Introduction: Professing Criticism in the Antipodes

Joseph Steinberg

Arguably the first to profess literature in the Antipodes was one George Bernard Barton, elder brother to the rather more famous Edmund Barton, Australia’s first Prime Minister. In a 1901 obituary published in The Bulletin, the children’s author and poet Robert Richardson claimed Barton the elder ‘may be fairly regarded as the first purely literary man whom New South Wales has produced’, a distinction in no small part occasioned by the three years he spent as the first ‘Reader in English [Language and] Literature, as the office was then styled, at the Sydney University’. We can recover some of the idiosyncrasies of this initial posting in The Study of English Literature (1866), the published form of the first in a series of lectures that Barton delivered at Sydney University that same year, in which he takes it upon himself to make a case for the scholarly integrity of his nascent discipline. ‘It is a common notion, or, at least, it seems to be a common notion,’ Barton hedges, ‘that English Literature is not a subject for study, in the strictest sense of the term’ (3). What seemed to him an obstacle might now appear an advantage, at least to those of us interested in making the case for literary studies today: he can, at least, readily presume that his audience will associate literature with ‘pleasant, miscellaneous reading in leisure hours—reading pursued with no method, and aiming at no precise end’ (3). From the vantage point of a media ecology he could not have imagined, this assumption is no longer tenable.
Barton’s task as he conceives it is therefore less to make a case for literature’s value—this, he can take as a given—than for its formal study, for the necessity of a systematic and historical approach distinct from ‘desultory reading’ or ‘the dilettante’ fingering of attractive books’ (4). As Leigh Dale notes in her indispensable history of literary criticism in Australian universities, The Enchantment of English (2012), this emphasis works to distinguish the study of vernacular literature on literary-historical and philological-linguistic grounds from the practice of non-professional reading by insisting on both its rigor and, implicitly, the potential for it to be ‘taught and tested’, a necessary precondition for any discipline’s initial incorporation into educational institutions which sought to provide ‘a new social class of students access to higher levels of public service and the professions’ (96-7). That literary studies delimited its original object precisely by excluding the informational and bureaucratic genres routinely circulated among such individuals, as Barton himself does via an approving quotation from Thomas Arnold’s A Manual of English Literature (1862), lends an anti-vocational kink to the early curve of this professional pipeline that is often forgotten (13).

Barton’s explicit mustering of imperialist fantasies should likewise not be overlooked. His most conspicuous rationale is also his most distasteful: the study of language through literature would on his aggrandising terms amount to a record of ‘all that constitutes the greatness of our race—all that has raised the English empire to the supremacy of the world’, a sentiment steeped in the cringing anglophilia of a colony some three decades away from federation (7). That such supremacist claims here constitute an act of advocacy for an emergent discipline—in that they are deployed to justify the formal study of ‘a crude dialect [...] beneath the attention of scholars [...] unworthy of comparison with the literature of Greece or Rome’—does little to excuse them (9). More palatable, and of far greater interest, is Barton’s formulation of the literary scholar’s method. Part librarian, part docent, his literary historian boasts an encyclopaedic knowledge of works which considered ‘individually [...] may be trifling’, but when arranged and presented ‘as parts of a complete system’ take on an ‘importance’ that ‘cannot be too highly estimated’ (10). Certainly there is a latent chauvinism to this figure’s endeavours, and Barton’s insistence that ‘to obtain an accurate knowledge of the Old English Drama we must read the dramatists in their chronological order, and read nothing else’ is unlikely to earn his rigid guide any rave reviews, but it’s hard not to find something to admire in his devotion to literary knowledge as such, to a formulation of teaching and research in which ‘the books are not mere instruments—they are the end, not the means’ (13). Today, few universities indeed still offer a rigidly chronological and narrowly literary survey of the kind Barton champions, and the question of whether the de facto pedagogical offerings on Australian campuses—courses organised to varying degrees via topical thematic foci, which privilege short or excerpted texts and adopt the genre
agnosticism of cultural studies, all with a watchful eye to their share of a dwindling humanities cohort—can still maintain a non-instrumentalised relation to the field’s object of inquiry thus seems a rhetorical one.

And should we want to maintain such a relation? For Catherine Gallagher, writing before the turn of the millennium, it is this order of question that complicates the task of securing for literary studies the kind of ‘institutional footing that would allow us to develop once again as a discipline’ (152): the various interpretive schools of the preceding decades ‘have been hard put to explain’ the necessity of furnishing their political claims with ‘evidence from literary objects per se’ (151). Wouldn’t other objects do—or even do better?

Much the same sense of a recurrent mismatch between claims and evidence undergirds the argument forwarded in John Guillory’s magisterial essay collection *Professing Criticism* (2022), a collection unified by its careful sociological and historical account of professionalisation’s debilitative effects. For Guillory, overstated claims are ‘the principal form of professional deformation resulting from uncertainty about the social effects of literary study’: other forms include ‘the difficulty of critical language’ and ‘the prevalence of a rebarbative dialect that sometimes has a more performative than communicative function’, both of which are understood as ‘in some measure the defense mechanism of an inward-turning profession, a response to the disappointment of its great expectations’ (79-80).

