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Taking its cue from Jonathan Kramnick's *Criticism and Truth*, 'Theory on Theory' this year examines some of the core practices that mark literary criticism and theory. In Section 1, Kramnick's work, which focuses on criticism as a distinct writing practice, is reviewed, along with a brief consideration of teaching in the form of Fredric Jameson's *Mimesis, Expression, Construction*. Section 2 takes Eric L. Santner's *Untying Things Together* as a representative example of various writing practices characteristic of Theory, and considers (following Kramnick) how these practices may affect the sorts of content or truth that theory can claim. In Section 3, Caroline Levine's *The Activist Humanist* provides the occasion for considering another characteristic practice, namely the method of homology, and its use in facilitating the sorts of claims that are commonly made for the utility of literary studies. Finally, in Section 4, Christopher Rovee's *New Critical Nostalgia* and Robert T. Tally's *The Critical Situation* highlight the connection between our understanding of methods or practices and the wider situation of a discipline that often draws on senses of crisis and (implicit) nostalgia for its self-understanding.

1. Writing, Truth, and the Practice of Literary Studies

Though it has not caused quite as much of a stir as John Guillory's recent *Professing Criticism*, Jonathan Kramnick's *Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies* has been received with considerable interest by the more self-obsessed branch of the academy (if that is not a redundancy), particularly in the United States. Almost immediately upon its release, it was the subject of a 'scholarly roundtable' in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jackson, 'Does Literary Criticism Tell Truths About the World?'). That may not be entirely surprising for a book about academe by an academic for an audience of academics. But it cannot be every piece of academic self-scrutiny that, like Kramnick's, makes its way into the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Like a lot of works pitched as defences and justifications of the discipline, *Criticism and Truth* hankers for a connection between literary scholarship and something bigger or more important. Not content with simply telling us about books, Kramnick wonders ‘whether criticism is capable in some fashion of telling truths about the world itself, not just the small piece of it called literature’ (p. 15). Why this might be so, why it should be, or why we would want it to be, are matters not addressed. The question of whether literary scholars possess the appropriate training and qualifications for pronouncing such truths is not considered. Nor is the possibility that elevating ourselves from being good readers of fiction and poetry to custodians of world-truths might be a piece of presumptuous bombast. One never knows how much this sort of thing pervades other disciplines, but it would be surprising if, say, chemists expected themselves to tell truths not just about chemistry but about ‘the world’. One certainly receives the general impression that even philosophers are content to limit themselves to telling truths about the small piece of the world called philosophy and not, say, chemistry as well. A view held in some circles is that the very idea of a scholarly ‘discipline’ takes its colour from the fullest meaning of that word, which includes maintaining a proper sense of proportion and exercising a due measure of restraint that comes from an awareness of limits.

Kramnick does not tarry with such limits:

topics and questions in literary studies have no restrictions at all. They seem rather to take on the concerns of the world in vividly shifting order: climate change; surveillance and policing; state formation; race before race; categories of aesthetic experience; law and personhood; Blackness and ontology; the public meaning of poetic genres; sound, image, and writing; animals and animality; empire, economies, and oceans; and happily onward beyond what is presently imaginable. With respect to subject matter, eclecticism and heterogeneity have long been the order of the day. (p. 28)

As a description of the field, that seems true. But it also begs the question of how we might distinguish legitimate topic-driven or interdisciplinary literary research from superficial dilettantism. Here, in a habit that marks the book, Kramnick seems untroubled by doubt, and will give the situation its most flattering spin: ‘The very proliferation of enquiry [...] testifies to the rigor of method, as a core manner of asking and answering questions creates knowledge about everything literature itself addresses. It is because our inquiry has sure footing that it may range widely. Method is the steady ground for a worldliness that has no limits at all’ (p. 29). Learned worldliness

crowds out any suspicions of incoherence or uninformed eclecticism. But this reviewer cannot be the only person who has noticed that literary scholars are not immune from—in fact, at times they seem peculiarly liable to—errring spectacularly about the world even when they have an unerring grasp of text.

What, then, is the methodological ‘sure footing’ that gives us a purchase on everything? For an appetite whetted on the idea that close-reading a poem tells us something about the world, the main course here is remarkably—conspicuously and deliberately—humble fare. Like another reflection-upon-cum-defence of the discipline reviewed in these pages two years ago (Rachel Buurma and Laura Heffernan’s *The Teaching Archive* [2021]), Kramnick represents something of a turn to modesty in literary studies. He eschews the exceptional for the everyday. And, like Buurma and Heffernan, he stakes his claim on the basis of what literary critics actually *do*—moving from ideas about our practice to what he sees as the practice itself.

