personal involvement may be confidently left to biographers, and the need to explain all the complex hidden motivations in their story to psychohistorians.¹ My interest lies in the temporary shift in Russell's aspirations as a writer and the methods by which he unsuccessfully attempted to bring about this change. What did Russell intend to offer to the world about matters that were inadmissible in his rigorous philosophy? Lady Ottoline made Russell realize that devotion to what Hume had called "the truths of facts and the truths of reason" could not wholly deal with his experience. If impersonal truths could not justify a life, what then did he have to say to the world and how was he to find the speech for these exalted things?

In his glowing enthusiasm at the start of his affair, Russell hoped that she would give him benefits analogous to those which Harriet Taylor had provided to his godfather, John Stuart Mill. Russell had, after all, experienced ten years previously a "conversion"² that bore

¹ Sandra Jobson Darroch, *The Life of Lady Ottoline Morrell* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976); Andrew Brink, "Russell to Lady Ottoline: the Letters of Transformation", *Russell*, nos. 21–2 (Spring–Summer 1976): 3–15; and *Bertrand Russell: the Psychobiography of a Moralizer* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities P. International, 1989), esp. Chap. 6.

² Russell described his "conversion" in *Auto.* 1: 146–7. For a psychoanalytical interpretation, see Brink, Chap. 4. A contrasting explanation of the event, based on the changes in Russell's philosophical outlook, is provided by Nicholas Griffin's "Bertrand Russell's Crisis of Faith", in *Intellect and Social Conscience*, ed. M. Moran and C.

some resemblances to the "crisis" in Mill's "mental life" in reaction against the rigid Benthamism of his father, James. Like his godfather before him, Russell had been made dramatically aware of the "dissolving influence of analysis"³ upon feelings. The discovery that they had neglected affection only to leave themselves feeling lonely and desiccated had burst upon both in similar, though not identical, ways. Several years had to pass before either found a woman who promised to alleviate these feelings. Following the precedent still further, Russell dared to believe that he had found a collaborator who, by balancing her intuitive nature against his intellect, might act either as joint author or as muse in the production of books that would enrich mankind. He shared the dream by writing to Lady Ottoline about the life of service and fulfilment he envisioned before them:

You need never have one instant's doubt of your power to help me—you can help me more than you will ever realize, because you will think it all comes from me, when it is you reflected in me.... I see a wonderful future for us stretching through the years, in which we shall help each other to bring good things to the world and have the bond of mutual strength and a great work in common. (#74, 19 May 1911)

By anticipating so much, Russell projected his own innermost desires onto another person in a way that Lady Ottoline, with all her qualities, could not be expected to fulfil.

Since Lady Ottoline placed such a high valuation on the arts, it is perhaps inevitable that Russell would aspire to express himself in a literary mode. To accomplish this would be to honour her role as a supporter of culture. His love was strong enough to make him sincerely wish to transform himself as a writer in order to please her. Lady Ottoline gave specific encouragement by telling him in her idiosyncratic style:

It is extraordinary how different you are from most of the scholars who are really not fully human—but it is bad work for you who have all sides of a

Spadoni, *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 101–22.

³ Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: U. of Toronto P., 1981), p. 142.

human being in you. Tearing at each other. But *it is so rare* you must not regret it. It makes it possible for you to do things they could not even dream of. (23 Aug. 1912)

She did not seek to deflect him permanently away from the analytical work he knew himself best able to do, but rather to allow for the expression of neglected aspects of his personality and thought. Using vivid language, she emphasized her belief that his well-being would be imperilled by any further delay. Hence she told him to "give place to that creative creature within you that sees and that would ravage you if you did not let it have its way—To give peace to the longing to realize in full what you see now only in part" (18 March 1912).

It was Russell himself who actually went so far as to consider for a time the abandonment of formal philosophy. If he were to advance his own ideas about the problems of the personal life and man's place in the cosmos, he felt that he needed a medium that would permit a free exploration of what lay outside the confines of the strictly verifiable. Although the content of these discussions need not be fictional, these accounts would align themselves with literature in their accommodation of subjective uncertainty. For other philosophers who defined their role broadly as masters of all types of inquiry, the need to find a less austere form would not have asserted itself so urgently. But Russell's argument was that modern philosophers should attempt to be scientific in their methods by modestly carving out small areas of sureness in vast regions of doubt. Perhaps more often than not, the very aloofness of rational pursuits from the pain and confusion of daily existence proved irresistibly compelling. But, on occasion, the purity of his rationalism could look very much like aridity, and his pursuit of intellectual perfection could seem dangerously close to irresponsibility, callousness or luxuriousness. With Lady Ottoline's guidance, he wanted to relax his sceptical intellect in order to transcend the piecemeal and the partial—to find the one dominant insight about what it is to be human.