This account is animated by a Nietzschean sense of the ‘indissoluble union of mastery and deformation’ (6), the ‘mutually intensifying’ relation between ‘specialization and bureaucratization’ (7), and the ‘overweening self-regard of the scholar’ as the ‘behavioural correlative of an overestimation of the aim of scholarship, which is in turn an attempt to cope with radical uncertainty about this aim’ (9). ‘All education’, writes Guillory, ‘can be understood as a process of habituation, the embodiment of knowledge’: he makes the stakes of this ostensibly modest claim vivid via reference to Kenneth Burke’s *Permanence and Change* (1935), whereby he suggests that professional scholars are not so far from well-conditioned chickens, at least in the sense that we are far from being immune to ‘a maladaptive hardening of behaviour over time’ (16). We might not all come clucking at the chime of a bell, expecting to be fed, only to find ourselves beheaded, but we do run the somewhat analogous risk of our specialised knowledges leading us to respond ‘inflexibly or inappropriately to a change of circumstance’ (16). That change of circumstance entails, in Guillory’s schema, first and foremost a ‘system of media’ which has developed in ways uncountenanced by criticism’s earliest practitioners and professors; absent a concerted effort on our part to establish ‘a more engaged and rationalized relation’ to this burgeoning media ecology, he deems it likely that our discipline’s ‘place within that system will continue to contract’ (355).
Under these broad auspices, *Professing Criticism*'s essays attend to the history of professionalisation and its consequences for the study of literature at present. From its account of the institutionalisation of the nineteenth century sage-critic, to its analysis of the disappearance of rhetoric from tertiary syllabi, to its critique of the limits of decolonisation as curricular logic, efforts to politicise the pleasure of reading, and the perniciousness of credentialism, through to its formulation of monumentality and documentality as the duality that structures our objects of study in the humanities, *Professing Criticism*'s level-headed reflections on the discipline’s past and present teach us to regard the ever-mounting pressures to professionalise our critical labours with due scepticism.

Guillory is clear about his account’s limits. He writes, in his words, as ‘an American scholar of English literature, acknowledging where possible prior or parallel developments in the history of literary study in the United Kingdom or modern foreign languages’: for all the erudition and extraordinary range of his account, the question of criticism’s professionalisation further south is beyond his ambit (ix). This limited remit is reflected in the flood of reviews and critiques in major public and scholarly literary fora that his book has attracted to date: these include, but are by no means limited to, responses by Merve Emre in *The New Yorker*, Stefan Collini in the *London Review of Books*, Evan Kindley in *The New York Review of Books*, Nicholas Dames in *The Nation*, Bruce Robbins and Eric Bennett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sarah Brouillette in *Public Books*, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado and Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Laura Heffernan and Rachel Sagner Buurma and Frances Ferguson in *Critical Inquiry*, Michael W. Clune in *Genre*, and a season of *The American Vandal* podcast. Insightful as many of these pieces are, with few exceptions they confine their musings on the state of the discipline to the forms it has taken in British and American institutions.

The seven responses to *Professing Criticism* collected in this special issue enter this conversation with an eye toward its implications for, and in some cases the limits of its applicability to, the state of tertiary affairs in Australia. In his essay ‘Bureaucratic Reading’, Andrew Dean exposes the ‘profound cynicism’ that undergirds the administrative practice of research evaluation, contending that such measures artificially narrow ‘the possibility of what research can be’ (Dean 98). Lynda Ng’s approach, in her essay ‘Decolonising Guillory?: The Contradictions of English in Australia’, is to attend closely to the chapter in *Professing Criticism* of a similar name, drawing out some of the limitations of Guillory’s critique of decolonisation as a curricular rationale (Ng). Jessica Marian and Nick Robinson, in their essay ‘Professorial Autonomy, Casualisation, and Wage Theft in Australian Universities’, draw on their considerable experience as unionists to interrogate questions of autonomy and scholarly reproduction (Marian and Robinson). Ben Eltham, in ‘Trouble at the Mill’, draws on his journalistic expertise to cast a wide net, attending to the concerns Guillory raises as they resound well beyond the
purview of literary studies (Eltham). James Jiang's lively essay 'Criticism, Faith, and Styles of Common Sense' turns to the question of pleasure and displeasure in *Professing Criticism* to make a spirited case for critical antinomianism (Jiang). In 'The Ladders', Wiradjuri scholar Sarah-Jane Burton and I examine points of divergence in the teaching of literature in Australian schools and universities in order to make a case for Guillory's vision of a unified 'program of study [...] continuous from the earliest to the latest phases of the educational system' (Guillory 352; quoted in Steinberg and Burton 74). Finally, in his essay 'The Passion for Knowledge', my co-editor Christian R. Gelder pays careful attention to two moments in the history of the discipline in which criticism 'was shaped more by dominant and hegemonic forms of knowledge than by its resistance to them' (Gelder 102).

**JOSEPH STEINBERG** is a Forrest Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in English and Literary Studies at the University of Western Australia. His articles, reviews and interviews have appeared in *Australian Literary Studies, JASAL, The Review of English Studies, The Cambridge Quarterly, Australian Humanities Review, the Sydney Review of Books, and The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel.*

**Works Cited**


Clune, Michael W. 'John Guillory's Distortions.' *Genre* 57.1 (2024): 77-88.