Unlike *The Teaching Archive*, however, the everyday practice that Kramnick seizes upon is not teaching but actual criticism. Criticism rests ultimately on (close) reading, and because our readings do not exist as the stuff of a scholarly discipline unless they are communicated—written and published—the fundamental practice of criticism is writing. The ‘truth’ of Kramnick’s title is thus a truth that is manifested, not simply conveyed, in the distinctive writing practices of literary criticism. The core ideas of *Criticism and Truth* emerge from the discussion of ‘bedrock procedures’ (p. 46) like quotation and summary that are strikingly ordinary: ‘There is knowledge that is manifest in the act of placing words just so’ (p. 39). It is a knowledge said to be ‘steeped in norms of perspicuity, elegance, and evidence’ (p. 36) and registered with adjectives like ‘apt’, ‘dexterous’, and ‘adroit’ (p. 91). To provide something as ordinary as an in-sentence quotation is, for Kramnick, to ‘accommodate an indissoluble grammatical epoxy; it is to adjust one’s expression to the constraints of mood, number, person, and tense that belong to words grouped in an order’. When critics quote, ‘they fold language they are writing about into language that is theirs’; they accommodate the ‘formal economy’ of two different types of language; they manifest an ‘ability to sustain person, tense, and other features of syntax across two orders of writing’ (p. 36).

At times *Criticism and Truth* becomes, quite literally, a paean to our everyday practices at the ‘microscale’: ‘Let us then praise the artfulness of remaining close, of quotation and imitation and summary’ (p. 82). ‘Note the performance’, he writes after one example. It is ‘dramatic and deft’. A critic ‘spins her words across and over three lines from Cowper, whose grammar

acts as a binding warp for the whole' (p. 37). Perhaps this praise is the sort of confidence boost that our ever-ailing discipline needs. Perhaps, too, it is not entirely churlish to cavil with routine quotation—which, after all, is also common in various other disciplines, some of which also use it for generating close readings—being elevated into an act of 'intuitive virtuosity' (p. 37). Kramnick even manages to turn the universally lamented habit (apparently quite unique to literature scholars) of reading out a conference paper verbatim into a virtue and a cause for self-congratulation (p. 62).

On a related note, which regrettably can be but a brief excursus in this review, Kramnick describes the 'journey from classroom discussion to published criticism' as something miraculous and, in words that will come into their own in a moment, something 'to be valued immensely' (p. 21). 'But even then', he continues,

an important series of changes occurs. Halting and interrupted expressions of excitement fall away or remain standing; digressions smooth into lines; and, most importantly, words once spoken in a student's or instructor's voice wrap themselves around and fasten themselves to words in a stranger's idiom. All of that [. . .] creates something new. (pp. 21–22)

Uncannily, *Mimesis, Expression, Construction: Fredric Jameson's Seminar on Aesthetic Theory* (edited by Octavian Esanu) arrives just in time to declare: not always. This is a work that strives hard—often too hard—to avoid all those polishings that intervene between the classroom and the published work. It is full—too full—of the haltings, excitements, and digressions that characterize the spoken word. And not just those things: the coughs, footsteps, zippers, door slams, rappings of knuckles on desks, dragging of chairs, creaking of chairs, sneezes, sighs, page flipping, page tearing, exhalations, throat clearings, spelling out loud, mumblings, whisperings, distant sirens, administrative announcements, and everything else that might be momentarily audible in a classroom is included here too. The book—weighing in at 750 pages—is a transcription of Fredric Jameson's seminar on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* at Duke University in 2003:

What could an aesthetic be without being a work anymore . . . ?
[Footsteps. Door creaks open.] Anyway . . .

[Long pause.]

Okay, I think that will be enough for today . . . [Door slams shut.] and so our next time, we will talk about film, and then we will finish with

this book. And I want to see those who plan to graduate in my office ... [*Chairs scratching against the floor. Footsteps.*]

Audience stands up. Objects drop on the floor. Door squeaks.

Students return chairs to other classrooms. Zippers zipping up.

Some students form a line to discuss their assignments with

Jameson. General noise. Screeching microphone noise.

[*Microphone turns off.*]

CURTAIN

As Kramnick might say: note the performance, though it is very different from the one that interests him. And it seems to come to us unmediated by any self-consciousness on the part of the performers, for the recordings were apparently made in flagrant disregard of both elements of informed consent (on the part of Jameson himself and of everyone else in the classroom, whose questions, presentations, and interjections are also transcribed). The great man has magnanimously given *his* permission, at least, to republish his words here, and the result is a rare and valuable glimpse into the classroom of a world-renowned thinker (who, perhaps surprisingly for such a prolific and rarefied theorist, places considerable importance on his more workaday labours as an educator: see, for example, 'Teaching and Marxism' [1978] and *Jameson on Jameson* [2007]). It is of course fascinating to see the workings of one great mind as it grapples with the work of another, but the book is also replete with a rich fund of anecdotes, illustrative examples, excursions, and gossip, from which almost as much is to be learned as from the central work of exegesis.

