

Introduction

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The word *value* seems to have become about as ubiquitous as email,” the anthropologist Daniel Miller writes. “Everybody seems to be talking about shareholder value, best value, and above all added value.”¹ Indeed, the global financial crisis that struck in 2008 has increased the public’s awareness of the term’s associations, both quantitative (“What exactly is in my 401(k)?”) and qualitative (“Did all that shopping make me happier?”). Miller writes, “If value is no longer the holy grail of theory, it is certainly today the holy grail of practice” (1122). Though we have come a long way from calculating “value” in terms of its labor costs, a principle of nineteenth-century political economy derived largely from Karl Marx’s reworking of Adam Smith, we live in a world where the manifestations of value saturate the mass media and everyday life in constructs like “shareholder society,” “consumer culture,” and “the marketplace of ideas.”

Drawing on the renewed pervasiveness of the word *value*, this special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* explores the relationship between literature and economics by focusing on the notion of “literary value.” Examining this idea in a range of historical contexts and national traditions—including ancient and futurist literature (Jeffrey T. Schnapp), seventeenth-century England (Valerie Forman), Enlightenment and Romantic Germany (Richard T. Gray), the Italian Enlightenment (Roberto M. Dainotto), and postbellum America (Angela Sorby)—the issue aims to reveal how economic conditions shape the

¹ Daniel Miller, “The Uses of Value,” *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008): 1122.

aesthetics of the literary text and, correspondingly, how literary form can rethink its economic and financial contexts. Overall, this issue seeks to deepen our understanding of the fruitful connection between the often separate spheres of objective economic analysis and subjective aesthetic judgment.

This union, according to the opening essay, can be an uneasy one, since literature, “as a domain of freedom, protected from the intrusion of all higher authorities by the magic of ‘as if,’” may even be “defined by its founding disobedience to the discourse of value” (Bruce Robbins). Stimulated by the perennial tendency to seek the hand of God in the world’s events, Robbins’s “Is Literature a Secular Concept? Three Earthquakes” asks whether literature is “different in kind from the vindications of heavenly design” so often invoked to explain disasters like the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Robbins engages the work of Richard Rorty to describe literature’s capacity to reject “the vocabulary of value” and its refusal “to speak in the name of any capital T Truth.” In “The Chatter of People and Things,” Schnapp considers the “complex modes of ordering” in the Western literary imagination as “an aversion toward *noise*” that manifests itself in inventories, catalogs, and other “enumerative structures.” Analyzing lists ranging from Jove’s prophecy in Virgil’s *Aeneid* 6 (19 BCE) to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *parole in libertà* (words in freedom) in the sound poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1912–14), Schnapp shows how such catalogs “*impose themselves* on distracted reader-viewers” and achieve “value” through “the ability to (momentarily) capture and hold humanity’s (limited) attention span.” Forman’s “Early Modern ‘Neoliberalisms’: England and the English Caribbean” discusses how today’s term *neoliberalism*, “with its insistence on free trade and its link to personal liberty,” provides a useful perspective from which to consider the “relationships among economics, politics, and even literary experimentation in [seventeenth-century] England and the English Caribbean.” Her reading of Aphra Behn’s influential *Oroonoko* (1688) demonstrates how that novel contests many neoliberal ideas that developed during the seventeenth century by bringing to light the horrors and injustices of the slavery and colonialism that unchecked market forces helped spawn. The dialogue between “two ‘new’ [eighteenth-century] scientific-theoretical disciplines, economics and aesthetics” drives the analysis of Gray’s “Imaginary Value and the

