

The Passion for Knowledge

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It must not be thought that the philosopher with fine university credentials is the blackboard that can accommodate this *divertissement*.

Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

JOHN GUILLORY'S *PROFESSING CRITICISM* (2022) CONTINUES HIS WORK IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF professions, tracing how the bureaucratic and social structures of the modern university frame literary studies as a discipline that produces knowledge, not mere opinion.¹ The book examines the contemporary organising concepts and aporias in the field of literary studies and the humanities more broadly, whose contemporaneity arises out of the strange fact that English was a 'profession before it was a discipline', having no settled method (nor even settled object) despite being governed by the professionalising protocols of the university. This disciplinary disorganisation is the result of the sense that English has always uneasily managed its relationship to knowledge, ostensibly taking the literary text as the thing regulating its multiple inquiries. But English also retains the more wide-reaching and ambitious historical mission of criticism, aiming to enact a ruthless critique of all that exists. Literature, as the French poet Stéphane

¹ I greatly thank James Jiang for his insightful comments on a draft of this essay.

Mallarmé once put it, is ‘the subject to which everything is attached’, a remark that registers the unnerving, constitutive gap between literature as a finite object and its infinitely outward-looking referential indeterminacy: the sense that the written text could very well be about everything and nothing all at once (Mallarmé 195).

For Guillory, this disciplinary confusion is invariably bound up with a larger sociological problem about how literary studies relates to the ‘market for knowledge’ engendered by twentieth-century capital (Guillory 39). Literary studies, he affirms throughout his book, is a knowledge producing discipline. But knowledge itself became a commodity throughout the twentieth century, with the university simultaneously producing a new kind of social elite: the professional knowledge class. Paradoxically, though, the members of this knowledge class have little or no use for the very knowledge that actually brought them into that class in the first instance. Although not always the case, the Australian humanities student will today often take up work in a field remote from the discipline in which they were trained: in media and marketing divisions, in the public service, in the ‘creative’ sector or re-training in another more ‘job-ready’ field (to invoke a phrase widely used in university marketing). This is the product of a contradiction between the disciplinary knowledge transmitted by contemporary literary studies—which tends to see itself as singular, largely insulated from market capital—and the subject *of* that knowledge, which produces a subject who belongs to the dominant professional-knowledge class. When academics talk about the transformative potential of a humanities education, they tend to mean the fashioning of an ethical and critical subject—and Guillory himself is fond of invoking the idea of ‘critical thinking’, ‘still a very desirable component of the professional profile’ (Guillory 81). But when universities employ this same language, boasting about the transformative power of education, they generally mean that the student will be transformed into a member of a professional-knowledge class. I felt this contradiction personally when a very brilliant student for a class I once taught in literary theory (read: Marxism and psychoanalysis) described themselves in their email signature as a ‘junior management consultant’!

Guillory’s book is driven by the idea that literary criticism reacted to this situation by inflating the political importance of its own scholarship, as if the less widely academic scholarship in the humanities is read, the more overblown its radical claims must become—a situation explored by multiple essays in this special issue. A recent article by a senior American scholar starkly illustrates Guillory’s point here, arguing that climate activism would be better executed if we reconceptualised our relationship to the endings of Victorian novels, prioritising planning and architecture over more ingrained humanist habits of critical ‘open-

endedness'.² Despite the inventiveness of this argument, it is worth inquiring into the historical conditions that allow for the almost automatic conflation of criticism and radical activism—and Guillory is admirably critical of the sometimes strained desire for 'topicality'. Speaking broadly, it does seem as though the contemporary humanities sometimes inhabit a strange kind of *pre-Marxist* world, where—recalling Marx and Engels scathing rebuke of nineteenth-century philosophical idealism—the intellectual class over invests in the capacity of *ideas* to drive societal change. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Holy Family* (1844), no worker believes that “‘*pure thinking*” will be able to argue away their industrial masters and their own practical debasement’, just as today the knowledge produced by academic output, however radical that knowledge may claim to be, has little to do with the material conditions that govern contemporary capitalist relations (Engels and Marx). The academic ideas-based focus on the political actually has a strangely de-politicising function, as if the accumulation of knowledge about the literary, chained as it were to society and history, could replace other means of action. It is symptomatic, then, that the harshest reforms to take place in the Australian university sector do not just come from uber-capitalist agencies threatened by humanist rabble-rousing (though recent reporting has shown just how reliant the Australian university sector is on external consultants like EY Sweeney). Some of the most brutal cuts to the humanities and the university are actioned by humanists-cum-managers, who have produced political scholarship for decades, and whose constitutive double-lives illustrate perfectly the distinction between, as Marx and Engels put it, ‘*thinking and being*’. The ultra-lean staffing numbers, excessive casualisation and regular ‘re-structures’ that plague the sector are not just the product of right-wing culture wars, though these obviously did not help. The destruction of the humanities can be, in part, attributed to the humanists themselves because, not in spite of, how the humanists conceive of their knowledge production.