But we must return to *Criticism and Truth*. It is an elegant if slight monograph that shows the signs of its origins in an article for *Critical Inquiry*. It is clear, thoughtful, and, in some ways, refreshingly modest, as it must be to contain an introduction, five chapters, and a coda within its 108 pages. It eschews many of the hyperbolic claims about our discipline that are as embarrassing as they are familiar: that literary studies will solve global heating, will bring social harmony, will make us kinder to the other. *Criticism and Truth* is an attempt to defend literary studies in terms that do not crudely reduce it to doing something else at one remove.

But it is not impossible that *Criticism and Truth* is also symptomatic of the schizoid professional situation to which it speaks. Here Kramnick's coda on the 'Public Humanities' is instructive. One such forum, the *Los Angeles Review*

of *Books*, recently featured a scholar who last year (reviewed in these pages) argued that literary criticism needs to be more ‘affirmative, serviceable, constructive’ and to embrace a mood of ‘generosity’ (Anker, *On Paradox*, pp. 268, 307). This year, reviewing *Criticism and Truth*, she accuses Kramnick of a ‘reactionary posture’ and ‘colonialist fantasies’, even as she bemoans our profession’s ‘[r]ampant infighting’ (Anker, ‘A Reactionary Turn’). Similarly, the same disciplinary leaders who once defended difficulty and sneered at a distinguished scholar for writing ‘introductory primers’ (Butler, ‘Exacting Solidarities’) have, with a turn of time’s wheel, themselves come to be issuing mass-market popularizations (Mackay) and, from the comfortable perch of a named chair, writing columns with titles like ‘The Future of the Humanities Can Be Found in Its Public Forms’ (Butler). Kramnick pushes back against some of the ‘Public Humanities’ cheerleading, as he pushes back in the name of ‘truth’ against defences of criticism that would prefer to expound fanciful ideas of its utility. But, within our discipline, the insularity of churning out examinations of itself for an audience of itself coexists with an endless reaching for relevance to everyone else by claiming to be popular, useful, and public-facing. Within *Criticism and Truth*, a similar tension plays out. The modesty of everyday micropractice seems to be ‘folded’ and ‘accommodated’ with the audacity of world-truths.

It is sound and uncontroversial for criticism to profess the skill—for whatever it is worth—of bringing together quoted literature and the critic’s own language. But this criterion does not demarcate anything distinctive to literary studies. Close reading and the careful use and interpretation of quoted language are also the bedrock micropractices of historians and lawyers, for example. It is also uncontroversial to observe that literary studies is at liberty to fix upon some other object of knowledge that it brings to bear on its criticism—someone interested in the temporalities of modernism will need to know something about time; a feminist reading of some text will need to know something of gender and politics; an ecocritic will, we hope, have some correct grounding in the ecology that informs their work. In this obvious sense, literary critics can and do reach beyond knowing only about literature to know something about the wider world. But that is not because they are literary critics. It is because they draw upon the work of other scholars working in other disciplines. And of course this is not unique to the enterprise of literary criticism. The economic historian has to know something of economics as well as history; the commercial lawyer knows all about business practices, not just law. In each respect they reach beyond their primary domain in order to bring it together with some other topic of concern. An engineer working on aircrafts will not only know about

engineering or about planes; she will also know a good deal of metallurgy, meteorology, physics, and so on. And to turn the point the other way: there are many examples of very fine literary criticism that make little if any attempt to be interdisciplinary in this sense, and which seem content to know about literature. Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, or Erich Auerbach have taught us many important truths about literature, and far fewer (if any) about the world.

If I was unsure that *Criticism and Truth* left me with any clear grasp of the domain of criticism, I was also left in doubt about its category of truth. Kramnick argues that literary scholars cannot engage with the rest of the world—cannot provide the ground for ‘ongoing conversations and collaboration among disciplines’ (p. 98)—unless we recognize that ‘we tell the truth’ (p. 98). But it seems that his benchmark for knowing such truths about the world would be that ‘a “reading” of a poem on, for example, the topic of harvesting apples might be of interest for a scholar working on sustainable agriculture’ (p. 98). I cannot be the only one who trembles for the fate of food security in our time if it depends upon farmers reading poems about agriculture or, *a fortiori*, reading the latest monograph from Anytown University Press on the poetry of fruit-harvesting.

2. Writing, Truth, and the Practice of Theory

Kramnick’s focus on the basic practices of the discipline provides the theme for the rest of this year’s review. The terms in which he assesses the ‘performance’ of literary scholarship are suggestive. He writes of ‘deftness’, ‘artfulness’, ‘weaving’, and ‘elegance’. Most of all, he emphasizes the almost unnoticed labour of ‘accommodation’ to bring two registers of writing into some compound unity. That may be what goes on in literary criticism, but what is arguably more striking is how well these terms capture the performance of another sort of writing. There is undoubtedly an adjacent discourse in which the deft and artful stitching together of quotation and other techniques for ‘fold[ing] language they are writing about into language that is theirs’ (p. 36) becomes a sort of virtuoso bricolage. And this bricolage, in turn, has become enshrined as a form of skilled handiwork and a form of knowledge that has been asserted to arise from a particular linguistic-stylistic practice (a ‘knowledge that is manifest in the act of placing words just so’, as Kramnick would put it: p. 39). This practice is nothing other than theory itself. The creativity or knowledge generation that he proposes (making something new in the act of interpreting it), the equilibration that takes place through rewording and quoting, the evolution or elision from

knowledge-bearing to knowledge-producing: these were the hallmarks of a particular—probably dominant, at least for a time—mode of theory, and continue to be a noticeable legacy in its practice today.