For all that the very character of his philosophizing seemed on the face of it to rule out the possibility, Russell sought a final synthesis. If he was often severely critical of the premature formulation by other

thinkers of grand, overarching schemes,⁴ he also experienced periods of severe regret when he feared that his own contribution to the world's knowledge might be confined to the strictly analytical. In his letters to Lady Ottoline, he rejoiced often in the conviction that with her help he might find a means to bind together the various disparate provinces of his thought and being. Thus, he could say: "I have sought truth before all, and have been willing to let anything go to the wall rather than that ... but now it seems easier to make other good things fit with truth" (#17, 4 April 1911). Using a startlingly effective image, Lady Ottoline accepted her role as conductor for the achievement of this harmony: "I suppose in some mysterious manner I do help you to free the gods and goddesses within you—and to help them all sing together well in tune" (24 Feb. 1912). But the union he so desperately sought proved unattainable. In frustration about his creative ambition, Russell could write: "I have something in my mind that I want to bring out.... Oh if I could weld together in a whole the things I feel and care for ... it would be very great" (#386, 16 March 1912). Ardent expressions of desire for erotic union, to be expected in such a correspondence, are found there in profusion. Much more surprising in love letters are these urgent wishes for coherence within a system of thought.

Two gravely didactic works, that were directly inspired by Lady Ottoline, Russell intended to present to the public: "Prisons" and a short story called "The Perplexities of John Forstice". A less serious endeavour, an unpublished essay entitled "Dramatic and Utilitarian Ethics" also bears the marks of her influence.⁵ "Prisons" grew very quickly to book-length proportions, but Russell discarded most of it when he decided that the mighty themes outreached his expression. Only the chapter revised as an essay, "The Essence of Religion", some

⁴ For example, in *Theory of Knowledge*, he noted, "Most of us have been told in youth that analysis is easy and base, whereas synthesis is glorious and difficult. Some of us may have felt inclined to reverse that judgment; but however that may be, it is only by analysis that we can hope to know what analysis and synthesis are, and therefore only the humble analyst can know in what the glories of synthesis consist" (*Papers* 7: 119).

⁵ "Prisons", *Papers* 12: 97–109; "The Essence of Religion", 12: 110–22; "The Perplexities of John Forstice", 12: 123–54; and "Dramatic and Utilitarian Ethics", 12: 378–83.

other sections he incorporated into the ending of *The Problems of Philosophy* and a few early fragments have survived from this ambitious project. In the extant portions of "Prisons" and "The Perplexities of John Forstice", the insistence on the need for wholeness again dominates. Although these two writings assert repeatedly that thought, feeling and will can and must be brought into a state of oneness in order that wisdom may be acquired, the practical guidance required for that difficult accomplishment receives scant attention. Similarly, there are confident declarations that polarities like those of Self and not-self and action and contemplation can be reconciled. But here, too, affirmations take the place of explanations.

Lady Ottoline hoped that Russell would find "some light or philosophy that would help *all* the wretched Human beings" (18 March 1912). "Prisons", which they referred to as their "child", was meant to tell a secular age what benefits could still be found in religion, even for those creedless ones unable to accept fundamentals like the existence of God or immortality. However, that project floundered because they could not reconcile their own deep differences on the topic. In a manner rather suggestive of his practice in "The Free Man's Worship" of 1903, Russell habitually used, in letters to her, language laden with intense connotative force: like "mysticism", "soul", "awe", "vision", "spirit", "conversion", "sacred" and "heaven". Lacking the orthodox faith, he still relied on the vocabulary of belief, in the time-honoured poetic manner, sometimes to articulate the exultation of his romantic love, and sometimes to express the heightened intensity of his own psychic states. He must have used these words in anticipation of their affective impact on her. But he could not have foreseen the misunderstanding that arose when Lady Ottoline read into his diction the evidence she wanted to see for a conviction nearly as profound as her own. When Russell bluntly stated his scepticism in December 1911, their relationship suffered its first serious difficulty and "Prisons" became imperilled too. He described the gulf that separated them in two letters which read, in part:

It is difficult for you to disentangle what I understand and what I don't understand in your religion. I understand your passion for it and what it is and why you care about it. What I don't understand is the purely intellectual part—how you can think that it is true. I think if I could get the fanaticism out of my soul I should understand. You also don't understand my allegiance

to reason, which seems to you to depend on *not* seeing something. (#298, 26 Dec. 1911)

You do not believe that reasoning is a method of arriving at truth; I do. Reduced to that, it does not much matter. (#299, 27 Dec. 1911)

Of course, it did most decidedly matter a great deal. The union between her belief and his doubt could not be achieved, because each had underestimated the extent of the chasm that divided them. The argument dramatizes the point that Lady Ottoline did not alter Russell's ideas. Her effect on him cannot strictly be called an "influence" in the way the term is used in the history of ideas. She encouraged him in a general way to "express his soul", but she had little control over what precisely he would find there.