In a recent essay for the *New Left Review*, Lorna Finlayson sketches the professional profile of this contemporary academic: an individualist out for themselves, lulled into a false sense of security by their publication or grant-winning record, largely indifferent to ‘the fate of the temporary lecturer who will be brought in to cover their sabbatical’. She concludes by wondering what this academic *really* thinks of the contemporary university: ‘[f]or all the heart-rending laments from academics about the state of the universities, the reality may be still more depressing. Maybe they like what they see’ (Finlayson). But if Finlayson’s description captures the psyche of the contemporary professionalised academic, how might we understand the relationship between this psychological sketch and

² See Caroline Levine’s ‘In Praise of Happy Endings: Precarity, Sustainability, and the Novel’. The book from which this article is an extract, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (2023), has been discussed in an article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* whose title illustrates Guillory’s point: ‘Why Do Humanists Think They Can Save the Planet?’.

the disciplinary knowledge produced by literary studies? Literary studies may have been shaped by the historical mission of criticism—but why would we be so certain that such a mission survives in our every living letter? Defences of the humanities often invoke the power of critique and ‘critical thinking’ to ground and justify their existence, as if without the institutionalised humanities, ideology would simply homogenise into one uncritical block. But doesn’t this kind of argument risk bifurcating professional identity and disciplinary knowledge into two unrelated entities, thereby dramatising the difference between doing and saying that we have become so accustomed to—the ruthless manager whose first book also happened to be on utopia?

In this brief essay, I want to suggest that rather than automatically seeing criticism as a site of counter-hegemonic resistance, one reason for the contradiction described above is that professionalised criticism has a long history of being shaped by scientific and political forces that are perfectly in keeping with the status quo—pushing back against the notion that literary studies continued to produce radical scholarship while coincidentally experiencing professional degradation. This very short essay is thus not about critique, subversion, transgression, dissent, the logic of the exception and the other radical conceptual categories that have, throughout the history of the discipline in the twentieth century, played an important part in shaping literary studies’ own image of its disciplinary knowledge. It is instead about two moments when modern criticism was shaped more by dominant and hegemonic forms of knowledge than by its resistance to them. I am going to do this in dialogue with *Professing Criticism* and by singling out two moments, one historical and another contemporary. I will begin with a discussion of I. A. Richards’s criticism and its relation to scientific positivism, and then make a second point about a more recent instance of professional formation: Rita Felski’s post-critique. I then conclude with a brief remark about the relationship between knowledge and truth.

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For many in the discipline, the Cambridge critic I. A. Richards’s seminal experiments in close reading gave literary studies a firm disciplinary footing, ethical grounding and even a radical political purpose. In Guillory’s history, Richards helped to deliver a new kind of critical discourse, one that was ‘neither positivist nor belletrist’, separate from its disciplinary predecessors philology and belles lettres (Guillory 193). But as Stefan Collini notes in his review of *Professing Criticism*, this account risks ‘exaggerating a partial truth’, given the importance of the textual practices of William Empson, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, whose complicated (and often conservative) politics have long been scrutinised (Collini). However, as much as Richards’s experiments in practical criticism may have been new and profound, one largely underappreciated aspect of his criticism concerns

how in tune it was with a much longer history of nineteenth century laboratory criticism, whose complicated and often sinister politics and epistemology shaped his own scientific ambitions—and it is worth recalling this, particularly when thinking about the politics the history of literary studies assumes in the contemporary imagination. To give one example of this earlier, often forgotten method: when the conservative New Humanist Irving Babbitt leapt to the defence of the humanities in his 1908 *Literature and the American College*—a work cited by Guillory—he not only criticised the positivism of philology, but also sought to guard against a newfound ‘hard literalness’ penetrating the humanist mindset (Babbitt 89). Babbitt found himself in the ‘nightmare of statistics’, which took the form of a mathematical formula: $x + HI^n + VF$. Quoted by Babbitt, this formula was created by the critic Mark Harvey Liddell, whose earlier *An Introduction to the Scientific Study of English Poetry: Being Prolegomena to a Science of English Prosody* (1902) aimed to give a literalised account of what poetry is (“‘Vex not the poet’s mind”, is the petulant cry of the poet himself, when Reason with her compass and square attempts to measure his poetic architecture’, he writes) (Liddell 4). For Liddell, poetry is not a ‘thing of God’, a ‘finer spirit of knowledge’, a matter of the ‘divine’, that which is in ‘opposition of science’ or the ‘the completest expression of humanity’—despite the historical insistence of these antiquated beliefs. Poetry is rather a piece of material *about* something (denoted by x), supercharged by a variable amount of human intensity (designed HI^n), couched in a limiting and delimiting verse form, VF (Liddell 5, 89).