Eric L. Santner's *Untying Things Together: Philosophy, Literature, and a Life in Theory* is as good an example as any of this practice. Like Kramnick's, Santner's work has been spurred by the question of identifying or explaining a 'method', in this case his own rather than the entire discipline's. Indeed, the opening anecdote serves as a microcosm of the theory salad that was a fixture of the menu for decades. After a lecture, Santner recalls, he was asked how he would characterize his method:

The question had a critical edge and seemed in part to be asking how I identified myself in the context of university disciplines, in part to be asking about what struck the questioner as an odd way of working with concepts, my tendency to 'distort' them by incorporating them (or parts of them), often through a play on words, into neologisms, each of which thereby takes on the aspect of a disjunctive *Aufhebung*, one that displays the relative autonomy of its parts. (p. vii)

Among other things, that sentence performs the enthusiastically synthetic disposition of which it speaks. We readily enough detect Freud's *Entstellung* in that reference to distortion. We are reminded of Lacan, Derrida, and various others in the tendency to pun and neologize one's way through a thought. There is the nod to Hegelian dialectics in *Aufhebung*, though with the obligatory insurance against totalization. All rounded off with the Marxist phrase 'relative autonomy'. This is not just a useful and accurate foretaste of what the book contains. It is a formula that could make Santner a veritable synecdoche for a version of the age of high theory, and of the method that it has bequeathed us: 'bring[ing] together literary texts, works of art, philosophical arguments, psychoanalytic concepts in a way that registers their limits, their need for supplementation and support by a "neighbor discourse" without thereby losing their distinctiveness' (p. vii). That discourse, we can say, is theory, and Santner seems to say as much (p. viii).

As the title suggests, as the anecdote reinforces, and as the profusion of 'I's in this book makes clear, *Untying Things Together* has something of a memoiristic quality that can be seen as a personal stocktake of the age and the legacy of high theory. It can also, very usefully, serve as a point of shorthand reference for the very condition that, *mutatis mutandis*, Kramnick was addressing in *Criticism and Truth*: what is the method of (in this case) theory, and what (if any) sort of truth arises from it? This, in turn, raises the essential problem that has contributed to the putative crisis of

humanities (especially literary studies and the enterprise of theory more generally), namely the observation of (or failure to observe) canons of rigour and coherence, or even to advert to the need for such. Santner writes of his foundational anecdote: 'I recall that I was somewhat flustered by the question for I had never really given a lot of thought to methodology and have always felt a deep resistance to doing so' (p. ix). The victory of feeling over thought is noticeable and explicit there. Perhaps, in other hands, this book might have been a sort of modest pendant to *The Education of Henry Adams*—a retrospect of lessons learned and mistakes made over the period of Theory's orthodoxy, from the standpoint of its eclipse. As Santner himself writes, his

retrospective, autobiographical aspect would seem to give these reflections a certain 'owl of Minerva' quality; that is, it becomes possible only at the point at which the concepts and practices at issue have begun to lose their salience [...] This book might thereby be seen to be part of a larger current in contemporary literary studies that has come to be characterized as 'postcritical'. (p. xi)

But the age of theory is still awaiting its Henry Adams.

Santner steers well clear of the postcritical in its usual sense, though he does elaborate a number of other senses with which this book aligns. Arguably the most pregnant of them, because it is the one at which style and substance overlap, or where, in Kramnick's terms, we might see the practice of a particular form of theory-writing amounting at one and the same time to a type of knowledge (or at least a way of asserting knowledge), is the one that Santner articulates as 'what might strike some as a soft pluralism, a willingness to patch, to (*un*)tie together concepts that would seem to belong to antithetical theoretical paradigms' (p. xiv; emphasis in original). Perhaps post-theory would be a better label than post-critique for what Santner is doing here. The method is unmistakably bequeathed by Theory. It is a method that, very much working with the technique of paraphrase (sometimes verging on mere assertion) rather than quotation, can begin a paragraph with Weber's Protestant ethic and, by eventually rewording it as a quest for 'ever more "surplus glory" for God', end by paralleling it with Marxian surplus value (p. 138). The latter, in one of the verbal formulae that perform an endless sleight of hand, 'nicely maps on to Weber's account' (p. 138). All of this is achieved without a single citation from either Weber or Marx.

