

May 2023

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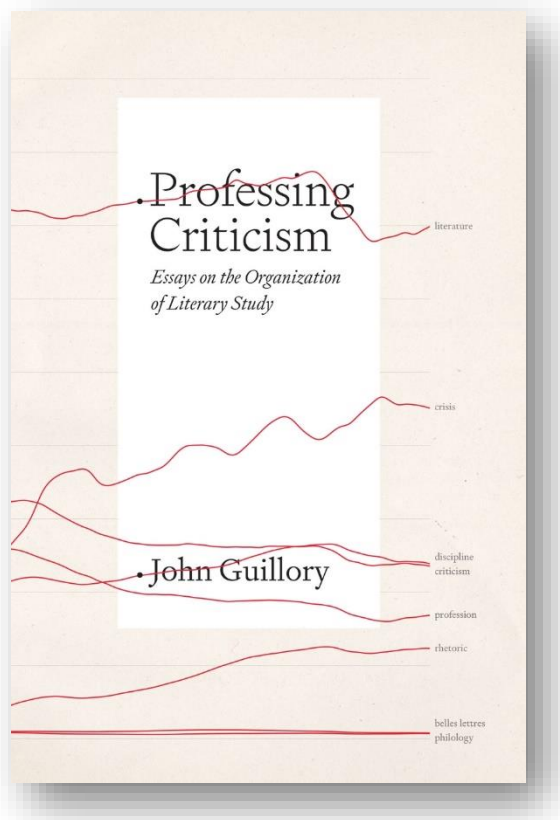
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Recommended Citation

Donovan, Thomas. "Stop Apologizing: A Review of John Guillory's Professing Criticism." *Critical Humanities* 1, 2 (2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33470/2836-3140.1026>

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Stop Apologizing: A Review of John Guillory's *Professing Criticism*



GUILLORY, JOHN. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. The University of Chicago Press, 2022. ISBN 9781032405353, 294 pages.

Guillory's text, *Professing Criticism*, enters the field of literary study with impressive organizational weight. Outlining the "sociology of literary study," his account progresses along the historical and thematic development of the study of English liter-

ture.¹ The main drift of the text charts the evolution of the institution of the "critic" prior to the institution of vernacular languages within collegiate departments, the rise and decline of disciplines like rhetoric, *belles lettres*, and philology, the relationship between the humanities, social sciences and hard sciences, and the plight and pessimistic position of graduate students in the humanities in the 21st century.

The text is organized into three "parts," each containing several "chapters," with some overarching thematic grouping. The first is "The Formation and Deformation of Literary Study," which includes Guillory's discussions of the profession, the emergence of the concept of profession, and the relationship of the profession to critique—all overlooked by the Nietzschean adage "craft makes crooked."² Significant here is the eponymous second chapter ("Professing Criticism,") which includes a discussion on Guillory's distinction between the terms "discipline" and "profession,"—a recurring theme of the text, as well as the nature of criticism. The nature of "criticism" is somewhat ambiguous for Guillory—it involves an indeterminate

¹ Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2022) vii-xvi

² Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* 3.

valence between the legacy of the Kantian ‘critique’ (*kritik*,) the criticism (or identification of problems) in broader society, and the identification of flaws and problems within particularly literary texts; a range from the problems of metaphysics to the techniques of a particular trade. In this section, Guillory asserts that “Criticism... became an academic profession before it became a discipline.”³ We can understand “profession” here as having specifically institutional and economic connotations, whereas discipline is concerned specifically with the methodology and subject matter—thus, the account shows that the literary critic was instituted within the academy before it was given conceptual or thematic clarity. This problem for Guillory can be phrased as such; we can easily identify a literary critic but are frequently unsure of the identity of literary criticism.

The second, “Organizing Literature: Foundations, Antecedents, Consequences” moves forward into the development of the university system, here exploring the various disciplines which have taken literature as their subject matter (such as classical studies, *belles lettres*, philology and rhetoric) with a view to the changing notions of literature, into a discussion of the problems literature faces in the present. Of particular interest to this particular publication might be the chapter “The Contradictions of Global English.” In this section, drawing on particular personal experiences at NYU as well as a wealth of contextualizing sources, Guillory moves against strains of contemporary literary study which he identifies with “decolonizing the curricu-

lum.”⁴ For him, this is problematic in several regards. Firstly, he identifies it with being politically inefficient— “falling off rapidly” outside of the domain of the humanistic disciplines and the discontent among non-academic activists with these practices.⁵ Secondly, as having a particularly problematic view of the ‘other,’ both internally and in relation to literature broadly. For Guillory, a study of literature that strives primarily to be accommodating through the provision of “relatable” material leads to a neglect of other material and harms the interest of interested students while doing nothing to increase the interest of the student involved in ‘general education’ (who he assumes to be unavoidably disinterested.)⁶ Further, it has a problematic relationship to anachronism—in his view, a genuine interaction with cultural material from the past is also a meaningful encounter with alterity.⁷ While acknowledging the importance of the capacity for students to “see themselves” in literature, he argues that instead of an immediate identification, we should promise students the notion of what is relatable “ultimately”⁸

Thirdly, “Professionalization and It’s Discontents” takes up contemporary problems in the academic study of literature as something which professionals do in a thematic way, exploring problems of graduate schooling, adjunct teaching, and those individuals with advanced degrees in liter-

³ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary* 52.