As Guillory notes, Babbitt’s New Humanism had as its object ‘the very concept of culture, defined in opposition to the domain of nature, the object of natural science’ (Guillory 108). But formulae like Liddell’s appeared in the criticism from the period far more frequently than we might first think, devised by scholars who were motivated by a search for the unchanging laws of literary production and who saw literature itself as more of a natural than a cultural object. This critical pursuit was called by Babbitt himself the ‘laboratory method’ of criticism, though he was far from being the only person to use this term, and it designated a form of scientific criticism that gained favour in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The laboratory method was not defined by epistemological unity: the scientists who practised it had varying conceptions of what counted as scientific knowledge and what counted as ordinary everyday thinking, and the debates they engaged in were as much about the nature of science itself as they were about literature’s laws. Nor were these critics bound by the turn-of-the-century university system: their inquiries took place in English departments (like at the University of Nebraska, which was led by Lucius Aldeno Sherman), but also larger interdisciplinary centres like the Harvard Psychological Laboratories, and by independent polymathic scholars who came from all sorts of fields, like economics,

chemistry or the physical sciences.³ What united the laboratory method was a more fundamental desire to subsume the study of literary objects into the natural sciences, going beyond philological inquiry to experiment in fields such as statistical analysis, quantitative reader-response theory, prosodic science, generic literary taxonomies and classifications, mathematical formalisations and psychological treatises. Moreover, these inquiries carried a primitivist (and largely racist) politics with them, seeing literary study as a fundamentally civilising force, capable of confirming the merits of Western Civilisation and justifying colonial expansion. Liddell's sense that a scientific criticism was key to producing 'sound judgement and healthy emotion', an argument he makes in an earlier essay on the merits of scientific criticism published in *The Atlantic*, is an expression of exactly this (Liddell 76).

If Richards's work offered newfound disciplinary ground—establishing literary studies as its own unique form of knowledge—it was also responsive to the politics and epistemology of this micro-discipline of scientific criticism, taking literature as an object of natural inquiry by diagramming its neuro-psychological effects on both readers and writers. While his famous category of 'emotive language', identifiable in poetry and mythology, was intended to be a bulwark against referential meaning and scientific verification, the category itself represents a scientific account of what escapes scientific determination. In Richards's vision, criticism was a form of language necessarily steeped in the referential and so had to be scientific, given that criticism itself is not poetry itself nor a form of mythologising. Moreover, Richards was the co-author of *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923)—a book of linguistics famous for its recourse to the psychological sciences, its formalisation of the triangle of reference and repudiation of 'word-magic', a type of linguistic thinking that forges a natural connection between things and words and whose primitivist associations should not be forgotten. What Richards went on to do after *Practical Criticism* (1929) is also telling here, as he rejected disciplinary specialisation—not simply in relation to the idea of English but in relation to the very idea of the humanities themselves, imagining a kind of single-world education. Just like the laboratory critics, who held a primitivist politics that saw scientific learning as a civilising force, Richards himself was invested in the political repercussions of his scientific criticism. His work in *Basic English* (1925), for example, was an empire-expanding colonialist project, and his later writings were modelled on the vision of global political agreement.