The question in Santner's foundational scene is never answered, but the scene is repeatedly evoked throughout the book in his performance of the method that gave rise to it. That method is surely what Kramnick would call

one of the bedrock micropractices of theory. The adaptability and proliferation of which this method is capable can be seen if we continue to follow the frenetic course of this one example. Having thrown Marx and Weber, surplus value and Protestantism, together as ‘much the same’ (p. 139), the next sentence equates both of them with Lacan because ‘business—or better: busyness’—brings a form of jouissance. But Lacan brings us to Kafka, because the jouissance arises from a sort of asceticism, in a manner ‘not unrelated to that of the anorexic, the hunger artist par excellence’ (p. 139). This means we can get in a quote from Nietzsche about asceticism’s ‘orgies of feeling’. As Kramnick might say: note the performance, a welter of this-equals-that-equals-something-else strung together paratactically. Ascetism gets us to the Cynics, which in turn gets us to that noted exegete of third- and fourth-century BCE Greek philosophy, Michel Foucault (who once made a passing reference to Cynics and asceticism). These slivers from various Big Names, all of them ripped from their contexts and decoupled from the theoretical underpinnings (if there were any) that are necessary to understanding their ideas, are arranged in a dance of vague parallelisms that result in an endlessly tossed concept salad.

Nietzsche once thundered ‘Against mediators’: ‘Those who want to mediate between two resolute thinkers show that they are mediocre; they lack eyes for seeing what is unique. Seeing things as similar and making things the same is the sign of weak eyes’ (*The Gay Science*, p. 212). It may be that weak eyes conduce to weak or at least vexing ideas. For vexation is one legitimate response to arguments that are constructed of nothing more rigorous or definite than a series of loose homological assertions: Marx ‘nicely maps’ onto Weber; Weber’s idea is ‘much the same’ as Marx’s; Lacan is ‘not unrelated’ to Kafka; Foucault ‘exactly parallels’ Schreber (p. 40); Lacan and Heidegger share a ‘similar oscillation’ (pp. 176–77); things are in some sense the same ‘[f]or both Freud and Agamben’ (p. 44); something in de Man is ‘much like’ the work of psychoanalysis (p. 28); Pippin ‘echo[es]’ Lévi-Strauss and, in another respect, Žižek (p. 173); Foucault ‘echoes’ and ‘recalls’ Shakespeare (p. 133); Freud ‘calls us back’ to Shakespeare, who are both then reworded ‘[i]n Zupančič’s terms’ (p. 163); Carl Schmitt is put into ‘psychoanalytic terms’ because ‘[t]he sovereign [is] like the superego’ (p. 220); Lévi-Strauss raises a problem, and the etymology of problem ‘calls to mind Heidegger’s notion of *Entwurf*’ (p. 230). Sometimes the work of mediation is done by mere relabelling. Paul de Man is triangulated with Benjamin and Lacan by calling his allegories of reading ‘*Trauerspiele* of the signifier’ (p. 28). Lacan, as we have

seen, can be bolted on to Weber by calling the payoff of worldly asceticism a form of 'jouissance'.

With theory as this sort of rearranging of the conceptual deckchairs, the actual claims being made become diluted, in a familiar pattern, from arguments to wants and likes: 'I want to suggest' (pp. 112, 186); 'I want to work my way back to the question of' (p. 118); 'I want to argue' (pp. xii, 189); 'I want to share' (p. 1); 'I want to underline' (p. 8); 'I'd like to turn briefly to' (p. 180); 'I would like to call' (p. 180); 'At this juncture, I'd like to return to' (p. 200); 'I'd simply like to sketch out' (p. 6); 'I'd like to underline' (p. 92); 'I'd like to note in passing' (p. 96); 'I'd like to recall' (p. 98); 'I'd like to conclude' (pp. 134, 164); 'I'd like to share some thoughts' (p. 138). In the spirit of such trends as 'mesearch' (or 'autoethnography') and 'autotheory', the ubiquity of 'I' here is transformed into the object of everyone else's interest: 'one's thoughts and feelings are never entirely one's own and [...] at a certain point what is most deeply personal turns out to be no longer simply personal; the intimate turns out to be always at some level "out there", or to use a Lacanian formulation, to be *extimate*' (p. 13; emphasis in original).

When thought is reduced to nothing more rigorous than the restless assertion of vague parallels, when ideas have nothing more forceful to suggest them than the frenetic urge to pun, whole books can be strung together on nothing more solid than the undigested personal reflexes that begin this one: 'I've wanted', 'My intuition', 'My hunch', 'My guiding thought', 'One thinks [...] of', 'struck me' (pp. 1–2). Wordplay and neologisms do the work of thinking and, where they are of no avail, different ideas are strung together by personal whims and anecdotes. Wishes, intuitions, and unmotivated assertions ('one is reminded of') serve as substitutes for scholarly labour. One of Santner's main coinages, 'encystance', which appears sixty-one times in the book, is never explained. So we are left to wonder what sort of connection exists between the act of insisting and the biological phenomenon of an abnormal sac or cavity containing pus or some other fluid. Italics and scare quotes also proliferate: nine instances of the former and sixteen of the latter across pages 3–4, for example. Twenty-four words or phrases are italicized across another two pages (pp. 229–30). The noncommittal play reaches a meta-pitch when the confession of 'recycl[ing] certain materials' is itself put in scare quotes and punned into shape (in italics, thus completing the trifecta) by being called a '*manu-fracture* [...]' with the goal of creating a new kind of assemblage' (p. 13; emphasis in original). An example of such an assemblage is the following sentence:

It involves the patient and precarious process of working through the ways in which the possibility of new possibilities for individual and collective life have [sic] always already been captured, ‘undeadened’ by demands for work issuing not from the vital sphere as such in the form of homeostatic imperatives aimed at sustaining an optimum level of somatic flourishing—the domain of the pleasure and reality principles—but rather from an enigmatic agency embedded in the forms of life that give human life its intelligibility and meaning. (p. 44)

People who can understand that sentence may enjoy this book, though I would also not bet against this being a case in which the relationship between a reader’s conceptual grasp and their enjoyment of the text is an inverse one.

3. The Uses of Literary Scholarship

The passage from arguments, or even ideas, to assemblages is not neutral. It emerges from and is supported by the distinctive methodology that is so effectively demonstrated by Santner—embedded as it is in such bedrock micropractices as italicizing and scare-quoting, punning and neologizing, and stringing together names (not always supported by citations) through loose equilibrations and analogies. It is only such a methodology that can facilitate the sort of ‘enigmatic agency’ that haunts a lot of theoretical and critical work. The most common manifestation of the enigma is homology. Having been trained by countless works, the antennae of many of *Criticism and Truth*’s readers will have been violently twitching at Kramnick’s talk of ‘the artfulness of remaining close’ (p. 82) and the way a critic ‘binds her words to [the text’s] words’ and ‘composes something new within the constraints of what it is given’ (p. 71). The signs seem unmistakable that we are building towards the usual ethical rabbit being pulled out of the hat with a homological sleight of hand. Two registers of writing being brought together (folded, accommodated, adjusted, kept close), each retaining its local autonomy but being formed into a new whole. Surely this is where academic literary criticism pats itself on the back for packing a miraculous political punch by modelling pluralism, openness, democracy, and ideal self–other relations? As Kramnick puts it: ‘From the formal to the cognitive to the political and ethical. This is a familiar and well-founded journey’ (p. 47). But it is a journey that he studiously avoids.

The opposite tendency is represented by Caroline Levine’s *The Activist Humanist*. Though it is subtitled *Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*, there is

nothing here specific to climate or environmentalism more generally. Rather, the climate crisis is really the occasion to rehearse a method—the journey from form to cognition to ethical politics described by Kramnick—that has become familiar to the point of ubiquity.

Like Anker's *On Paradox*, reviewed in these pages last year, Levine takes issue with the array of 'humility, open-endedness, undecidability, and complexity' that she sees as an unhelpful tendency in literary studies (p. ix). Like Anker, she sees this tendency as complicit with a politics of 'collective inaction'—instead of 'sketching out plans of action' it is 'feeding the logic of climate denialism and neoliberal atomization' (p. 10). Behind this problem lies a common bogeyman: 'there is one key value at work across schools of thought. It shapes and subtends all of the fields that I call the *aesthetic humanities*. [...] It is so pervasive across our fields that it does not even need to be justified' (p. 1; emphasis in original). This idea is anti-instrumentality, and only after taking it down will we be capable of 'moving beyond it' to nothing less than 'the practical work of designing, building, and maintaining collective life' (p. 1). This practical work is the particular domain of those who are trained in the analysis of literature. For Kramnick, close reading gives us some handle on truths about the world. For Levine, close reading seems to make us literal world saviours. Being a discipline in a state of crisis is not inconsistent with the grossest inflations of its practitioners' self-importance.

Levine sees a common error infecting disparate approaches: 'From Marxist critique to Black and queer studies, and from deep ecology to aesthetic autonomy, the common logic of anti-instrumentality subtends otherwise conflicting schools of thought' (p. 3). In Chapter 2, close reading and historicism are roped in for additional stick as the allies and collaborators of anti-instrumentality because they train us 'to resist prediction and expectation, surpris[e] us out of conventional wisdom and beckon[] us to an unknown beyond' (p. 22). Close reading and historicism are tied up with the rest of Levine's motley assortment of targets—anti-instrumentality being associated with 'forms' like the pause, the rupture, the dissolve—in advancing an agenda of 'freedom from norms and constraints' (p. 7). Donald Trump unwound environmental regulations; Jair Bolsonaro defunded environmental regulatory agencies; Narendra Modi has deregulated crude oil sales. Thus 'the drive to resist norms' (p. 7) is bad. Or, in the form of a syllogism: close reading and historicism are methods for 'opening up to strangeness' (p. 23); Trump is a form of strangeness; therefore close reading and historicism are 'not the best framework for social and environmental justice now' (p. 23).