Value of the Imaginary: J. G. Schlosser, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and the Convergence of Aesthetics and Economics in German Romanticism.” Drawing on such preeminent theorists as G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Adam Smith, Gray studies the controversial role of the “productive imagination” in Romantic economic discourse through close readings of Schlosser’s theoretical writings and Hoffmann’s short fiction. In a meditation on Italy’s often-overlooked Enlightenment, Dainotto’s “With *Plato in Italy*: The Value of Literary Fiction in Napoleonic Italy” ponders the manifold nature of literary value in the work of Vincenzo Cuoco. By examining print culture, the publishing industry, and systems of patronage, Dainotto’s reading of *Plato in Italy* (*Platone in Italia*, 1804–6) probes the notion of literary value not in the abstract but in “the specific, peripheral, semicolonial Italian situation of the early 1800s.” In “Who Wrote ‘Rock Me to Sleep’? Elizabeth Akers Allen and the Profession of Poetry,” Sorby revisits Akers’s legal tussles with Alexander M. W. Ball in “one of the most notorious attribution scandals of the nineteenth century.” In considering the cultural and gender implications of Akers’s struggle to retain the rights of authorship to her wildly successful poem, Sorby reveals the evolving nature of copyright as well as the increasingly blurred line between readers and writers in print culture, which raised questions “about the extent to which poems circulated as commodities—and the extent to which poets could, or should, work as professional authors.”

This collection returns us to concerns that have motivated—one is tempted to say vexed—literary criticism from its origins, especially in those specialized dimensions that explore how economics, finance, and the material conditions of life shape the production and reception of literature.² Aristotle, Marc Shell writes (90–95), was likely the

² The robust critical field on the relationship between literature and economics has benefited from three principal modes of inquiry. The first, exemplified by such works as Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), focuses on the structural homologies and metaphorical similarities in language and symbols between economic and literary discourses. A second, more historical approach, embodied in studies like Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in*

first to use the term *economy* in literary theory in his *Poetics* (384–322 BCE), which draws on aesthetic and political theory in determining whether works of the imagination involve natural or unnatural modes of production (*poiesis*). Aristotle's theory of imaginative labor is among the many antecedents that lead literary criticism to alternate between regarding the literary text as a "commodity"—even a system of inventory, as Schnapp does—and treating it as a "priceless" phenomenon capable of transcending its material coordinates.

Giorgio Agamben captures the ontological divisiveness inherent in attempts to define literary value when he writes:

Why does poetry matter to us? The ways in which answers to this question are offered testify to its absolute importance. For the field of possible respondents is clearly divided between those who affirm the significance of poetry only on condition of altogether confusing it with life and those for whom the significance of poetry is instead exclusively a function of its isolation from life. Both groups thereby betray their

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), shows the interchange between literary and economic forms of representation as it arises in a specific cultural and discursive milieu—often nineteenth-century Britain, arguably home to the first mature capitalist economy. A recent study, Richard T. Gray, *Money Matters: Economics and the German Cultural Imagination, 1770–1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), combines the semiotic analysis of the first group of works and the historical focus of the second while engaging significant trends in German idealist philosophy. A third approach constitutes what Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, editors of the valuable anthology *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Interface of Literature and Economics* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 1999), call "critical economics," in which works like Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), examine how economics is itself a form of writing that draws on literary and rhetorical strategies of representation. See also the important studies by Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

apparent intention: the first, because they sacrifice poetry to the life into which they resolve it; the second, because in the last analysis they are convinced of poetry's impotence with respect to life. Romanticism and aestheticism, which confuse life and poetry at every step, are just as foolish as Olympian classicism and well-meaning secularism, which everywhere keep life and poetry apart, destining humanity to transmit a patrimony that is holy but that has become useless precisely in the issue that should have become decisive.³

However reductive, Agamben's diagnosis of an eternal divide between formalist criticism and more context-based literary interpretation evokes the long-standing dichotomy that sees literature either as a material product or as the bread of angels. Indeed, the dual status of literary value as an indicator of both economic exchange and private evaluation or judgment supports Agamben's framing of the issue as one of "absolute importance." In asking whether literature is "a secular concept," Robbins explores the larger theological concerns that hover over Agamben's dualistic notion of literary value, while Dainotto pushes the matter to reflect on the so-called crisis in the humanities today: "What can literature promise, and what can it give? Can the humanities still have an end in sight? . . . Is knowledge a commodity? If so, how much is it worth?" Sorby's take on the issue of poetry's "absolute importance" brings up both gender and the changing nature of publishing: just as women endured inferior authorial status in the late nineteenth-century United States, so poetry remained "an economically weak genre vulnerable to appropriation by others."

What Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls the "double discourse of value" can encompass both the aesthetic experience of art unmoored from sociopolitical coordinates (the "literary" in the Kantian, disinterested sense of the term) and an awareness of art's status as a cultural commodity with a measurable price.⁴ In this spirit Terry Eagleton attempts to connect the two terms *literature* and *value* by writing that "there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*. . . . 'Value' is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 93.

