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Ryan Ruby

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Abstract: "Criticism as a Way of Life" historicizes the recent return to close reading as an effect of the institutional crisis of the English department and the rise of public-facing criticism. It examines the arguments for close reading's status as a truth-producing practice put forward by Jonathan Kramnick in *Criticism and Truth*, and concludes that criticism is more similar to fiction: creative both in method and in outcome. The essay considers an alternative genealogy of critical production whose stylistic and generic features decenter the epistemic norms of academic criticism in favor of a conception of hermeneutics instead oriented toward ethics.

I

Times of crisis typically see returns to myths of origin. And who can doubt that the humanities in general, and literary studies in particular, are in crisis? Since the 2008 financial crisis, literature and other humanities departments in universities across the US and the UK have seen the drying up of tenure lines and available faculty positions; the casualization of labor; drop-offs in funding and enrollment; the instrumentalization of education under the pressure of skyrocketing tuition; and a loss of prestige, authority, and methodological self-confidence relative to STEM departments. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, departments have been decimated; some have been shuttered altogether.[1] This institutional system crisis has been responsible for a number of disciplinary identity crises.[2] Yet the effect is taken for the cause by humanities scholars who insist on curricular or methodological solutions to what are ultimately problems of resource allocation within and outside the university, whose current mission lies uncomfortably on the shifting borders between research and pedagogical institution, on the one hand, and tax haven, investment portfolio, and real estate company, on the other.

Perhaps this is what accounts for the renewed interest among scholars of English literature in the experiments in practical criticism conducted by I. A. Richards in the Moral Sciences department at Cambridge just under a century ago—often considered to be the birth of literary criticism as an academic discipline—along with attempts to retheorize close reading—the suite of critical practices pioneered by the Cambridge School and refined by the New Critics.[3] In *Criticism and Truth*, for example, Jonathan Kramnick dusts off Gilbert Ryle's distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that" to argue that close reading, the "proprietary" method of literary studies, ought to be considered a form of "craft knowledge" (*CT* 5, 64). On Kramnick's account, close reading is the practice of surveying a text in the process of writing about it, preparatory to a series of interpretive or evaluative claims about it. Close reading uses three techniques—quotation, critical free indirect style, and interpretive plot summary—to make certain features of a text explicit. It requires a degree of training, and, as with other crafts, people who do it well are appraised as skilled. In these respects, he says, it is a creative practice: close reading "makes something new and something valuable" out of the text (*CT* 12). Citing Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, Kramnick characterizes interpretation done in this manner as a kind of "aesthetic practice," a *Kunst*, or artform (*CT* 69).

So far, so good: the creative and aesthetic dimensions of criticism Kramnick highlights in his treatment of the practice as a kind of craft knowledge too often go without saying. But Kramnick believes that for literary critics to remain members in good standing in a university system dominated by STEM disciplines, and for them to enjoy the material benefits that have until recently advantaged them, criticism must not only be "creative" in method, but "epistemic" in outcome. Wanting it both ways, *Criticism and Truth* attempts to demonstrate a series of further propositions: that close reading is a form of knowledge production; that it produces claims that are exclusively and nontrivially true; that the interpretations it generates are truth-bearing according to other criteria than those of the hard or social sciences; that critical know-how, when done well, necessarily leads to knowing-that. Unfortunately, he does not succeed in doing so. In the process, he tells a story about criticism that is partial—it allows the institutional, generic, stylistic, and methodological norms of the English department to stand in for the field as a whole—and is, as a result, under-historicized; it does not consider the relevance of critical production before criticism became an academic discipline to the way it is practiced today.

Of the three techniques of close reading that qualify it as a kind of skilled practice and craft knowledge, the accuracy of in-line quotation

and interpretive plot summary are certainly verifiable—a quote in the secondary text can be matched with a quote in the primary text—and the thoroughness of a plot summary may be falsified by recourse to further information in or about the text itself. Where critical free indirect discourse is concerned, however, interpretation enters the question and establishing truth is on shakier grounds. For example, Kramnick praises Nicholas Dames's skilled use of critical free indirect discourse in his reading of a passage from *Daniel Deronda* for giving the reader the "effect" that George Eliot is "continuing to write and therefore to explain her work" (*CT* 44). It is arguably true that Dames's reading has this effect, but Eliot is obviously not explaining her work—Dames is. Far from asserting a truth, critical free indirect discourse is a technique that creates an illusory effect, placing it within the purview of rhetoric rather than epistemology.

Although he sometimes conflates close reading with criticism as such, Kramnick admits that close reading needs to be supplemented by other scholarly "skills" such as "research and abstraction, theory building, and historical-chronological argument," but does not grapple with the implications of this for his argument about the truth-bearing nature of close reading in general and of interpretive plot summary in particular (*CT* 47). This problem of the truth-functionality of interpretation at a local level is only exacerbated when the techniques of close reading are "scaled up" to make evaluative claims or interpretive claims about the meaning of the work as a whole, or the work's relationship to the world of which it forms a part. "Method in criticism," writes Kramnick, paraphrasing Andrew Piper, "fails to generalize beyond or really within the singular case of any particular text . . . criticism cannot move from its limited words or lines or blocks of text to any larger unit, whether the literary work or its historical situation without some unwarranted leap of inference" (*CT* 23).[4] Close reading, often treated by critics as an evidentiary pursuit, suffers from an induction problem. Contra Kramnick, "some more capacious argument, set of concerns, or register of significance" cannot in fact be "derived" from the techniques of close reading alone (*CT* 47, 48). If close reading must be supplemented with the truth-bearing findings of literary scholarship, it is because it is itself insufficient to produce anything but trivial truths.