By February 1912, Russell was describing "Prisons", which he had thought finished the September before, as a failure. Perhaps partly to deflect attention away from its divisive content, he stressed the inadequacies of its style and structure: "Prisons' was wrong, I think, simply because it was expository. One must have a more artistic form" (#341, 12 Feb. 1912). Even when due allowances are made for the fact that "Prisons" can be read now only in fragments, it is difficult to countenance for long the possibility that its deficiencies must be attributed exclusively to its expository style. Yet, the chance that style alone had created the problem led Russell to take the daring step of attempting to use the narrative method. The writing of "Prisons" had called for indomitable enterprise, but at least he had been working there with a medium he had already mastered. The public praise that had been extended to his earlier elegiac essays, like "The Free Man's Worship" must have lent considerable confidence to the venture. To try imaginative expression, however, involved him in an unprecedented activity. In the beginning, he blithely underestimated the difficulties ahead and rejoiced in the new-found freedom. But before very long, he was sending a steady stream of complaints to Lady Ottoline about the slow, tortuous progress of "The Perplexities of John Forstice". He resorted even to doing practice exercises for the wastepaper basket to relax the paralysis that came from his determination to achieve polished results at first try. With this method, there was always the chance, he told her, that something might, by accident, be good.

Some measure of his relentless industry is apparent in the surviving manuscript of his fiction. There, the long deletions, the gropings for the right words and the rearrangements of entire sections give eloquent testimony to the labour expended. Yet, no matter how much he fussed over it, his story did not noticeably improve. Although he held for a surprisingly long time to the delusion that the situation was corrigible, he had remarkably astute insight into the root cause of his frustration.⁶ "I have always tended to extract the essence and state it baldly and briefly; it wants other things to create an atmosphere," he could admit (#347, 18 Feb. 1912). Or again: "Writing needs a body as well as a soul; hitherto I have not had enough invention for the body" (#563, 4 Sept. 1912). Even with an immeasurably strong desire to pay homage to Lady Ottoline and an amazingly dogged will, he simply could not turn himself into a writer of fiction.

Aside from all his struggles with form, his subject-matter presented overwhelming challenges of its own. For he intended to use a fictional persona in order to talk about himself through the safety of disguise and to present his most fundamental convictions about the meaning of human experience.⁷ Russell could not bring himself to set the complexity of his own personality aside as a matter of exclusively personal interest. If that circumstance had been otherwise, we would be deprived of his magnificent *Autobiography*. Its three volumes reveal Russell's assumption that he can tell us more by presenting himself as a part of all that he has met than by unremitting introspection. There, his shifts from the external to the interior landscape contribute impressively to the overall effect. Such alternation came from his certainty that the self cannot be understood by looking directly at it. At the time he wrote "Forstice", he was no less repelled by the excesses of self-absorption. But he had yet to acquire complete comfort with his own being and confidence about the large patterns that the various

⁶ Russell's daughter, Katharine Tait, told me in a letter of 11 September 1982: "It always seemed to me that a very quick analytical mind like his makes the slow construction of fiction difficult: the skeleton is there, but one hasn't the patience to put flesh on it."

⁷ For further details about Russell's autobiographical references and the process of composition, see my "Bertrand Russell's First Short Story: 'The Perplexities of John Forstice' as 'Spiritual Autobiography'", *Dalhousie Review*, 63 (1983-84): 575-89.

random episodes of daily existence were forming. Early middle age was therefore, even for a person of such a prodigious talent, too soon for this subject. Perhaps because he sensed the prematurity of the effort, he tried to compensate with ponderous didacticism and an imposed structural rigour that attempts to make his uncertainty look Euclidean. Paradoxically, the *Autobiography* gives the impression of having been written by a person with a younger heart and, indeed, a stronger sense of fiction than the earlier story.