⁴ See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 125–42.

certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes.”⁵ Indeed, he continues, we may one day live in a world where the works of William Shakespeare hold as little value as graffiti. Eagleton’s observation recalls the more ominous connection between thought and value judgments, literary and otherwise, in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who uses an explicitly economic rhetoric to diagnose the birth of modern morality:

Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging—these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking *as such*. . . . Perhaps our word “man” (*manas*) still expresses something of precisely *this* feeling of self-satisfaction: man designated himself as the creature that measures values, evaluates and measures, as the “valuating animal as such.”⁶

Recent literary criticism has benefited from three paradigmatic approaches to the question of literary value. Representative of the first, John Guillory notes that the contentious debates about literary value make a category error by failing to shed light on how indissolubly linked the notions of aesthetic and economic value were in the eighteenth century, a crucial point that Gray addresses in his essay:

The problem of “aesthetic value” is not in fact a perennial problem, but can be posed as such only after the divergence of aesthetics and political economy [in the Enlightenment], and as a consequence of the repression of their convergent origin. . . . The practice of judging works of art need make no reference at all to the concept of value before the emergence of political economy. It was not even the case that a concept of aesthetic value operated *implicitly* in the nascent forms of critical discourse in the early modern period; the point is precisely that the comparison of authors or works to one another need not at that time be expressed as the comparison of their relative “aesthetic values,” because neither the concept of the aesthetic, nor the concept of value, are as yet defined in such a way that they can be yoked together.⁷

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 13.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, in *On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 70.

⁷ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 303.

Guillory then shows how the discourses of both aesthetic value and political economy emerged from Enlightenment moral philosophy, in which “the order, proportion, or harmony of a work of art, or any object of beauty” became an analogy for the well-ordered, justly regulated, and harmonious political economy in such thinkers as Edmund Burke, Frances Hutcheson, Lord Kames (a pioneer of modern literary criticism), and especially Adam Smith (305). Though she does not focus on literary value per se, Forman lengthens this intellectual genealogy linking Enlightenment aesthetic and economic modes of thought by considering how early modern conceptions of private property, especially Lockean notions connecting labor and ownership, fired the imagination of seventeenth-century authors and social theorists alike.

Offering a second major critical viewpoint, Pascale Casanova follows Guillory in conceiving of literature as a form of capital; her interests, however, lie not in the discursive genealogy of the term *literary value* but in the way that literature creates an alternate market, “a space in which the sole value recognized by all participants—literary value—circulates and is traded.”⁸ Echoing Paul Valéry, she emphasizes that literary value or prestige often moves in a direction altogether independent from economics, as certain languages and genres dominate forms of currency in the international literary space regardless of the commercial machinations of the culture industry.⁹ Casanova’s study describes how literary value “depend[ed] on the existence of a more or less extensive professional ‘milieu,’ a restricted and cultivated public, and an interested aristocracy or enlightened bourgeoisie; on salons, a specialized press, and sought-after publishers with distinguished lists” (15).

Similar to Casanova, a third group in recent New Historicist criti-

⁸ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

⁹ “I say that there is a value called ‘spirit,’ as there is a value [assigned to] *oil*, *wheat*, or *gold*. I have said value, because it involves appreciation and judgments of importance, as well as discussion about the price one is prepared to pay for this value: *spirit*. One can invest in this value; one can *follow* it, as the men of the Bourse say; one can observe its fluctuations, in whatever quotations reflect people’s opinion of it. In these quotations, which are printed on every page of the newspapers, one can see how it continually comes into competition with other values. For there are competing values. . . . All these values that rise and fall constitute the great market of human affairs” (Paul Valéry, “La liberté de l’esprit” [“Spiritual Freedom,” 1939], quoted in Casanova, 13).

cism discusses how cultural institutions like publishing houses and legal constructs like copyright circulate notions of literary value. For example, Paul K. Saint-Amour argues in *The Copywrights* (2003) that Victorian literary value was determined in part by publishers' lists that established norms for high and low literature.¹⁰ Along the same lines, an edited volume by Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi marshals a range of legal and literary-critical contributions to consider such seminal theoretical essays as "La mort de l'auteur" ("Death of the Author," 1968), by Roland Barthes, and especially "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" ("What Is an Author?," 1969), by Michel Foucault, who notes:

It would be worth examining how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of "the-man-and-his-work criticism" began.¹¹

While the present essays share much with these three groups, their particular difference (and intended contribution) lies principally in their focus on literary value amid a wealth of methodological approaches, national traditions, and historical contexts whose breadth and depth attest to the enduring importance of this cultural phenomenon. The essays as a whole raise the following points:

1. The modern notion of literary value has origins in the emergence of both the quantitative understanding of value in Enlightenment political economy and a more qualitative contemporary discourse of value in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory.

Gray's contribution in particular centers on this often-overlooked connection between aesthetics and economics in intellectual history during an era that produced such foundational works in both disciplines as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750–58) and François Quesnay's *Tableau économique* (1759). Covering similar terrain in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European literature,

¹⁰ Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, vol. 2 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: New Press, 1998), 205.

Dainotto's study illuminates the intersection between the transhistorical migration of literary principles and the concrete reality of the Italian publishing industry in Napoleonic Naples.

2. Though economic conditions may shape a literary work's creation and reception, this same work can also employ formal means to provide insight into aspects of material life that technical economic analysis alone cannot access.

Schnapp's diagnosis of how cataloging (from the Greek *katalégein*) in ancient and avant-garde literature refers not only to the sober technique of data ordering but also to a "distinctive, self-reflexive poetic practice" suggests "poetry's powers as an agent of remembrance in the face of the overwhelming force of history's forgetfulness." Robbins does not grapple with the relation of economics to literature, but he sounds a useful note of caution when he writes that the jury is still out as to whether literature is a "secular" concept, since it often carries vestiges of theology even when it appears to empty itself of religious tradition. By analogy, even when literary form is at its most apparently immanent and commodified, its aesthetic qualities can push readings into registers of reflection and response that, while not necessarily religious, invoke the rhetoric of spirituality and inner life.

3. The relationship between a literary text's status as an aesthetic creation and its status as a cultural commodity implicates a web of other practices and institutions that make the category of literary value vital for insight into such issues as copyright, the publishing industry, the notion of authorship, and the formation of literary canons.

The interconnectedness of literary value with external cultural institutions is most evident in Sorby's study of how the female poet Akers negotiated "the tangled laws of copyright" in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when "poetry began disappearing from newspapers, from scrapbooks, and arguably from American daily life" as it became a more sharply delineated piece of intellectual property. In a related vein, Forman's genealogy of the neoliberalism current in a seventeenth-century England intent on expanding its empire reveals—in the brutal image of the slave Oroonoko's dismembered body scattered about the plantation after his failed rebellion—Behn's use of metaphor to contest "neoliberal" ideas and show how "the free market could be [a] tyrant."

For all the differences among these essays, a fundamentally intransigent but productive dialogue between value as a system of measure and value as an act of judgment stimulates much of the thinking in this collection. Ultimately the inchoate, unpredictable gravitational pull of literary form on the measurable world of goods and services, dollars and cents, reveals this dialogue at its most fascinating. If the economist measures gross domestic product and inflation, then it rightly falls to the literary critic to discern the protean, often-hidden capacity of aesthetic form to draw what seem to be questions of objective value into the more subjective and less certain domains of art and judgment. Since all of the essays bring the aesthetic dimensions of value to light, it seems appropriate to end this introduction and introduce this collection with a single metaphor that cuts across centuries, genres, and national traditions to meditate on literary value while performing it.