Upon closer inspection of the practice of close reading, quotation is not at all the evidence from which interpretive claims are "derived." Rather, the critic's preexisting "store of knowledge" tips her off as to where in the text to "look" in order to support her equally preexisting "set of concerns" and to "place aspects of the work within a field of inquiry . . . that responds to her specific interests" (*CT* 70). Unlike the

hard sciences, where empirical evidence preexists the production of the explanatory theory, "the truth of whatever is before the reading is not simply there for the critic to discover; it requires the active coaxing and comingling of the critic's words for it to take shape" (*CT* 62). As a result, close readings of complex literary texts always court a degree of confirmation bias.

Avoiding confirmation bias is not merely a matter of good scholarly hygiene. The critic, of course, cannot make inferences about a text from words that are not in it or from other false assumptions about it; facts about the text, its production, its reception, and any paratexts associated with it may constrain the kinds of readings that can be made of it, though, aside from quotation, these facts are not derived from close reading. Cherry-picking, whether of quotations or of the salient features of a plot, is generally regarded as a methodologically illegitimate practice, but the difference between a cherry-picked quote or passage and an appositely picked one is vague, a difference of degree rather than of kind. Because interpretation necessarily requires recontextualizing a text for the purpose of drawing out certain features—rather than others—the critic wishes the reader to notice, confirmation bias and cherry-picking are as integral to its practice as a creative artform as they are fatal to its status as truth-producing discourse. That is why criticism so often produces examples of valid and viable, but mutually exclusive readings of the same text. Each has its own emphasis, but none has a non-question-begging way of demonstrating why a particular emphasis ought to be considered more total or fundamental or *true* than another one. In all these respects, "readings" and "interpretations," terms which have both plurality and provisionality built into their connotations, differ from our ordinary intuitions about the exclusivity and finality of true propositions, which hold in the findings of other fields of inquiry, especially those of the hard sciences.

Not unreasonably, Kramnick insists that the procedures for producing and verifying true propositions that obtain in STEM fields are discipline-specific and should not necessarily apply to criticism. After all, complex literary texts are different objects of inquiry than, say, subatomic particles, and the ways they are observed, the observations about them, and the methods for determining whether these observations are true are all different. Replication, consensus, and verification—to use his examples—may be appropriate for evaluating the results of an experiment in particle physics, but not for evaluating interpretive claims that rely on close reading. The creative nature of critical practice means that the replication of a close reading is not only impossible—since it depends on the particular emphases of the interpreter—it is undesirable—since

the aim is to produce original scholarship by contributing new readings. For that reason, unlike the hard sciences, a programmatic dissensus rather than consensus is what the discipline encourages and rewards. As for evaluating the quality of a reading, this can only be performed by other readers, not by a replicable experiment whose success depends on removing human judgment to the greatest degree possible (*CT* 83). Although Kramnick admits this is circular, he claims that this is simply how successful performances are verified, even in STEM fields. This, of course, would be a reason to deflate scientific claims on objectivity—especially in light of the current "crisis of replication" in the hard sciences—rather than inflate interpretation's claims on truth. Practically speaking, it is hard to see how it would operate in a field where consensus is the exception that proves the rule.

What makes the practice of close reading unique and therefore deserving of having its claims to truth evaluated with criteria other than reproducibility, consensus, and verification, according to Kramnick, is "medium coincidence" (*CT* 68). As an analysis of language that takes place in language, the object and instrument of investigation are the same. Having attempted to cordon off close reading from the truth-procedures of the hard sciences, Kramnick goes on to distinguish close reading from practices in the humanities, such as ekphrastic description in art history and propositional analysis in linguistics and the philosophy of language. In the former case, he writes, analysis "translates" painting into writing, and in the latter two cases, it "translates" ordinary language into technical notation, which gives them the sort of "air of objectivity" and truth which close reading, by virtue of medium coincidence, does not appear to have (*CT* 74).

Even if we accept the claim that the technical notations of linguistics and predicate logic amount to different *media* from written sentences in ordinary language, there are practices that show that medium coincidence alone is insufficient to establish a special claim to being truth-bearing. The most obvious one is translation itself, the recasting of sentences in one ordinary language to sentences in another ordinary language. Leaving out the various forms of aesthetic judgment that come into play when evaluating translation, a successful translation of a text of sufficient complexity may be appraised as "faithful" and a mistranslation may be criticized for being erroneous, but they are not judged to be true or false in any more robust sense.

The discipline-specific criterion Kramnick proposes for truth in criticism is "aptness": "criticism is true when it is apt, false when it is formed poorly" (*CT* 12). A "performance" of close reading should demonstrate an "aptness of style"; it should be "perspicacious," "competent," "adroit,"

"agile," "dexterous," but above all it should be "elegant" (*CT* 25, 46, 63, 91, 96). "The apt spinning of two orders of language"—the language of the primary text and the language of the commenting critic—should be "compelling" to the reader, who acts as a spectator for the "drama of their reintegration" in the interpretation provided in the secondary text (*CT* 12, 71, 76). Evaluating whether a close reading displays any of these qualities or achieves these effects is a matter of aesthetic judgment.

