‘GILBERT: The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always.’
Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (1891)\(^1\)

Deep in the doldrums of graduate study, I read Perry Miller’s account of the theological controversies that plagued the early Massachusetts Bay colony. Two increasingly antagonistic tendencies of mine converged on this book: on the one hand, it was part of a desperate attempt to specialise as an Americanist after three years of intellectual vagrancy; on the other, I was pointed to Miller’s work in a collection of essays by David Bromwich, whose range and style as a critic I was (still am?) trying to imitate. First published in 1939, Miller’s account is, I imagine, seriously outdated to bona fide scholars in the field, but his parsings of the Arminian and Antinomian heretical outgrowths of Calvinist doctrine were instructive about the tension between visible works and imperceptible grace as grounds for divine election. At stake in these controversies were not only abiding metaphysical questions about squaring moral agency with predestination, outward behaviour with inward condition, but also political and

\(^1\) I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Marc Mierowsky, and Sean Pryor for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.
sociological questions about the relation between experts and the laity, self and institution.²

I was reminded of this episode in colonial American history, and of Miller’s account of it, when reading John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism*, a book in which literary criticism is indicted for what we might describe as an unearned, or at least a deeply compromised, state of disciplinary grace. ‘Justification by faith’ is how Guillory characterises the most serious of literary criticism’s professional deformations, namely, its overestimation of its purchase on the world outside the university; and like the ‘professing’ in the very title of the book, the phrase carries with it a deliberate religious undertow. For ‘justification by faith’ (or, more specifically, ‘justification by faith alone’—sola fide, as Luther put it) was the central Reformed doctrine that seventeenth-century Puritan divines tried to protect while leaving room for the ethical sanctions of scripture. Their solution was a covenant theology, the contractual logic of which was by equal turns ingenious and tortured. It was not an easy sell, as Miller observes:

> [T]he good parson had his work cut out for him. His congregation knew, if they knew nothing else, that salvation by faith and not by works was orthodoxy, and that any hedging of this point was heresy. He had to explain to them that when faith was viewed not as a simple act of belief, but as the condition of a covenant, it became in itself, as it were, a ‘work’, involving in the inward act an obligation to external behaviour. (383)

Necessary though not sufficient for salvation, moral self-cultivation became the glue that joined justification (the assurance of election) to sanctification (the appearance of righteousness).

The Antinomian Controversy that erupted in the late 1630s would show how flimsy the covenantal glue was; how easily this construction of faith could be construed as smuggling in the Arminian heresy (‘justification by works’) through the backdoor. There is, then, a suggestion in Guillory’s charge of ‘justification by faith’ that literary critics, in usurping the name and function of criticism (‘the privilege of no one discipline and the obligation of all’ [*Professing* 49]), have been liable to a kind of antinomianism. For just as Anne Hutchinson and her followers refused to allow any external mediation of the elected saint’s inward union with Christ (including, and especially, mediation by clerical authority), the literary scholar overlooks any need of extrinsic measures for calculating the political efficacy of their scholarship. The complacency of the thoroughbred professional

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² Interestingly, Miller’s discussion of the covenant of grace and the Antinomian controversy is placed in ‘Book IV: Sociology’.
proves not too dissimilar to the assurance of the divinely elected—occupational psychosis not easily distinguishable from religious enthusiasm—when one can claim, in an ecstasy of self-confirmation, that ‘just by reading novels, we engage in transformative political work’ (Professing 90).

The story that Guillory has to tell about the emergence of literary criticism, particularly its professionalisation within the disciplinary system institutionalised by Progressive-Era American universities, is fundamentally an Arminian one (‘Works were necessary, after all, demonstrable effects in the world’ [80]). Call it neoliberalism, late-stage capitalism, or even modernity if you will, but very few of us now lead lives free of the doctrine of ‘justification by works’. Credentialisation has become the new sanctification. When William James, sensitive to the cost to intellectual spontaneity of the new regime of doctoral accreditation, wrote in 1903 that ‘we dangle our three magic letters before the eyes of these predestined victims, and they swarm to us like moths to an electric light’ (68), he was perhaps channelling, in a modern, minor key, the Calvinist energies of that staunch anti-Arminian, Jonathan Edwards (he of the well-known sermon in which God holds the sinner ‘over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire’), to underscore the wide gulf between outward sign and inward soul spanned by those ‘three magic letters’: PhD.