⁴ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary* 225

⁵ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary* 226, 228

⁶ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary* 229

⁷ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary* 230

⁸ *Ibid.*

ature outside of the boundaries of academic discourse.

One element that is particularly impressive in this process is the depth and breadth of the bibliography. Guillory, a scholar of English literature, consistently calls upon significant amounts of information from fields like classical studies and comparative literature, both historical and contemporary, as the boundaries of the text expand to necessitate a confrontation with them (for example, in the historical development of a tradition of Greek and Latin literatures taught in the vernacular.) Further, his grasp of materials concerning the history and sociology of the humanities borders on the encyclopedic— as something of a disciplinary outsider, he is still capable of participating in major debates in these fields. The same could be said of his familiarity with the internal and historical documentation of the Modern Language Association. One area of potential weakness in this, however, is a lack of serious attention to the philosophical or theoretical issues raised by this sociology of criticism— for example, writing off the influence of Derrida as stylistic and unnecessarily engaging in an attack on Heidegger.⁹ However, these concerns are mostly secondary to the development of the argument of the text. While not clarified explicitly, this broad historicizing of literature in academia sheds light on the mention in the subtitle “Literary Study” as opposed to literary studies. In shifting the syntax of the nomenclature, Guillory establishes that his concern is not an internal understanding of one discipline amongst others, but ra-

ther to reinforce the sociological significance—not just looking at ‘literary studies,’ he is concerned with the organization of ‘literary study:’ of all of the relations of the academic to literature.

The prose style is clear, articulate, and unexpectedly approachable. Because of his grasp of the material of his study in such depth, Guillory can present the developments and positions in historical debates on what literary scholars do in a way that is strikingly conversational. A danger that arises from this is the occasional lapse into the polemic or the epistemically superficial— but these are rare, and, again, concerns that are mostly secondary to the development of his argument.

His appeal to continue the inclusion of graduate-level alumni in departmental recognition and involvement comes as a welcome acknowledgment of the scarcity of the academic job market, and a validation of the concerns of aspiring humanists that they will lose access to their institutional home should the luck of the market not allow them a permanent placement there. Similarly, his account of the adjunct crisis in the American university is more pertinent than ever in the face of recent unionization struggles. Having established the historical precursor of the non-academic critic, we are called by Guillory to make real the possibilities of a non-faculty but educated reading public, wherein the works of literary scholars might find outlet outside of the very-nearly-closed circuit of intra-academic disputation and feedback.

The position that Guillory takes in relation to the future of the humanities is lucid and

⁹ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, 10

provocative. In the chapter “Monuments and Documents: On the Object of Study in the Humanities,” he makes the call for us, as humanists, to “stop apologizing and begin explaining,”¹⁰ to begin, as caretakers and experts on the arts of reading and understanding and the work of documents and monuments, to take ourselves seriously as producers of knowledge. Here, there appears to be something of a punk-rock revival of the position taken by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, now emphasized less on an existential phenomenology than an attempt at the preservation of our disciplines in the face of the existential danger of administrative annihilation. This, for him, requires something of a reigning-in of the assumption of the political efficacy of literary criticism—something we might consider the key position of the text.

As scholars of literature with particular attention to the struggles for liberation and recognition in the Global South, we are called by Guillory to participate in our work soberly and deliberately. Despite our aspirations, it is unlikely that a new reading of *Noli Me Tangere* or the novels of Faulkner is going to produce radical material changes in the world when isolated in circulation between conclaves of critics (we can hear whispers of Walter Benjamin in this.)¹¹ Instead, we should take with the utmost seriousness the problems of knowing and being that arise from our literary works, from the documents and monuments to which we attend our time— to not apologize for the reality of the scholarly

situation, but to instead come to a deeper understanding, and from there, be able to explain what it is that we do, and how we do it. In the course of the text, certain problems have arisen—including those of the relationship between knowledge and institution, of knowledge and power, and of the possibility of an “ultimate relatability” between readers (given notable weight in this wake of ‘post-humanism.’) These are problems that we as scholars, both in and adjacent to the structures of professionalized knowledge, are called to engage with, and equipped to handle fruitfully. In doing so, in coming to understand the realities of the “criticism” we practice as critics and practicing it both boldly and deeply, we can renew our efforts for liberation on steadier ground.

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Thomas Donovan is a student at Marshall University, where he has studied English and Philosophy. Donovan's research interests lie in the problems of modernity, technology, and colonialism specifically as they appear in 20th century literature and philosophy. Significant signatures in his thought are Joyce, Pynchon, Heidegger, and Derrida. He is a native of Hurricane, WV.

¹⁰ John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* 124

¹¹ Guillory, *Professing Criticism, Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. 79-105,