Having begun by claiming that close reading is not merely empirical, but "especially empirical," he is forced to conclude that "truth in literary criticism derives from hands-on engagement with texts rather than facts or assertions about them," that is, that interpretative claims are not propositions at all (*CT* 65, 67). Having declared replicability, consensus, and verifiability as inapplicable to close reading, he is forced to discard ordinary notions of truth as a nontrivial correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs, too. The attempt to wall off criticism from the epistemic standards of other disciplines—whether of the hard sciences or the social sciences—runs afoul, finally, of the fact that the criteria Kramnick proposes are not even those that apply when literary scholars engage in historical, archival, or philological research on topics, which he claims are necessary for helping close reading to scale up to interpretation.

In any case, Kramnick inconsistently applies his own preferred criteria for aptness in practice. He objects to a reading of John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* by Stanley Fish, although he judges it to be a "dazzling" display of the "drama" and "magnetism of critical mastery"—that is, as possessing the very sorts of qualities he had previously singled out as truth-bearing (*CT* 86, 87). The objection, it turns out, isn't the reading per se, but Fish's metacritical, antifoundationalist view that what close reading does is twist the text to the "will" of the critic, "imprinting his meaning on the world and convincing the community to go along with his reading" (*CT* 87). By virtuosity, Kramnick says, he does not actually mean "spectacles of unusual performance that hold us in awe," but rather the day-to-day practice of close reading as a normal science (*CT* 87). This is not only not what virtuosity means, but as with his redefinition of truth as aptness, it is an instance of moving the terminological goal posts when confronted with consequences of his premises that are unfortunate for his argument. As with the question of cherry-picking, the difference between a reading that legitimately twists the text to the will of the critic and one that does so illegitimately will always be vague and a matter of aesthetic judgment.

II

Over and over again, Kramnick's premises point toward a conclusion that he seems unwilling to swallow: namely, that criticism is a creative practice, not just in method, but also in outcome. That criticism, in other words, is what Friedrich Schlegel and Oscar Wilde said it was: a work of art equal to and, in the final analysis, independent from the works of art it considers. When attempting to prove that know-how necessarily produces knowing-that, he reaches for an example from anthropology, though what the craft knowledge of the Telefol weavers of Papau New Guinea produces is bags, not truth-functional propositions.

He could have chosen a linguistic example nearer to his departmental home. Fiction is also a form of craft knowledge, as any first-year MFA student will tell you, but one that generates sentences which have no pretention to being truth-bearing. "Critical free indirect discourse" has its origins in Gustave Flaubert's *discours indirect libre*, a staple technique of the creative writing workshop.[5] Just as the illusion that is said to be produced by critical free indirect discourse has a counterpart in the "reality effect" achieved by the use of *discours indirect libre* in realist fiction, "aptness" is not dissimilar to Flaubert's *le mot juste*, and would not be out of place in the evaluation of a descriptive passage in a novel or short story, whose success, as we have seen, is a matter of aesthetic judgment in both cases.[6] Although few would argue that they are epistemic, novels and short stories, whether of the realist or of the world-building variety, could also be described as literary forms that "half create, half pick out features of the world that are true" (*CT* 25). (And if acknowledging this would seem to disqualify criticism from its rightful place in an institution which requires knowledge production, it is worth remembering that the subfield of literary studies that has actually demonstrated growth of tenure-track faculty hires and student enrollment between 2009 and 2019 is creative writing [*CT* 112].)

Interpretation of and commentary on other texts (extant or invented) are not foreign to fiction either, especially to modernist and postmodern fictions, though these rarely rely on the same quotational practices as close reading does. When Stephen Dedalus gives an interpretation of *Hamlet* in the National Library scene of *Ulysses*, or when the narrator of Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance* reads Franz Kafka as a proletarian novelist, the characters are performing acts of criticism. Experiments such as the alternating chapters of narrative and discursive prose in Marcel Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and Jean Améry's *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor*, the biographical essays on Joseph Conrad and A.C. Swinburne in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and on Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill in

Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*, the footnotes in Enrique Vila-Matas's *Bartleby & Co.*, and the lectures in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* also incorporate criticism into their narratives. In *Ulysses* (again), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Guy Davenport's "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," and Percival Everett's *James*, criticism can also be more implicit, taking place at the level of structure or plot, but intertextual commentary—on *The Odyssey*, *Jane Eyre*, Kafka's "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, respectively—is one thing each of these fictions is doing, however ironically or parodically. (Where poetry is concerned, a whole school of criticism is devoted to the proposition that poems are rewritings of older poems, and are thus a genre of critical interpretation and commentary.[7]) Finally, there are those fictions that include interpretations by characters or the narrators of texts that are themselves fictional and appear, in whole, in part, or not at all: the encyclopedia in Jorge Luis Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," for example, or John Shade's poem in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

What all of these cases have in common is that they are collections of non-truth-bearing sentences that nonetheless, like translation, satisfy the criteria for medium coincidence, which Kramnick hoped to reserve for criticism via close reading. When criticism appears in fiction it serves as a reminder about two things that are sometimes forgotten about criticism as practiced in the academy. First, that interpretation is a form and close reading is a technique of translation, not from one "order of language" to another, but from one set of *genre codes* (fiction, poetry, drama, etc.) to another (the expository essay). And second, that the academic paper or monograph is a literary genre in its own right (*CT* 71).