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At the risk of making a mountain of a rhetorical molehill, I’ve tried to suggest that the theological context of the phrase ‘justification by faith’ isn’t an arbitrary choice of phrasing or framing, but rather brings into focus some of the broader sociological stakes of Guillory’s argument. Indeed, the Antinomian Controversy offers precisely the kind of ‘crisis of expertise’ that is Professing Criticism’s primary animating context. The questions raised by that episode are strikingly resonant: can one lay claim to expertise—that is, legitimacy in the world of routinised professionalism—at the same time as pursuing something like a ‘prophetic career’ (71)? And what if the discipline in which we stake our professional identity is one that developed in radical opposition to the very processes of specialisation that underpin the culture of professionalism?

But it also introduces an evenness into the style of Professing Criticism, the astringent sociological register of which is punctuated by a species of satire about intellectual combat (whereby a Kantian ‘conflict of the faculties’ verges on a Swiftian ‘battle of the books’). It seems to me that a phrase like ‘justification by faith’—in its overlaying of religious sectarianism on disciplinary factionalism—

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3 As Stefan Collini has argued, the ‘constitutive principle’ of the eclectic corpus produced by the Victorian sages—who, in their access to a notionally undelimited public, stand in relation to modern disciplinary literary criticism as primal fathers—‘was the repudiation of specialism’.
belongs with the oft-repeated ‘Archimedean lever’, and even the political portentousness of the epoch named ‘the postwar settlement’, as part of the book’s ‘mock’ idiom that, rippling like a ragged seam beneath the many folds of its finely tailored scholarship, is an important dimension of its quiet polemic against the over-polemicisation of the discipline. Such an idiom highlights the existential stakes of the institutional game being played by overweening academicians, but it also introduces a distance that both honours with pathos and deflates with institutional *realpolitik* the way in which literary critics have committed themselves to a programmatic overestimation of disciplinary aims.

What follows is largely a kind of rhetorical analysis, though one that I hope to show has institutional repercussions for both literary criticism (as a practice with both lay and professional audiences) and for what has come to be called the public humanities. I begin by discussing the rhetoric of faith and religious schism through which Guillory has repeatedly characterised literary criticism—for reasons that have partly to do with its history. As Guillory showed in the chapter on the New Critics in *Cultural Capital*, the identification of literary critics with clerics—a theme that runs from T. S. Eliot to F. R. Leavis (and all the way back to Coleridge)—‘occupies a realm of social fantasy, which yet testifies to a certain reality about literary culture’ (154). The fantasy was one of centrality; the reality one of militant marginality. ‘The social mission of English criticism’, as Chris Baldick has memorably called it, was to substitute literary sensibility for contentious religious or political belief as the basis of a harmonious cultural order. In other words, criticism was ‘surrogational’ (to borrow Guillory’s term) from the very start; its primary tactic was the framing of a new kind of common sense. I read this desire for shaping common sense back into Guillory’s own rhetoric—one which tries to provide a persuasive sociological account of expertise partially through the projection of his own expert persona. This may seem an impertinence given the weightiness of Guillory’s scholarship, but the matter of his style—its at-times vertiginous swings between declarative sobriety and evaluative or speculative abandon—brings into sharper relief the concerns about epistemic excess that are at the heart of his most recent book.