Thus *The Activist Humanist* skips its way from the formal to the cognitive to the ethico-political by using the magic of homology. Levine's work, in fact, represents an acme of the homological tendency because her idea of form, in at least one of its uses, is a codification of the practice of creating abstract and vague categories that then, unsurprisingly, turn out to have parallels everywhere. The paperback is a form, as is live theatre (p. 34). A cave or any other sheltering space is a form (p. 30). A coral reef is a form (p. 30). Food security is a form, as is public transport (p. 35). The cycle of the seasons is a form (p. 30). 'Containers' are forms (p. 25), and containers include ideas of 'formal closure' and 'self-protective containments of race and geography' (p. 25). This leads to claims like: 'borders and walls are among the most oppressive historical forms' (p. 70). That is a rather interesting way of framing the defence of Leiden (1573–74), the Paris barricades (1871), or Ukraine (2022–).

But borders are also surely forms of 'enclosure', which Levine praises in Chapter 3. The 'dissolve', on the other hand, one of the forms that Levine criticizes, stands for, inter alia, 'boundary crossing' and 'flow' (p. 1), while the 'hinge', one of her good forms, is a 'double connector' that 'joins inside to outside' or 'links two distinct things or spaces' (p. 134). Flowing or crossing boundaries is bad; connecting, joining, or linking is good. Likewise the 'turning point' is good, 'the rupture' is bad. These sound very much like the same thing being worded and reworded in different ways. Forms, in other words, like vague homologies, can be made to say anything. In fact, Levine's forms simply *are* vague homologies.

This method leads to such assertions as: 'a formalist scholar can analyze the shapes and patterns of a *Bildungsroman* or a school system. And that means that aesthetic critics have methodological tools that are portable beyond the aesthetic' (p. 24). Percy Bysshe Shelley's unacknowledged legislators—accredited experts in *Bildungsromanen*, self-appointed ones in school systems—now roam the slowly depopulating corridors of humanities departments. Presumably these monstrous arrogations also work in reverse. Given that forms are everywhere, and everyone is an expert in some of them—football, carpet, junk food, public transport—there seems to be no need or justification for experts in literature. The football fan, carpet aficionado, junk food eater, and public transport user can use their 'portable' familiarity with their own familiar forms to pontificate about literature and its forms. So can the physicist, accountant, and advertiser.

Levine is not wrong to say that 'a movement back and forth between aesthetic and political forms is already one of the most ordinary practices in the aesthetic humanities' (p. 24). But the fact that this homological method

has become ‘routine’ (p. 24) raises questions about the status of aesthetics and politics among those who practise it. *The Activist Humanist* is not seriously interested in either, for both are dissolved in the conceptual soup of ‘form’. Politics in this book is used as a source of examples (it would be going too far to call them case studies), and the seriousness with which those examples are taken is suggested by the fact that they rarely last for more than a paragraph. The ‘top-down imposition of particular values’ is disavowed (p. 15), as is the idea of the culture industry as a ‘top-down purveyor of oppressive ideology’ (p. 20). But a ‘top-down’ Brazilian mayor (appointed to his job by a military dictatorship) who ‘believe[d] in imposing change fast, rather than engaging in long and inclusive processes of deliberation’ (p. 81) is lauded as an example of good action when he pedestrianizes a commercial street over a weekend.

Bolted on to the end of this book by a noted literary scholar is a checklist of self-help nostrums and to-dos. In Week 1, Day 2, we are to ask ourselves: ‘What do you see as your weaknesses when working with others?’ (p. 151). By Week 2, Day 4, we have graduated to:

What routines could you practice to keep up your energy when things look bleak?

- repeating a slogan or mantra
- reminding yourself of past successes
- checking in with a supportive friend or ally
- imagining the joy of victory
- focusing on what you learn in every struggle
- making time for rest
- listening to words or songs that energize you
- other (please describe) (pp. 155–56)

Readers will struggle at times to find something in *The Activist Humanist* that is not a rehearsal of commonplaces. Levine’s case for the form of the ‘hinge’ rests upon the fact that a hinge links things—as if activists have been labouring in ignorance of the need to make connections and alliances between different groups. Or as if analysts of culture have been unaware that the popular plot that is familiar in narratives of the ‘struggling team’ (p. 143) (the Hollywood staple formula epitomized by *Cool Runnings* and *The Mighty Ducks*) has some nice messages—though surely what is called for here is a more serious balancing of those with the degraded ideology that they also disseminate. It is not enough simply to accept, as Levine must, that ‘happy endings often restore dominant norms’ and, accordingly, that teleological narratives can be ‘critiqued as an engine of ideological conformity’ (p. 144),

and yet, on the other hand, to declare airily that even Hollywood tripe can have ‘affirmative affordances for political action’ (p. 144). Surely the scholarly task is to go beyond simply giving some alternative facts and to sift through the differing accounts of a cultural form to reach some coherent argument that is more sophisticated than ‘They say it’s bad, but I say it can also be good?’ That labour is eschewed here. So too are the labours of generations of theorists who have interrogated and theorized the connections between politics and culture in ways far more sophisticated than the homologies from form to ethics that are traced here. Their erasure from *The Activist Humanist* is nowhere made more clear than when Levine ventures as her ‘hypothesis’ the idea that ‘material forms can in fact shape and engender some worldviews and practices of sociability while foreclosing others’ (p. 28). This can be called a hypothesis because the word materialism does not appear once in the book.