The metaphor comes from Giovanni Verga, Italy's preeminent commentator on the literature-economics nexus in an age of national unification and proto-industrial development that increasingly defined cultural issues in terms of the marketplace. In the masterpiece of his novel cycle on the economic winners and losers in late nineteenth-century Italy, *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*, 1881), Verga promises a "studio sincero e spassionato" (sincere and dispassionate study) of those who, after living for centuries in relative if impoverished serenity, are newly perturbed by the "vaga bramosia" (vague yearning) for material gain.¹² The novel portrays the protracted decline of one such materially agitated family, the Malavoglia, who after generations as exploited fishermen decide to seek private ownership of their boat, only to lose the family home and honor. In the first, decisive encounter between the Malavoglia and modern capital, the honorable patriarch, Master 'Ntoni, becomes uncharacteristically embroiled in financial speculation. It all begins innocently enough with the purchase of lupin beans on credit. Master 'Ntoni intends to ship the beans to market in a town far from his own Acitrezza and then sell them at a profit. But as his son Bastianazzo is transporting them, a storm claims his life and

¹² Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (1881), in *Opere*, ed. Luigi Russo (Milan: Ricciardi, 1968), 177; in English, *The House by the Medlar Tree*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 3.

destroys the cargo. The tragedy sets in motion other calamities, and soon the patriarch is forced to sell the family home, the house by the medlar tree. A legal loophole may be available to save the home, which belongs to his wife under the terms of her dowry. But he insists that a debt incurred must be honored; he does not understand written, legal contracts, only the oral ones handed down by tradition and sanctioned by conscience.

The conscience of Master 'Ntoni becomes the tipping point on which Verga balances his notion of literary value, for it is through the machinations of the protagonist's inner life that we see the literary and economic elements of genre in vertiginous dialogue. While Master 'Ntoni grieves for Bastianazzo and reflects on the family's uncertain future at his funeral, the narrative describes how "il nespolo lasciava cadere le foglie vizzate, e il vento le spingeva di qua e di là pel cortile" (withered leaves fell from the medlar tree, and the wind pushed them here and there in the yard) (*Malavoglia*, 216; *Medlar Tree*, 46). Verga then extends this venerable trope of the falling leaves:

"Egli [Bastianazzo] è andato perché ce l'ho mandato io," ripeteva padron 'Ntoni, "come il vento porta quelle foglie di qua e di là, e se gli avessi detto di buttarsi dal *faraglione* con una pietra al collo, l'avrebbe fatto senza dir nulla. Almeno è morto che la casa e il nespolo sino all'ultima foglia erano ancor suoi." (*Malavoglia*, 216)

["He went because I sent him," Master 'Ntoni repeated. "Just as the wind carries those leaves here and there. And if I'd told him to jump off the Faraglioni rocks with a stone around his neck, he would have done it without a word. At least he died when the house and the medlar tree down to its last leaf were still his."] (*Medlar Tree*, 46)

As I have written elsewhere,¹³ Verga's passage recalls a Homeric trope that, after detours through Virgil and Horace, receives a significant

¹³ The subsequent analysis of the metaphor of the falling leaves in Verga and his predecessors draws on my reading of this passage from *I Malavoglia* in "Romantic Allegory, Postwar Film, and the Question of Italy," *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2007): 68–70. More generally, see my discussion of the trope in "'As a Leaf on a Branch . . .': Dante's Neologisms," *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 326–32. See also Robert Fitzgerald, "Generations of Leaves: The Poet in the Classical Tradition," *Perspectives USA* 8 (1954): 68–85; and Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 127.

rewriting in Dante.¹⁴ In *Aeneid*, 6.305–12, the image of the dead bunched together in the underworld like the fallen leaves of autumn represents an endlessly circular pagan worldview that places little value in the afterlife:

huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat,
 matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita
 magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,
 impositique rogis iuvenes ante ora parentum:
 quam multa in silvis autumnum frigore primo
 lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto
 quam multae glomerantur aves, ubi frigidus annus
 trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.

[The whole throng of the dead was rushing to this part of the bank, mothers, men, great-hearted heroes whose lives were ended, boys, unmarried girls and young men laid on the pyre before the faces of their parents, as many as are the leaves that fall in the forest at the first chill of autumn, as many as are the birds that flock to land from deep ocean when the cold season of the year drives them over the sea to lands bathed in sun.]¹⁵