In his *Autobiography*, Russell emphasized Lady Ottoline's capacity to make him less narrow-minded and priggish (I: 205). Neither "Prisons" nor "The Perplexities of John Forstice" can offer very convincing corroboration of this claim. Their creator can scarcely have been other than an earnest seeker after meaning, as prone as ever before to merge private melancholy into metaphysics. An essay Russell left unpublished, "Dramatic and Utilitarian Ethics", comes somewhat closer to supporting those aspects of her influence which he chose to highlight for his life story. Whereas Russell had been previously determined to view literature as a storehouse of moral reflection, he relaxed his previous aesthetic puritanism for a vivacious and elegantly sophisticated examination of the shocking inappropriateness of many famous protagonists as examples for conduct. Other genres represented by Shakespeare and Synge make the heroic qualities that give rise to action, and particularly violent action, more glamorous than the harder virtues of patient endurance. We can only speculate why Russell decided against publishing this essay.⁸ Perhaps he felt uneasy that his comments might be misconstrued to imply his complete disapprobation of Shakespeare's art. Still, the question whether the best that has been thought and said can be reconciled to the morality of daily living is not one that would make most literary critics blush. The answer for Russell's abandonment of the paper may lie simply in his customary reservations about whether literary criticism itself had sufficient merit to warrant his attention.⁹

⁸ He glanced at the theme again in *The Scientific Outlook* when he imagined a future society so sterile as to prohibit the general public from reading such works as *Hamlet* and *Othello* "on the ground that they glorify private murder" (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931, p. 221).

⁹ For discussion of his previous views of literature and literary criticism, see my

Balancing Russell's desire to create literature was a renewed commitment to the reading of it. Particularly in the early letters he repeated expressions of gratitude for his aesthetic awakening. "I have been ascetic and starved my love of beauty because I could not live otherwise the life I had to live. Now all that is over" (#11, 30 March 1911). Knowing at the outset that nothing could correct his blindness to excellence in painting or sculpture,¹⁰ he focused attention on books as the only art form in which he could dare to imagine being able to match her in appreciation. Just as he recognized that he had no "power of *creating* beauty except to some extent in words" (#44, 27 April 1911), so did he realize that verbal expression moved him most. Lady Ottoline and Russell exchanged many books, often with especially favoured passages marked. Among their best loved poets were Shelley, Blake, Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Leopardi and Vaughan. Shelley, though as always his great favourite, he confessed to finding hard to approach because he had reread admired passages so frequently as to have almost exhausted a capacity for response. Of Blake, Russell remarked: "He can be simple and very great at the same time" (#385, 18 March 1912). He found a good deal to treasure in Matthew Arnold, and indeed cherished at least half-seriously the illusion that he might one day succeed in writing poetry like his. Russell dismissed Crashaw as dull and thought that Donne's longer poems might be best employed for passing empty moments in waiting rooms. Keats' "Endymion", while memorable enough to inspire several allusions, he considered to contain "much that is very bad" (#400, 24 March 1912). No fiction could compare in Russell's estimation with Conrad's. Of the many novelists he valued for their capacity to entertain him, the names of Tolstoy, James, Wells and Bennett recur frequently. As for fine expository writing, he noted: "It is a sad fact that almost all the best prose stylists write dull stuff—Milton and Carlyle are almost the only exceptions" (#103, 30 Jan. 1911). Later that judgment may have been qualified by new respect for Charles Lamb: "he is quite amazingly good—[he] makes one laugh and cry at once." Russell seems to

"Bertrand Russell's Early Approaches to Literature", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 54 (1984): 56–78.

¹⁰ See Carl Spadoni, "Bertrand Russell on Aesthetics", in *Intellect and Social Conscience*, pp. 49–82.

have placed Synge very high among the dramatists.

Aside from the astonishing reference to himself as a potential imitator of Arnold, there are no hints that he undertook any of this reading to provide inspiration for his own literary ambitions. He retained his deeply ingrained habit of delighting in works which allowed him to see his own moods, moral standards and circumstances reflected in some way. Often, he read, as before, simply to give rest to his active mind. But he confessed to being an inadequate reader because he could rarely spare the concentrated emotional and mental attention that great literature usually demands. This admission probably explains the discrepancy between the vast quantity of literature he consumed and the exclusiveness of the list of authors he considered worthy of the highest praise.

Once in a way a book is important to me, but very seldom.... [Many] I might almost as well not have read ...; if I had sat still thinking, it might have done me as much good. I know this is shameful. It is because I find it so hard to be receptive—a few words of the book start some reaction in me which prevents me from taking in the rest. (#335, 6 Feb. 1912)

Perhaps there are clues here too for the underestimation of the craft of fiction that gave him the temerity to begin "Forstice". Beyond everything, Russell respected the artistic beauty he perceived in pure mathematics. In that field, he never misjudged the effort required to apprehend or to create beauty.