Critical style is touched on, but genre receives no consideration in *Criticism and Truth*. This omission is a consequence of Kramnick's decision to focus primarily on academic criticism, and to treat close reading as its essential feature, and practical criticism as his historical starting point. With its entry into the academy, the expository essay became the normative genre for criticism, and evolved a "house style" commensurate with the disciplinary requirement to advance knowledge about the object of inquiry through the production of original research, the professional requirement to engage with existing scholarship in the field, and the field's pretentions to science. According to Geoffrey Hartman, the academic paper or monograph inherits what he calls a "middle style" from nineteenth-century English criticism, a descriptor whose implication about the class of its producers is not unintentional.[8] Middle style is "conversational" yet "decorous" (*CW* 126) in tone, with a "purity of diction" (*CW* 122) adulterated only by innovations or importations in terminology and jargon befitting professional specialization, and edito-

rial taboos against personalization, polemic, and evaluative judgment, which would compromise the impression of the epistemic virtues of neutrality or objectivity, and the aesthetic virtue, also shared with the hard sciences and mathematics, of elegance (*CW* 135–36, 147, 150). (Although the taboo against personalization, in particular, has softened in the last decades, thanks, in part, to methodological inroads made by feminist scholarship.[9]) Along with this, the scholarly protocols of citation and the techniques of close reading establish a particular relationship between the primary text or texts that are the object of inquiry of the secondary text, or academic paper that interprets or comments on it. The secondary text, considered subordinate to and dependent or even parasitic on the former, does not imitate the formal features or genre codes of the primary text—such as paradox, irony, and ambiguity—but familiarizes and demystifies these formal features by recasting them in the what Hartman calls the "mode of the ordinary" (*CW* 27). In other words, it translates them into or embeds them in the "middle style" of the academic paper, a genre that depends, for its rhetorical power, on the fiction that it is not one.

But criticism has always been more generically and formally protean than a narrow focus on the protocols of academic writing would suggest. From the second half of the eighteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth, when criticism was exclusively an affair of the journalistic public sphere, it was written in several genres, including the dialogue, letters, life writing, and even poetry, alongside book reviews and belletristic essays.[10] As early as 1798, Friedrich Schlegel was arguing that "the work of criticism is superfluous unless it is itself a work of art as independent of the work it criticizes as that is independent of the materials that went into it."[11] Variously called "creative" or "aesthetic criticism" (Oscar Wilde), "avant-gardist criticism" (Eliot Weinberger), "revisionist or philosophical criticism" (Geoffrey Hartman), and "experimental criticism" (Louis Bury), by those who endorse Schlegel's view that criticism is an independent artform in its own right, the genre might be said to constitute a counter-canon of discursive writing about literature.[12] It includes such generic and formal deviations from the expository essay and the middle style as "The Critic as Artist" (Oscar Wilde), "Richness, Chaos, and Form," (György Lukács), *The Arcades Project* (Walter Benjamin), *S/Z* (Roland Barthes), *Glas* (Jacques Derrida), *The Claim of Reason* (Stanley Cavell), *Swinburne* (Jerome McGann), *Discourse Networks* (Friedrich Kittler), *My Emily Dickinson* (Susan Howe), *Economy of the Unlost* (Anne Carson), and *The Necropastoral* (Joyelle McSweeney), to name but a few. To paraphrase Arthur Danto, this is criticism as/and/of literature.[13]

This counter-canon is hardly obscure, but it is sometimes forgotten or ignored in accounts of the practice of criticism. During the twentieth century, such approaches were periodically invited into the English department, and then assimilated by or expelled from it as trends in research and hiring changed; sometimes to and from other departments, such as classics, media studies, and philosophy, the latter of which makes a less strict distinction between primary and secondary texts, and sometimes to and from the journalistic public sphere, where different institutional structures, economic incentives, and interpretive communities offer different stylistic opportunities and produce different concerns and constraints. (It is worth remembering here that "practical criticism" also has its origins in an experiment performed by a scholar in the "moral sciences," or philosophy department, before the establishment of English as an autonomous field of study at Cambridge; nor is it irrelevant, as Hartman notes, that many of the above cited examples come out of national intellectual traditions other than the Anglo-American one [*CW* 239–41].) Ironically, thanks in no small part to the crisis of the humanities in the twenty-first century, the journalistic sector of critical production is once again flourishing. Seen from the perspective of a history that is wider than the one Kramnick provides in *Criticism and Truth*, the present does not look like a moment of criticism going down with the sinking ship of the English department; it looks like a return to the status quo ante.[14]

"It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to flatter ourselves that we live in a golden era of literary criticism," Louis Bury writes in an essay collected in the 2017 volume *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online*.[15] Like many of the other contributors, Bury credits the internet with extending "the popular reach of book culture," in part by providing academics with venues and "permission to write for audiences of non-specialists in salutary and discerning ways," while criticism itself has taken "increasingly varied and daring forms."[16] As a result, literary criticism "has enjoyed greater circulation and relevance" and "come to encompass some of the most urgent and ambitious writing around today."[17] Since then, this trend has only increased, and "public criticism" or "public-facing criticism"—criticism written by trained academics for a nonspecialist audience—has slowly come to be a semirecognized form of critical production and reception within the academy and its various publication networks.

In its "Coda," *Criticism and Truth* considers public-facing criticism in a way that implies that this form of writing criticism is privative compared to criticism produced for an audience of "experts," a prejudice which is barely concealed by the descriptor itself (*CT* 99–108). What distinguishes criticism proper from public-facing criticism, Kramnick says, is peer review

(*CT* 92–93). Without minimizing the generic and stylistic differences between an academic paper and a consumer-report-style book review, or a scholarly monograph and a piece of public-facing or creative criticism, it is not clear how peer review operates in an essentially different (or for that matter superior) quality-control mechanism than the sorts of editing and fact checking that obtain in the journalistic public sphere. Kramnick's claim—that unlike peer review, in public-facing criticism and literary journalism there is no feedback from readers—is simply false (*CT* 13, 100). Before publication in a magazine or newspaper, the writer of a critical essay receives feedback from one or more commissioning editors. After publication, if the essay is shared on social media, it receives feedback from its readers, via social media platforms and amateur literature blogs, Substacks, and podcasts. On a more expanded understanding of who constitutes a "peer" than Kramnick is willing to concede, much of this amounts to second-order criticism in its own right.