Guillory's very insightful account of philology and belles lettres—the precursors to English—concludes by suggesting that where the failure of philology made a

³ For a partial history of laboratory criticism, see Gelder.

space for scientific linguistics, the failure of belles lettres made a space for criticism. He writes that

precisely because it resisted scientific treatment, literature could be positioned in opposition to science, to industrial civilization, even to modernity itself. [...] Literature became the repository of whatever in language was *resistant* to scientific explanation, to modernity, and ultimately even to the goal of communication. (Guillory 195)

But as much as the emergence of literary studies's disciplinary inquiries can be framed as neither scientific nor amateurish but a separate third thing, there is another way of recognising criticism's relationship to scientific knowledge, starting with critics from the nineteenth-century onwards who saw literature as the medium through which the power of scientific rationality could be confirmed. From the nineteenth-century scientific critics, to Richards, to later theoreticians of literature like Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, who were themselves responding in part to Richards's empiricist linguistics (see in particular Lacan's characteristically acerbic remarks about him in *Écrits* (1977)), laboratory criticism and its insistence throughout the twentieth century shows a strand of criticism in keeping with dominant forms of scientific rationality—quantitative science in the nineteenth century, neuro-psychology in Cambridge, mid-century cybernetics and so on. If Richards did offer literary studies a kind of disciplinary unity, then it was not because his modality of reading was removed from scientific positivism. His work was steeped in nineteenth-century science, which shaped his sense of liberal internationalism. What is important to note here is that if close reading is radical, removed from the exigencies of productivity and efficiency that define the capitalist economy, then the rationale for that radicalism should not be sought in Richards's own work.

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A great deal of scholarly work would have to be done to trace the connections between Richards's original conception of engaged 'close reading' and the contemporary situation, which I will not attempt here. But present attempts at conceptualising the professional formation of literary studies and its ability to produce knowledge have echoed Richards's originary metaphor, shifting the emphasis of his famous adjective from the close to the surface, the distant and even the 'close but not deep'. Sometimes grouped under the title of 'post-critique', the thinkers associated with these modalities of reading also articulate their frustrations with the sense that criticism is necessarily politically radical, though their target is not criticism as such but critique—the so-called symptomatic or paranoid modalities of reading that seek to explain the political and the aesthetic through causal factors that are not ready to hand. As Stephen Best and Sharon

Marcus put it in an introduction to a special issue of *Representations* devoted to 'Surface Reading', '[e]ight years of the Bush regime may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading' (Best and Marcus 2).

Rita Felski is perhaps the best-known theorist associated with this movement. Her more recent appropriation of Latour's later 'actor-network theory' ('ANT-ish', she writes) offers a modality of reading that aims to flatten the ontological sphere, rebuking any conceptual category that might segment social reality, such as class or race (Felski xii). In her de-hierarchised vision of the social, one whose anti-Marxist politics has drawn much commentary, it is relations not unconscious forces that are the prime mover; these are relations that can offer the immanence of reading descriptive consistency, explaining how amateur readers become attached to aesthetic objects in terms that are unmediated and not drawn from elsewhere.⁴ There is something eerily New Critical about Felski's faith in immediacy and transparency—'we cannot do justice to aesthetic attachments as long as we explain them in terms of something else', she writes—as if displacing the famous New Critical doctrine of immediacy, 'words on the page', onto the words as they appear unmediated before a reader (Felski xii). However, as much as Felski's post-critique theory aims to capture the activities of the lay reader, Guillory's insightful chapter dedicated to post-critique notes that such appeals to 'plain reading' risk forging an entirely imaginary image of the reader. 'The world of amateur readers conjured by the new tendency', he writes, 'remains for the literary professoriate a *projection* of our desire' (Guillory 94).

The word 'desire' is worth lingering on here, because like many of her post-critical contemporaries—Marcus and Best among them—Felski rejects psychoanalysis. For her, just as Marxism might aim to attribute aesthetic attachments to states of false class consciousness, so too does she see psychoanalysis as a discourse too heavily invested in the logic of critique, where aesthetic preferences are attributed to unconscious investments. In *Hooked* (2020), her most sustained account of post-critical attachment, Felski writes: '[t]he attachment theory of psychologists John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott might offer a more positive resource, yet here again the spectre of reductionism threatens: we cannot do justice to aesthetic attachments as long as we explain them in terms of something else' (Felski 19). But should we not psychoanalyse Felski's own rejection of psychoanalysis, querying the unconscious investments of her own desire? If the world of amateur readers conjured up by the post-critical critics is a 'projection', to use Guillory's phrase, then what fantasies and ideologies mediate that projection? In fashioning

⁴ See here the commentary of Robert Scott, who has explored the relationship between post-critique and class in an insightful and unprecedented fashion (Scott).

an account of aesthetic attachment that attempts to move beyond psychoanalysis, what therapeutic imaginary governs Felski's idea of the subjectivity of the reader?