Guillory’s most explicit use of religious schism occurs in his essay on ‘The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism’, an early draft of the argument in the first section of *Professing Criticism*. Guillory’s account of the Sokal hoax points a finger

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4 To summarise the affair briefly: in its Spring 1996 double issue, the journal *Social Text* published an article by Alan Sokal titled ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’ that its author later revealed to be a hoax—an attempt not so much to engage seriously in a ‘postmodern’ critique of physics as to expose the fatuity of fashionable literary theorising through what he later called ‘pastiche’. The journalistic coverage afforded this scandal funneled what was initially a debate within science studies into the sphere of public controversy. Though, as Guillory points out, the polemical terms in which the
quite squarely at cultural studies as the culprit of disciplinary overreach, a program that brokered a spurious alliance with the putatively antirealist, or constructivist, stance of science studies (reduced to a monolithic bloc) in order to challenge the epistemic and social prestige of the natural sciences. In a move that will no doubt sound familiar, this opportunistic play on the part of cultural studies is characterised as an act of intellectual revanchism: ‘a desire to repossess the territory once claimed by the cultural critic, but more recently by social scientists—the human world’ (482). For Guillory, the Sokal affair, insofar as its game of intellectual-institutional territory-marking became a front in a wider culture war, ‘undoubtedly replayed the two cultures debate’ (479), only this time with the political alignments reversed: the partisans of literary sensibility were no longer cultural conservatives arrayed against the disorders of technologico-Benthamite civilisation; they placed themselves on the progressive fringe with a new disciplinary accommodation to the products of mass culture. Where once the literary critics (of the Leavisian or New Critical stripe) could be compared to the ‘recusants, by analogy to the English Catholics who were excluded from many social and political privileges in the wake of the Reformation’ (502), they were now, under the expansive hermeneutic mandate of cultural studies, more like the ‘enthusiasts ... the Nonconformist Protestants after the Restoration’ (503).

To my amateur theologian’s eyes at any rate, this comparison seems both an extravagant excursus into religious history and an illuminating if surprising homology. Its epistemic value relies more than a little on the rhetorical force of an historical precedent—and it is the weight of detail which probably differentiates this kind of instrumental typology from something like Arnold’s more schematic parsing of the social body into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace. And yet the mark of a certain mode of cultural-critical polemic may not have left Guillory’s account altogether (it’s worth noting, for instance, that ‘enthusiast’ is far from a neutral term, finding currency as a pejorative label for fanatical Nonconformists among Anglicans like Swift). Guillory’s purported reason for making the analogy is ‘precision’: ‘the analogy of recusancy is intended more precisely to characterise the position of cultural critics in the university, in relation to the dominant secular modernism of the positivist natural and social sciences’ (502-3; my emphasis). That is, the historical specificities ought not to draw our attention away from what is primarily a functionalist analogy: the vast gulf in doctrinal beliefs between recusants and enthusiasts should not obscure the greater significance of their shared marginality (or, as Guillory will put it in Professing Criticism, their shared ‘eccentricity’ of location with respect to both institution and cultural environment). There’s another neatness of fit too: this reversal of literary criticism’s disciplinary politics is placed within a cultural-institutional matrix
where, felicitously, the high-church coincides with the highbrow, low-church with lowbrow.

But the analogy is also a bit overdetermined, being both functionalist and genetic. In support of the justice of his comparison between the Leavisians and New Critics and the recusants, Guillory can—and does—point to not just institutional positioning, but intellectual pedigree: ‘The development of cultural criticism in the Anglo-American context was, in fact, tinged with Anglo-Catholic nostalgia, shamelessly espoused, of course, by T.S. Eliot’ (502; my emphasis). One might, I think, wholeheartedly agree with this assertion while questioning its presentation, which, in being split between plain statement and evaluative license, makes ‘fact’ very difficult to tell apart from an idée reçue, ‘of course’. Perhaps there’s nothing wrong with a scholar’s having his cake and eating it too (tea-room nostalgia, shamelessly espoused), but the analogical detour in Guillory’s characterisation seems poised between two registers—the critical-polemical and the scholarly-scientistic—the mixing of which threatens to imperil the kind of disciplinary hygiene he’s otherwise at pains to maintain.