Judged harshly, the early stages of Russell's involvement with Lady Ottoline may be seen as a period of considerable divarication from the sort of academic work where he excelled. With the important exception of the love letters themselves, the written material that resulted from this excursion gives warrant to such a strict conclusion. He had after all been able to produce at her prompting only an abandoned book, a short story which he refused to allow to be published except posthumously, and a rather promising brief essay which he never saw into print. Had Lady Ottoline merely succeeded in rendering Russell mute and inglorious? The disappointment occasioned by the failure of "Forstice" can be gauged by his enumeration of grievances: "three things I want and can't have—children, daily companionship and imaginative writing" (#989, 17 Feb. 1914). The list of deprivations and disillusionments might well have been lengthened if he had gone on to

consider all the ramifications of his determination to become a new person for her sake. Always his sceptical intellect reasserted itself to leave matters much as before, and his strict commitment to truth had forbidden any pretence about the outcome. About his inability to produce a literary masterpiece and refine his sensibility to the artistic achievements of others, his distresses were acute enough. But the strongest impression of defeat came from his failure to perform the marvel of finding an organizing insight, apparently conjured out of the ground. Intermittently throughout his life, he lamented the absence of this means to the final synthesis. Thus, he spoke in 1918 in urgent tones of a need unfulfilled: "I *must* before I die, find *some* way to say the essential thing that is in me, that I have never said—a thing that is not love or hate or pity or scorn, but the very breath of life" (*Auto.* 2: 87).

If the outcome of the quest he had been induced to make by Lady Ottoline seems entirely bleak, we must make allowance for two facts. The grandeur of his initial expectations had almost ensured disappointment. Besides, Russell preferred reality—even when painful—to delusion. For him a bracing sublimity arose from the honest recognition that man is dependent on his own resources in a friendless universe. In a similar way, he could not sustain for long any comforting mythology about his own nature. A letter to Lady Ottoline composed in 1912 summarized for the time being the conclusions he had reached in his search for meaning and self-knowledge.

One is always hunting for a general philosophy of life which will cover all the contradictory things that seem good....

... [P]ure thought, on things not connected with human life, seems to me the only thing worth while. I find then a kind of joy in clearness, in transparent lucidity, in godlike detachment....

... [T]he purely intellectual side of me ... is reliable, clear, quite independent of my life and my other passions, and with a flame-like purity. Everywhere else I am hesitant, tortured, struggling; there I am decisive, clear, secure. And I hardly ever doubt the value of pure intellect, whereas I constantly doubt the value of religion.... [A]ll desire for religion is a form of cowardice, an offshoot of the thirst for happiness....

There are two worlds, the world of illusion and the world of fact. Everything mystical, all beauty that is intoxicating, almost all happiness, belong to the world of illusion. The problem is to find a beauty and a happiness that can live in the world of fact. Mathematics is for me one part of the answer....

The summit of legitimate joys is the joy of courage, of battle, of stripping away illusions and standing forth naked to meet the storm. That is a joy as wild and unearthly as any in the mystic world. (#430, 30 April 1912)

Eventually, Russell wrote so voluminously and so persuasively in the popular medium that many of his ideas have successfully permeated the consciousness of Western man. We cannot now confidently sort out the conclusions we have reached ourselves from the attitudes he taught us to regard as self-evident. But in 1911 and 1912, his fame derived almost exclusively from his aristocratic lineage and his professional achievements. By then, virtually the only hint of his latent power as an opinion-maker was his restless impulse to speak directly to everyman. He trusted that by accommodating himself to Lady Ottoline's interests in religion and art, he might acquire a voice less cold than before, in order to convey a message that all men would gratefully heed. Yet, the effort proved a failure, made magnificent only by the grand intentions behind it. The transformation from scholar to sage he had expected to enjoy through love, came instead, miserably, through war. During the First World War, Russell expended most of his energies campaigning for peace. If he could not reach a mass audience by becoming a novelist or a poet, he could most assuredly do so as a social critic. In this endeavour, Lady Ottoline sustained him once again. Although by then he no longer wanted to redirect his life to please her, his protest against the war isolated him to such an extent that he welcomed encouragement from one who shared his pacifism. Had events been otherwise, the war alone would have turned Russell into a social dissenter, but the years of self-assessment at her prompting gave special fervour to his message to "all the wretched Human beings". Contrary to all his reasonable expectations, his writings as a propagandist and prophet afford much stronger claims for literary merit than his self-consciously artistic performance.¹¹

¹¹ Jo Vellacott's *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1980) assesses the historical importance of his stand. For a discussion of Russell's rhetoric in his anti-war writings, see my "The World As It Can Be Made: Bertrand Russell's Protest Against the First World War", *Prose Studies*, 8 (1985): 51-68.