It is true, as Kramnick points out, that the payment, benefits, and job security on offer at the university are superior to those received by critics working in the journalistic public sphere, but, by the same token, freelance writing, being piecework rather than salaried labor in an administrative setting, participates in a more obvious way in a preindustrial craft tradition than twenty-first scholarship and pedagogy do, with all that implies for the differences in *habitus* between the practitioners and audiences of the respective genres (*CT* 106). Allowing for the hybrid formation that has evolved thanks to the professionalization and academicization of creative writing, the freelance or staff critic has much more in common, in terms of professional sociology, with the novelist than with the professor or scholar.[18]

The readership for contemporary para-academic, journalistic, and creative criticism is vastly more sophisticated than it is given credit for. It includes current literary scholars and academics in other fields, people who have received undergraduate training in critical methodologies from them, practitioners of the genres under review, who are thus in their own way experts, as well as interested non-professionals who have developed a taste for criticism as a literary genre. Among "lay readers," this sub-group forms a "connoisseurship," and it is not clear how their own aesthetic judgments about the effectiveness of a performance of interpretation are necessarily less valid or authoritative than those laid down by "experts" in literature departments.[19]

The existence of a rival interpretive community for performances of criticism weakens Kramnick's methodological claim that establishing the truth of a given reading is the sole prerogative of scholars. More importantly, it further undermines the normative claim about

the epistemic telos of critical practice, which does not apply in all sectors of the field. For example, the primary/secondary text distinction so crucial to establishing criticism as a knowledge-producing practice generally relies on an assumption about the primary text, namely, that both the writer and the reader of the secondary text are familiar with it, usually because of its historical or canonical status. That assumption is not always operative in the case of critical work on as-yet-unpublished or little known texts. On the production side, commentary cannot exist without the thing it comments on, but this fact is less significant than it is made out to be: is it correct to describe painting, to use Wilde's example, as parasitic on the "visible world of form and color"?[20] (Or to use an example where "medium coincidence" comes into play: Joyce's *Ulysses* may depend on *The Odyssey* for its existence, but that obviously does not disqualify it as an independent work of art.) On the reception side, the reader of nonacademic criticism usually reads the secondary text before the primary text, and sometimes to the exclusion of it. This fact does not fail to have an impact on the way such criticism is written, on the types of stylistic and rhetorical gestures it can make. Consumer-report-style reviews published in newspapers and the sorts of demotic criticism found on social cataloguing sites like Goodreads are intended to be consumed by readers who would like to become informed about the book preparatory to a decision about whether or not to purchase it, but connoisseurs of creative criticism read it for its own sake—in other words, for the same reasons they read novels, short stories, poetry, and other genres of creative nonfiction.

It is not that producers and receivers of creative criticism do not value knowledge per se, it is that the kind of knowledge they are primarily concerned with differs significantly from one constrained by the norms of knowledge production as it exists within the institutional context of literary studies. As with the literary genres listed above, this particular conception of knowledge finds its telos in ethics, rather than in epistemology; in life, rather than in truth; in turning "knowing how" into "knowing of" rather than "knowing that."

III

For a criticism that conceives of itself as creative in method and outcome, innovates formally and stylistically in multiple genres, rejects the significance of the distinction between primary and secondary text, and aims at the production of aesthetic experience and ethical self-fashioning rather than truth and knowledge, a different myth of origin is in order.

Sometime in the middle of the sixth century BC, Croesus, the King of Lydia, an empire in what is today western Turkey, paid a call on the Oracle of Delphi. A dynastic dispute had broken out when Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, overthrew his grandfather Astyages, King of the Medes, and Croesus wanted advice on military strategy. In the inner sanctum of the Temple of Apollo, the Pythian priestess sat on the tripod placed over the omphalos, a chasm at the center of the earth, and inhaled, as legend has it, some kind of vapor.[21] According to Herodotus, our source for the story, she returned the following answer to Croesus' inquiry: "They both predicted that Croesus, if he did go to war with the Persians, would destroy a mighty empire." Delighted, Croesus first attacked Pteria, a Persian vassal state. Cyrus retaliated, driving the Croesus' army back to Thymbra, then to the Lydian capital at Sardis. He laid siege to the city, captured Croesus, and according to some accounts had him burned at the stake. Thus, the Pythian's prophecy was fulfilled: by attacking Cyrus, the King of Lydia had indeed destroyed a mighty empire—his own.[22]

Aside from this incident, Croesus was best known in antiquity for his extraordinary wealth, which he made as an early adopter of gold currency. As a long-time patron of the Temple of Apollo, he should have known that the priestess's prophecies—delivered as lines of poetry in dactylic hexameter—were in fact riddles, statements with more than one potential meaning.[23] He learned the hard way that interpreting them correctly could be a matter of life and death. What guide to proper interpretation did the oracle provide to those who consulted her?