As with the evocation of post-Reformation debate over faith and works, these schismatic comparisons are meant, I think, as de-familiarising gestures at the same time that they can’t avoid relying, to some extent, on familiar narratives about the origins and history of the discipline. The reliance on such narratives has been an explicit theme in Guillory’s writings over the years. Through concepts such as Louis Althusser’s ‘spontaneous philosophy’ and Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘doxa’, Guillory has analysed the power of received ideas and commonsensical belief in galvanising group identities, particularly those of experts or professionals during the legitimation crises precipitated by intramural institutional conflicts or extramural culture wars. In the context of these inquiries, the rhetoric of faith becomes a shorthand for the very epistemic short-cuts (‘what is given for [a] discourse community’ [Guillory, ‘Sokal’ 477]) of which it itself is a species. Indeed, a phrase like ‘justification by faith’, when used outside of its theological context, is liable to slip into what Bourdieu calls, in yet another religious metaphor, the ‘vulgate’: ‘a discourse halfway between everyday talk and scientific statement [that] can give the illusion of revealing truths by referring to commonplaces and expressing them in a scientific-sounding language’ (15). The ‘vulgate’, in other words, is a register caught between generalist and specialist discourses—and, in doing double-duty, an awkward mix of warmed-over platitude and aseptic rigour.

It seems to me that this is precisely the kind of conflict that warps Guillory’s characterisation of Eliot’s ‘Anglo-Catholic nostalgia’ in his article on the Sokal affair. Moreover, some aspect of vulgarisation, implicit in the use of the ‘vulgate’, is involved in the trace of mock I detected in Professing Criticism’s choices of diction: phrases like ‘justification by faith’ and ‘the postwar settlement’ are
invested with pseudo-gravitas, almost a bit too aware of their future careers as professional shorthand, as the hooks onto which cavilling responses like mine will invariably hang their critical hats. But the clearest instance of the 'vulgate' idiom in *Professing Criticism* occurs, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the chapter on 'The Question of Lay Reading', which, again, invokes a religious framing—the distinction between the Latin-reading clergy and the 'unlettered' laity—in order to conciliate between the claims of academic and non-academic readers. It contains such an aperçu as:

I would like to argue that we should regard lay reading, or reading for pleasure, as belonging to the same category of practice as physical exercise, cooking, conversation with friends, sexual activity, or any number of other pleasures which enlarge our experience and enrich our sensibilities (337-8).

And further down the page:

Lay reading belongs to the field of the ethical because it is a practice on the self and because the experience of pleasure in reading is capable of being cultivated or refined, in precisely the sense of what was called in the early modern period *self-improvement*. What I would like to propose is that the practice of lay reading belongs to the domain of a *practice* of pleasure, where the assumption is that the practicing of pleasures will both intensify them and make them better for us. (338; Guillory's emphasis)

This may seem like a low blow (it is), and surely part of the point here is a deliberate rhetorical dressing down for the occasion of a rapprochement between professional and lay readers. There is a hope, perhaps, that a candour and open-mindedness, bordering on naïveté, will help puncture the straitjacket of disciplinary decorum. But reading this, I can't help but cringe a little at the formal *Wissenschaftlich* reclamation of the everyday under the aspect of 'the field of the ethical'. Such passages seem to me to distil the 'vulgate' into its 'purest' form. (It's also worth noting the importance of paralinguistic features such as listing and italicisation—has there been a more italic-heavy monograph in recent years?—in conjuring a scene of forensic analysis or synthesis. But what, for instance, is the force of the italicisation of 'self-improvement' and 'practice' in the above passage? They are highlighted lexically to signal a specific or more restrictive usage, except nothing about the passage seems to require a more than vulgar sense of the italicised words for it to be comprehended.)