¹⁴ See Homer, *Iliad*, 6.146–50: “As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. / The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber / burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. / So one generation of men will grow while another / dies” (*The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richard Lattimore [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 157). See also Horace, *De arte poetica*, 58–63, 68–72: “licuit semperque licebit / signatum praesente nota producere nomen. / ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos, / prima cadunt; ita verborum vetus interit aetas, / et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque. / debemur morti nos, nostraque . . . / . . . mortalia facta peribunt, / nedum sermonum stet honos, et gratia vivax. / multa renascentur, quae iam cecidere, cadentque / quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus, / quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi” (It has ever been, and ever will be, permitted to issue words stamped with the mint-mark of the day. As forests change their leaves with each year’s decline, and the earliest drop off: so with words, the old race dies, and, like the young of human kind, the new-born bloom and thrive. We are doomed to death—we and all things ours. . . . All mortal things shall perish, much less shall the glory and glamour of speech endure and live. Many terms that have fallen out of use shall be born again, and those shall fall that are now in repute, if Usage so will it, in whose hands lies the judgement, the right and the rule of speech) (Horace, *Satires; Epistles; Ars poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991], 454–57).

¹⁵ *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books 1–6*, ed. R. D. Williams (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1992), 134; in English, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West (London: Penguin, 1991), 141–42.

Dante situates the Virgilian imagery in a Christian framework that transforms the neutral souls of Virgil into sinners of “mal seme” (evil seed) (*Inferno*, 10.115) and changes the Virgilian right of entry (burial) into the Christian prerequisite of baptism:

Come d'autunno si levan le foglie
 l'una appresso de l'altra, fin che 'l ramo
 vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,
 similmente il mal seme d'Adamo
 gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
 per cenni come augel per suo richiamo.

[As the leaves fall away in autumn, one after another, till the bough sees all its spoils upon the ground, so there the evil seed of Adam: one by one they cast themselves from that shore at signals, like a bird at its call.]¹⁶

By recalling the ancient metaphor of the falling leaves at a moment of profound personal turmoil and narrative import, Verga initiates a meditation on literary genre in the context of an economic discourse. It is as though this simple image fell through a trapdoor in literary history to connect Verga with ancient and medieval authors who similarly comment on the human condition through a naturalist image. That Verga does so while speculating on the relationship between property and identity indicates how readily an aesthetic issue (the association of the spare verismo style of his falling leaf metaphor with its epic forebears) may also implicate an economic matter (Verga's understanding of life in a protocapitalist system that tears asunder the Malavoglia family ties). In the final tally, Master 'Ntoni emerges as an epic-minded character whose ancient worldview and ancestral home are deconstructed by modern financial speculation, the technical terms of which trump the language of tradition that speaks through him. Verga's would-be epic image of falling leaves cannot comfortably inhabit a nineteenth-century realist novel attuned to the wholesale social changes wrought by untamed entrepreneurialism. The same circularity of human life and cultural expression that the Homeric, Horatian, Virgilian, and Dantesque versions of the leaves metaphor suggest is definitively bro-

¹⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, 6 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970–75), 1:32–33.

ken by the linear progress of a capitalist economy that levels everything in its path, to recall Marx's words on the inexorable acceleration of human—and, in this case, literary—history by free-market principles and practices.¹⁷

By performing literary value—that is, by fusing aesthetic and economic thought in a scene that draws on discursive practices in both literary and financial history—Verga's image of falling leaves achieves in art what the essays in this issue do through critical reflection: it lays bare the tensions inherent in *value*, poised forever between the transcendent and the immanent, the most privately held and the most publicly sold. By extension, the term *literary value* will likely never be understood by theoretical or discursive analysis alone, for precisely in delimiting it one risks the category error described by Agamben: either removing literature from life as an object of disinterested aesthetic experience or attaching it to life too closely as yet another construct and commodity of culture. The contributions by Robbins, Schnapp, Forman, Gray, Dainotto, and Sorby come at a moment in academic criticism when methodological and ideological certainties have arguably given way to a plurality of approaches without any dominant school or practice. The present collection, in subject matter and critical orientation, reflects this eclecticism as well as the internal paradox of *literary value*, a term that situates books in the equally volatile domains of the marketplace and private belief, if not faith. As such, literary value requires an especially nimble kind of critical attention to accommodate its dualities. The following essays individually and collectively rise to this challenge and in the process help reestablish an often-broken connection between aesthetic experience and the surrounding economic realities.

¹⁷ See Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Frederic L. Bender (New York: Norton, 1988), 59.

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