One clue can be found in the famous maxim, attributed variously to Apollo or to one or other of the Seven Sages, inscribed somewhere on the Temple's exterior: *Gnothi seauton*. For English speakers, the translation of the maxim— "Know thyself"—presents something of a riddle itself, one which has had serious implications for our understanding not only of what knowledge is but also what its relationship to the practice of interpretation may be.[24] Whereas English, which uses the single verb "to know" to mean both "to be familiar with a person or a place" (as in, "I know Jane," or "I know Berlin") and "to be aware of a fact or truth" (as in, "I know Jane is thirty-years-old" or "I know Berlin is the capital of Germany") ancient Greek distinguishes between *gignosco*, for the first sense, and *eidenai*, for the second. (In German or a Romance language like French or Spanish, which also follow this lexical pattern, *gignosco* is translated as *Kennen*, *connaître*, or *conocer* rather than *Wissen*, *savoir*, or *saber*.) Knowledge, in this sense, derives from experience. That is, from familiarity, from *having a relationship with*. In the present context, the imperative "know thyself" can be understood to mean "have or cultivate a relationship with yourself" in order to interpret correctly. Following

Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault calls this a form of looking, or attention, a "hermeneutic of the subject."[25] Croesus failed to notice that, like the coins he had minted, the priestess's statement had more than one side—that is, more than one interpretation. His envy of or exclusive focus on Cyrus' territorial expansion perhaps led him to fatally underrate his own position among the great powers of his time.

Another of the Delphic inscriptions—*Meden agan*—bears on the practice of interpretation.[26] Translated as "nothing too much" or "nothing to excess," the maxim has come to be associated with the influential "doctrine of the mean" from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which held that actions were virtuous insofar as they were *sophron*, in other words, insofar as they lay between the extremes of excess and deficiency. But to translate the virtue *sophrosyne* as "moderation," as is usually done, is somewhat misleading, since "moderation" as well as "mean" and "middle way" could suggest a kind of formulaic calculus whereby excess and deficiency can be plotted on a scale of one to ten, and the right action is always five.[27] Considered instead as "prudence" or even "self-control," *sophrosyne* would be a kind of spiritual bearing, learned through training and experience, which takes into detailed account the features of a particular actor in a particular situation, and provides not the "moderate" response per se, but the response which is appropriate or most adequate to the given circumstances.[28]

Just as *gignosco* is a "knowing of" rather than a "knowing that," *sophrosyne* is a "knowing how" rather than a "knowing that." What is key is that this conception of knowledge is first and foremost practical rather than theoretical, a matter not of applying a priori truths to a new scenario, but rather a matter of treating new scenarios a posteriori, on a case-by-case basis. As an ethos, or way of life, it is personal rather than impersonal, involving the totality of the being of the specific agent throughout, in particular the relationship that agent has cultivated with itself and the world over time. It is, in short, a technique or art (from the Greek, *techne*) of living, or "care of the self," rather than science of evaluating discrete actions, as moral philosophy has so often been conceived of in the post-Cartesian period.[29] It is a way of being that aims at "excellence" (*arete*, sometimes translated as "virtue"), a norm of human flourishing that is not without its aesthetic dimensions, both in its erasure of the line between art and life—a longstanding project of modernist aesthetics—and in the part of life which involves encounters with works of art. Unlike "knowing that" and "knowing how," which conclude when a fact is acquired or a skill is mastered, "knowing of" ceases only with the death of the knower.

In the twenty-first century, we no longer have an institution like the Delphic Oracle whose statements are authorized by a god, and can thus be presumed to be truth-bearing, but we do spend an historically unprecedented amount of our time interacting with, interpreting, and commenting on various forms of media, including written media, in print and online; and thus criticism is an integral component of any life and of any *art of living* today. Criticism, in this sense, may be an everyday activity, but to depict the relational and experiential "knowing of" in writing, a different genre than the academic paper is necessary. Whether it is called "personal criticism," "autocriticism," or "autotheory," the personal essay—narrative prose that employs a first-person pronoun which is assumed to be the author—has become an increasingly popular vehicle for performing readings of literary texts and other kinds of media. This development runs parallel to interest in the genres of memoir and autofiction in non-academic publishing, as well as autoethnography in the discipline of anthropology, but autobiographical "life writing" has been part of the generic repertoire of English criticism since at least the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* being a notable example.[30] With a wider range of formal and stylistic gestures at its disposal, the personal essay offers the reader of creative criticism "knowledge of" at least three things. First, the historical, sociological, educational, psychological, and even physiological contexts that helped to form the critic who encounters a given work of art. Second, the influence of the concrete circumstances in which an interpretation, evaluation, or judgment on that work of art was made. And finally, the effects the encounter with the work of art had on the being of the critic who experienced it and recorded that experience in writing in order to pass on a not dissimilar suite of *aesthetic effects* to the reader of the criticism.

Published the same year as *Criticism and Truth* by Sublunary Editions, a small non-academic press based out of Seattle that specializes in translation, poetry, and experimental fiction, A.V. Marraccini's *We the Parasites* is as fine an example of criticism that is both creative in method and in outcome as has been produced during the overlapping "golden era" and "crisis of the humanities."[31] Heterogeneous in its reference points, its subject-matter, and its tonal registers, *We the Parasites* is difficult to summarize. The five-part essay braids three main strands: commentary on the oeuvre of the American painter Cy Twombly; a critical bildungsroman that tracks Marraccini's ongoing sentimental education and aesthetic formation from a young, queer, unapologetically earnest, and precocious lover of art, literature, and music growing up in the upper-middle-class suburbs of Miami, to academic art historian at Yale, Toronto,

and the University of Chicago, to postdoctoral researcher at the Warburg Institute in London before and during the COVID-19 pandemic; and a descriptive theory of the art and ethos of criticism that is based on a series of correspondences between the critic's practice, her relationship to cultural tradition, and her place in the contemporary literary field on the one hand, and the morphology and survival strategies of a number of parasitic species of insects and worms, on the other.