For what it's worth, I don't think Guillory is a bad writer; my point rather is to identify a chronic, perhaps constitutive, instability in the rhetoric of expertise as it
adapts itself to existing common sense, and attempts, through the conversion of
readers (proximate professionals and then the laity) to its arguments, to make a
new common sense prevail. This problem is especially acute for scholars in the
humanities, part of whose claim on public attention consists in the general cultural
significance and visibility of their objects of study, and for literary critics, in
particular, whose expertise may be thought to extend to ‘the linguistic conditions
for communication in the public sphere’ (Guillory, ‘Sokal’ 506). It’s no accident, I
think, that this instability should be demonstrated so starkly in a chapter that
explicitly addresses the relationship between the professoriate and the laity. I
actually find this chapter to be the most generative of Guillory’s reflections on the
fate of criticism (more so than the neo-Baconian intervention of the final chapter’s
typo studiorum). There’s something tantalisingly speculative about his suggestion
that ‘the emergence of the category of the aesthetic can be seen as having been
necesitated in part by the absence of a distinction between the ethical and the
moral’ (340), and there’s real conviction behind the attempt to reinstate pleasure
to its proper place in our reading lives. To do so Guillory cites Roland Barthes’
observation about the way in which pleasure is ‘foreclosed’ in a society “‘ridden
by two moralities: the prevailing one, of platitude; the minority one, of rigor
(political and/or scientific). As if the notion of pleasure no longer pleases anyone.’”
(341) What’s interesting to me is the degree of complementarity between Barthes’
‘foreclosure of pleasure’ and Bourdieu’s ‘vulgate’, the register, we might say, in
which a subject-supposed-to-know pays lip service to these moralities (and their
characteristic tones of voices) and in so doing annuls their own pleasure.
Susceptibility to these two registers—the Scylla of unctuous platitude and the
Charybdis of scholarly rigorism—may be exacerbated when what is being
discussed has not been established as a proper disciplinary object of study.5 As
Guillory remarks, ‘lay reading’ remains ‘a practice that literary scholars have held
so close as not to see it at all’ (342).

But pleasure, as the promise of a possible reconciliation between secular clerics
and the laity, rescues Guillory’s chapter from this two-sided ‘foreclosure’ by
allowing him to introduce a more explicitly polemical element into his critique of
literary-critical enthusiasm (in his quasi-religious use of the term):

Our most advanced theoretical defense of pleasure tends to celebrate
it only when it comes dressed in the garb of a transgressive politics. To
politicide pleasure is once again to moralise it and thus to misplace the
politics of pleasure, which resides in the question of what social
conditions must obtain in order for individuals to develop the

5 We might also note the way in which Barthes plays the same role here that Bourdieu played in
the final chapter of Cultural Capital—as a diagnostician of the deletion of pleasure: ‘Bourdieu
quite rightly points to the fact that the pleasure of aesthetic judgment manifests itself curiously as
a kind of unpleasure.’
possibilities of pleasure, including the pleasure of reading. (341-2; Guillory’s emphasis)

The italicised phrase is *echt* Guillory, but shouldn’t distract from what is in the main an antinomian argument (one that remains open to the charge of subjectivism that has perennially beset criticism) defending the individual’s right to the cultivation of ‘the possibilities of pleasure’ against coercive moralities, including the kind of high-mindedness that requires pleasure to be ratified by ‘transgressive politics’. Such an argument, along with a certain perfectionist rationale (‘it seems obvious that [lay reading’s] improving pleasure has no upper end or terminal point’ [342]), constitutes a positive moment in Guillory’s otherwise scrupulous negation of institutional ill-discipline. I find it hard not to read this as a more promising reorientation of Guillory’s argument against the disciplinary stance of ‘justification by faith’: we should be against this automatic conflation of professional labour and social value not because it injures the discipline’s institutional respectability, but, rather, because it narrows and ‘misplaces’ a vital part of what makes reading a worthwhile activity, both inside and outside the university. In other words, far from literary criticism’s being too antinomian, it is, in fact, *not antinomian enough*.