Although Felski's critical practice rightly queries contemporary cultures of sensibility and their relationship to aesthetic media, her post-psychoanalytic criticism fashions an idea of a psychological subject in keeping with our current therapeutic imaginary, that of positive psychology and transparent mindfulness. Psychoanalytic models of causation—which generally rely on unconscious forces to explain conscious phenomena—are replaced by a vision of the subject as transparently attached to aesthetic media, by a subject who has identified with an aesthetic object because of 'their core commitments and their consciously held beliefs', as she puts it in *Hooked* (99). While Felski is of course aware of how political forces shape the logic of aesthetics preferences, this is explained not in terms of the direct political forces that might influence a subject but rather by the 'resonances' and 'alignments' people feel with the aesthetic objects they happen to come into contact with, just as positive psychology speaks of 'intentional activity', replacing earlier psychological theories that prioritise the social field. Although post-critique is exceptionally good at pointing out just how ubiquitous and specialised reading practices actually are, its theory of aesthetic attachment is only possible because of the psychological landscape in which we currently live, not simply because of Latour and actor-network theory. And to note Guillory's perspective here: what relation is there between Felski, our contemporary de-politicised therapeutic imaginary and the professional identity of literary criticism? Is it any coincidence that post-critique takes the lay reader as a key category for a renewed sense of professional formation at the very same time that the profession of English criticism is contracting? If it is harder than ever before to be a member of the profession, could we not attribute to Felski her own unconscious motivations when she suggests that professional formation should occur by way of a renewed focus on the anti-professional reader (or would that be critique...)? The point I'm making here is that the form of knowledge for literary studies offered by post-critique is only possible because of the political and epistemological conditions under which it has been produced, a kind of complicity with the status quo: a post-psychoanalytic and de-politicised therapeutic imaginary and the waning of the profession.

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My suggestion here is that the very category of knowledge itself is wholly inseparable from our contemporary political reality. Why else would it be (and I ask this question, as many others do, completely sincerely) that the people currently degrading the university also often have liberal arts degrees? If I might end with a suggestion, then, it is that we could reprise a conceptual category that has sometimes been positioned as knowledge's *other*. Throughout the history of

the professionalisation of literary studies, the concept of truth has been periodically invoked to designate what is concealed by knowledge itself; where what is obscured by the ideology of the passion for knowledge comes to the fore. In the 1920s and 1930s, Laura Riding (someone routinely cited for her role in the establishment of close reading) remonstrated against the surge of technical knowledges brought in to explain literary objects, admonishing what she saw as the creation of a new kind of literary bureaucrat synonymous with professionalisation of literary studies. Rebuking Richards and Empson in particular, Riding sought refuge in the category of truth, which she felt had been rendered invisible by techno-scientific modernity and the injunction to frame criticism as a form of knowledge. At another moment in professional formation—the so-called rise of ‘theory’—Jacques Lacan similarly positioned truth as that which ‘punches a hole in knowledge’, rendering strange the established meanings and co-ordinates that are taken for granted in the subject’s life. And in the contemporary sphere, philosopher Alain Badiou has relentlessly argued that the endless proliferation of knowledges actually constructs a universe that cannot tolerate truth, thought in this instance as novelty. In a universe where only knowledge is possible, everything that *is* is everything that ever can be.

Professing a history that would trace the fraught relations between truth and knowledge might occasion a different view of the activity of criticism: not one that separates knowledge from opinion but one that accounts for what, in criticism, insists beyond the knowledge produced by the professionalisation of the discipline. This is not at all to agree with Guillory that the future of the profession lies in its dispersal throughout other professions and it is of course to affirm that the so-called crisis of the humanities is not an epistemological problem but a political one, detailed brilliantly by Jessica Marian and Nick Robinson in their essay for this very issue (Marian and Robinson). But it is also to say that the image Finalyson draws of the contemporary academic, invoked towards the beginning of this essay, has as much to do with contemporary professional identity as it does with the production of knowledge itself—that the binding of these two things *is* literary studies. Recognising this could lead us to reprise concepts that hold knowledge, not to mention its inseparable relation to the ‘market for knowledge’, in suspicion. Nothing in the history we’ve happened to wake up in will last forever, not our methods of reading nor our canons nor especially the university. And yet, how many of us know the most burning thinkers who did not ‘win the lottery’, as the phrase has it, and who still think and still produce and still seem profoundly marked by something more than the knowledges of the world as it goes? I was reminded of this recently, lost walking with two such friends deep in conversation, demonstrating their subjection to a truth while expertly professing what they know, a long way away from the university.

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