We the Parasites opens with a factoid: "Here's a weird thing about some kinds of figs: there are male and female figs" (*WP* 5). It proceeds to discuss the way these figs are pollinated, in a process called caprification, by a species of wasp known to Aristotle and Theophrastus as *psenes*, which in turn need the figs in order to feed and reproduce, though in the case of both species the designations of male and female do not always track commonly held notions about which sex gets pregnant and which does the impregnating. As the book's title suggests, Marraccini rejects the notion that the ontological priority of the primary text gives it an axiological priority over the secondary text, and instead embraces and reclaims the pejorative designation of the critic as a "parasite." Just like the wasps and the figs, the relationship between the critic and an artwork is one of mutualism or commensalism. When she writes criticism, parasite Marraccini burrows "into sweet, dark places of fecundity, into novels and paintings and poems and architectures, and I make them my own" (*WP* 7). In interpreting, analyzing, and commenting on them, she lays "little translucent eggs" in the work of art or literature, "pollinating novels to make more novels" (*WP* 7). The critic's gaze may be violent—it involves, after all, "tearing apart" the primary text, just as the wasp tears apart the fig—but it is also erotic and queer. It is an "odd but sensuous" practice that is "generative outside the two-gendered model," since critical prose, like other forms of creative writing, involves the reproduction not just of "knowledge," but also of "people" (*WP* 7). That is, it participates in the making of texts and the formation of their readers, and potentially "infects," "contaminates," or impregnates them with the desire to read, or even: to become critics or artists themselves (*WP* 7).

An important predecessor to *We the Parasites*, Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" concludes with the famously gnomic pronouncement: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[32] Sontag was concerned that the prevailing modes of allegorical interpretation of her time had become "reactionary" and "stifling," especially in their preference for content rather than form.[33] Like Viktor Shklovsky before her, Sontag wanted a criticism that would allow audiences to "recover [their] senses," a criticism that would not "usurp" art's place, but "serve" it.[34] Yet her own critical practice can hardly be described as an erotics.

In his review of *Against Interpretation*, the collection in which the essay appears, Fredric Jameson points out that in her essay on disaster films and science fiction, for example, she engages in hermeneutics in precisely the sense she criticizes.[35] The reason is that, unlike Marraccini, Sontag maintains a distinction between form and content in her own critical prose. Marraccini's twist on Sontag's maxim, and her resolution of the problem, is to show that interpretation itself is corporeal and erotic; properly contextualized in the form of the personal essay, it functions as an erotics for the reader, too. The critic may appear to "usurp the kiss of the reader," she admits, usurping a line from H.D.'s poem "Cities," but the Greek god of thieves, Hermes, is also the one who lends his name to hermeneutics; the kiss stolen from the reader is simply a part of the critic's seduction of her (*WP* 28).

In her prose, Marraccini deliberately abjures the decorous tone and purity of diction characteristic of the "middle style" of academic criticism as well as Sontag's cool, cerebral tone, in favor of one that vaults from a narrative voice that is audacious, chatty, millennial, and online to one that is mandarin in its dazzling displays of contextualizing erudition, from one sentence the next. "There is a voice for the *TLS*, a voice for the internet, and so on," Marraccini acknowledges, but in *We the Parasites* she allows them to cross-pollinate or cross-contaminate, as though to argue that critical style, which can be differently performed in a range of venues, finds its unity in the polytropic life of the critic who occupies them all, and in a description of that life in critical prose (*WP* 29). Much of the book's first part is concerned to give a history (or "mythos") of the formation or education of this distinctive voice (or "tongue") (*WP* 21). In one episode in this history, Marraccini describes receiving John Updike's novel *The Centaur* from her undergraduate mentor, whose respect she earned during a heated classroom debate. Although the novel is about "fathers and sons," and Marraccini will be neither, she sees in her relationship to the mentor the one between Achilles and Chiron, and how the centaur—incidentally, Hartman's metaphor for the half-creative, half-scholarly critic—teaches you "how to both inhabit and step outside your own human-ness," and how to become, not just part parasite, but also, in a more literal sense, part text (*WP* 9, *CW* 214). In her mentor-mediated relationship to prose of the misogynist Updike, Marraccini figures her nonhuman half not as a horse, but as a fish-louse, a species that swims into the gills of the fish, eats its tongue, and gradually comes to live in the fish's mouth as a replacement: "I've already bitten off [Updike's] tongue at the root and started to speak with it . . . I've stolen him and his words and I've grown my flesh to them in a graft I can't undo for love or money" (*WP* 26).