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I began this essay with an epigraph from Oscar Wilde and I want to conclude with a thought about Wilde. For the kind of work that hopes to answer the ‘question of what social conditions must obtain in order for individuals to develop the possibilities of pleasure, including the pleasure of reading’ might well look less like a sociological study (such as *Cultural Capital*) and more like ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, an essay in which Wilde writes: ‘One’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living’ (242). Despite belonging to the Arnoldian lineage of critics, Wilde often gets written out of disciplinary histories, the aestheticist line branching out from Arnold via Walter Pater appearing as only a minor diversion in criticism’s story. Wilde was not one for accommodating himself to institutions, and seen from the other side of the gulf of professionalism, he may seem an unlikely figure to stake the future of the discipline on.⁶

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⁶ And yet, in a way, Guillory can be seen as having already done so. Take the ‘thought experiment’ that concludes *Cultural Capital*, in which the ‘socialisation of the means of production and consumption’ results in ‘a culture of universal access [where] canonical works could not be experienced as they often are, as lifeless monuments, or as proofs of class distinction’. Guillory characterises this utopia as ‘an aestheticism unbound’. What Guillory calls ‘aestheticism’, Wilde calls ‘Individualism’ throughout ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’. The proximity of Guillory’s
But if there is some truth to Guillory’s off-hand remark that ‘at some perhaps less than fully conscious level of the professional imaginary, criticism remained inimical to the very form of the academic discipline’ (Guillory, Professing 57-8), then Wilde’s antinomianism presents itself as an appealing guide towards a critical reformation around the axis of the pleasure principle. This seems to me the message, ‘at some perhaps less than fully conscious level’, of Guillory’s chapter on lay reading, the threads of which have already been picked up in, say, Simon Jarvis’ preliminary work on a materialist phenomenology that refuses ‘to preevacuate the content, the materials, the experiences; the ideas, the concepts, the wishes; the form, the moods, the eloquence’ (17) from the field of criticism. Whether such a project—call it aestheticist, antinomian, or materialist-phenomenological—adds up to a discipline is not a question I, or anyone at this point, can answer. But it gives critics (academic or otherwise) a place to start, at least, in their individual practices.

Guillory ends his chapter on lay reading with a despondent note: ‘In the present circumstances of literary study, it is difficult to be sanguine about the possibility of establishing intermediate practices of reading, which would presumably sophisticate lay reading without yielding to the fantasy of replicating professional readers’ (342). And yet, at the end of his chapter, ‘On The Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education’, Guillory seems aware that these ‘intermediate’ sites of critical exchange already exist in the form of ‘new versions of “little magazines”’ (277). Whom do these magazines address? Not the public perhaps, but certainly a public, ‘less than professional, but more than amateur’ (277). This is an important distinction that’s overlooked in less guarded statements of the following variety:

[T]he university's loss has been the public sphere's gain. If criticism is indeed returning to a late-19th or early-20th century formation, as a kind of belletristic art aimed at a non-academic reader, it appears to be doing so with as much energy exiting the academy as it did when it was absorbed into the institution in the first place. (Ruby, n.p.)

It’s my sense that the university’s loss is also the public sphere’s loss: the relationship between them is not that of two players locked in a zero-sum game. Rather, a generalist culture only flourishes to the extent that the tributaries of specialist knowledge continue to flow into it. There is a question here about the frontiers between academia and journalism, universities and the publishing industry, but it is a frontier that exists (though not exclusively, of course) at the

imagined scenario to the aspirations of the Arnoldian critical tradition—in particular, the cultural and institutional programmes of F. R. Leavis—has been noted by Simon During.
level of the sentence, in the writing of expertise. A stylistic question impinges on the general viability of the public humanities: can the humanities find a voice to address its publics that avoids either reducing the fruits of research into ‘communications’ pabulum or gussying up commonplaces in scholarly pedantry? Is there a form of critical writing that can harness

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination’s Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima?\(^7\)

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**Works Cited**


\(^7\) Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, ‘It Must Change,’ IX (Stevens 343; question mark added).