As with the erotic metaphor of the fig-wasp, the gustatory metaphor of the fish-louse draws attention to the corporeal aspect of activities such as reading, writing, and interpreting, all of which have a noncognitive dimension and context usually ignored in criticism. These activities do not just affect the being of those who perform them, they affect their bodies too, modifying them in unpredictable ways that can only be conveyed in prose that at least makes reference to the person of the writer: the "stolen" tongue of "Updike's shade" grafted onto Marraccini's in her account of criticism serves a not dissimilar role to "critical free indirect style" in *Criticism and Truth*, but the chasm between the respective subjects presumed by each—one embodied, one not—is nonetheless wide (*WP* 27). On the flipside, corporeal states—menstruation, night sweats, anxiety dreams, coziness, fatigue—and corporeal-affective states—fascination, longing, impatience, rage—bear on how a particular critic experiences and interprets a particular art object at a particular point in time, and Marraccini does not quarantine discussions of these from the heterogeneous array of works she considers—Twombly's paintings, the Niké of Samothrace, a print of Jerusalem by Wenceslaus Hollar; Updike's novel, Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, Petronius' *Satyricon*, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*; Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* and John Taverner's *Missa Corona Spinea*; the poetry of H. D., Theocritus, William Blake, Xenophanes, W.H. Auden, and Rainer Maria Rilke—which are in turn not quarantined from each other by the cordon sanitaire of disciplinary specialization and sub-specialization. In both the erotic case and the gustatory case, what we are dealing with is a kind of study whose purpose is not an epistemic "knowing that," but a carnal "knowledge of," if you will. This is not merely criticism as an artform, but criticism as an ethos; it is not just criticism as/and/of literature, it is, to update Mathew Arnold, criticism as/and/of life.[36]

By complicating a misleadingly cognitive picture of interpretation as transferring a meaning, via written signs, from art object, to critic, to reader, with a more corporeal picture of a relay of effects in a feedback loop between material art objects and material beings, Marraccini is able to give a compelling answer to the question of why making and consuming art and making and consuming interpretations of art matter in ways that critics operating in institutional settings sometimes are at a loss to do. "If we are going to keep doing this criticism thing," Marraccini writes in quarantine during the early days of the pandemic, an event as seismic to our generation, she notes, as the Persian War was to the generation of Xenophanes and Herodotus, "the new language better come in fast and arterial, bloom into our thoracic selves, into the little nidus cubby-nests of flats scattered around the globe" (*WP* 78). This is the experiential context in which she comes to see the value in the last

line of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," which previously she thought trite—"you must change your life" (*WP* 79). No less than changing one's opinion of a work of art, changing one's life, in Rilke's sense, is both an aesthetic and ethical activity: it involves seeing, acting, knowing, and being in a different manner than before the encounter with the artwork, which in some cases is tantamount to the creation of a new, or at least different, self. Taken together, all successful art, including criticism, has effects such as these for the people who make it as well as their audiences. "Does criticism keep anyone from dying but critics," she asks, rhetorically, "we the parasites, feeding on the art to make reviews and essays in the papers?" (*WP* 82). Taking care of oneself, changing one's life, and doing so by establishing a relationship with oneself, between oneself and the world, a world which includes works of art, is what criticism practiced as an artform, and as an ethos, attempts for those who write it, and for those who read it.

Whether and for how long the parasite of criticism survives in the host of the English department, or whether it will soon be ejected from the ecosystem of the university along with the rest of the humanities, remains to be seen. The loss of institutional knowledge would be incalculable, but ultimately this is a matter of political agitation on behalf of graduate student and faculty unions, democratized university governance, and changes to tax and budget policy at the state and federal level, not a matter of which kinds of knowledge may be said to apply to the interpretation of texts. If criticism, in its many forms, predated the modern research university and will survive it, it is because it answers to a need that transcends the separation between the institution of the university and society as a whole, a need so basic that someone thought to chisel it on the walls of the Temple of Delphi some two and a half millennia ago.

BERLIN, GERMANY

NOTES

1 Jonathan Kramnick, *Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2023), 2–3, 108 (hereafter cited as *CT*).

2 These terms are borrowed from Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

3 John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Studies* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2022), 50–56. See also Terry Eagleton, *Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2022); Guillory's forthcoming *On Close Reading* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2025); and Dan Sinykin and Johanna Winant, eds. *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, forthcoming).

4 Andrew Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018), 9.

5 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 113–14.
6 Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 141–48.
7 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).
8 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), 155 (hereafter cited as *CW*).
9 Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London: Routledge, 1991).
10 Ross Wilson, *Critical Forms: Forms of Literary Criticism, 1750–2020* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2023).
11 Friedrich Schlegel, *Athaneum*. Quoted in Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 159.
12 Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism & Selected Critical Prose* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 236–7, 242; Eliot Weinberger, preface to *My Emily Dickinson* by Susan Howe (New York: New Directions, 2007), xii; Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 179; Louis Bury, "Topical Criticism and the Cultural Logic of the Quick Take," in *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online*, ed. Houman Barekat, Robert Barry, and David Winters (London: O/R Books, 2017), 86.
13 Arthur C. Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1. (1984): 5–20.
14 Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 64–5.
15 Bury, "Topical Criticism," 86. I made a similar argument a few years later in "A Golden Age?," *Vinduet*, April 25, 2023.
16 Bury, "Topical Criticism," 86.
17 Bury, "Topical Criticism, 86.
18 Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 7–10.
19 On the "lay reader," see Guillory, "The Question of Lay Reading," in *Professing Criticism*, 318–42. On the concept of the "conoisseurship," see Ruby, "A Golden Age?"
20 Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 236.
21 Michael Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2014), 22–23.
22 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Tom Holland (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 24–25.
23 Scott, *Delphi*, 28–30.
24 Scott, *Delphi*, 128. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 21.
25 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 10–11.
26 Scott, *Delphi*, 128. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 3–5.
27 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 40–47.
28 Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy*, 244.
29 Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 318–19.
30 Wilson, *Critical Forms*, 201–12.
31 A. V. Marraccini, *We the Parasites* (Seattle: Sublunary Editions, 2023) (hereafter cited as *WP*).
32 Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 14.
33 Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 7.
34 Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 12.
35 Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," *PMLA* 86, no. 1. (1971): 9–18.
36 Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), 161–88.