The Activist Humanist is an archetypal expression of some of the assumptions in our field that are as mistaken as they are dominant. The idea that ‘the most powerful obstacles to meaningful change lie in culture, politics, and economics’ (p. ix)—on one hand perhaps a truism, on another perhaps an initial misstep in its understanding of the relationship of culture to the other two—all too often carries the presumptuous corollary that a book by a literature academic is a contribution to ‘designing, building, and maintaining the mundane forms that sustain collective life over time’ (p. xv).

4. Nostalgia, Crisis, and Method

Levine would be pleased to see in Christopher Rovee another scholar who seems to have no aversion to ‘instrumental’ thinking, for the final sentence of his *New Critical Nostalgia: Romantic Lyric and the Crisis of Academic Life* suggests something like the uses of nostalgia: ‘it is worth remembering that nostalgia can express attachments to the past that go beyond mere dream-chasing or “heart’s-desire” thinking—that its longings might even be integral to the disciplinary imagination, intimating a critical resistance to the unjust features of the present, and asserting the ultimately reasonable belief that academic life can be made better’ (p. 192). In our crisis-saturated academic times, no further justification is needed, and indeed in some respects nostalgia does for Rovee what crisis did for Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon in *Permanent Crisis* (2021; reviewed here two years ago). Rovee’s book is another addition to the substantial body of historicizations of the discipline of literary studies. It also shows that professional self-examination need not always be bundled together with self-defence or self-regard.

In one respect this is a study of the encounters between New Criticism and Romantic poetry. But what Rovee is more interested in is the idea of nostalgia, which he sees as lying behind the various senses of disciplinary crisis, and behind the method wars and ‘returns’ that are regularly posited as the antidote to that crisis (p. 1). The nostalgia of his title is less for the New Criticism *per se* than for what we think it achieved and what it represents:

a nostalgia for something indeterminate which the New Criticism is regularly identified with, namely the fleeting cohesiveness and relevance that our histories tend to associate with the postwar era of the 1940s and '50s [. . .] It is the image of a time when literary criticism, the humanities, and the university all seemed on a surer footing vis-à-vis society at large; when it could be taken for granted that the study of books played a role in public life. (pp. 1–2)

This golden age, rather than representing some norm or default position, was in fact the result of a fleeting and unique concatenation of post-Second World War, early Cold War circumstances. And yet it was in that ‘tantalizingly brief’ period that close reading crystallized as our method (p. 2). Thus the disciplinary touchstone to which we periodically recur, including with the present interest represented by Kramnick, is, in a sense, a rule that arose from an exception. Rovee offers a suggestion for this revival of interest in close reading that makes remarkably responsive and acute microeconomists of literary critics: ‘It is not surprising that interest in a reading practice which approached poems as self-sufficient objects would have revived at the very moment when academia was being forced into economic self-sufficiency (the early 1990s representing, as Mary Poovey notes, a key moment for the public divestment from higher education)’ (p. 3). This unpersuasive but, in its way, orthodox claim rests upon an elision from close reading as a method to the specifically New Critical version of it that insisted on ‘self-sufficiency’. But the casual acceptance (and acceptability) of such a claim registers the grip of homology on our thinking, for it rests on a vague and abstract parallel that dissolves upon scrutiny—a supposed causal relationship between a methodological mantra and its adventitious linguistic (not conceptual) coincidence with what is but one idiom—and far from being one of the more usual ones—for a managerial ideology and budgeting policy.

Like Kramnick’s work (as mentioned in Section 1 above), Rovee’s makes an interesting companion piece to Buurma and Heffernan’s *The Teaching Archive*. The two books overlap in period (the mid-twentieth century, though *The Teaching Archive* ranges more widely), method (archival research),

dramatis personae (each book has chapters on Cleanth Brooks and Josephine Miles), and the interest in classroom practice. Even more than the various works of recent years that have raked over the wars of High Theory, one is struck by the level of investment that critics in Rovee's period had in their subject matter. Fashion there has always been, but we of the uncommitted latter days of criticism are left to wonder at the sheer passion aroused by critical readings (or denunciations) of particular writers and works—P. B. Shelley being the primary case in point here.

In that light, one can see how Rovee's idea of nostalgia connects with contemporary calls for a return to judgement, such as *A Defense of Judgment* by Michael W. Clune (2021; reviewed here alongside Buurma and Heffernan two years ago). It is, or was, only on the basis of a category like aesthetic judgement that such deeply held and meaningful opinions—because they are about quality, worth, significance—could be held and argued about. No doubt that is one of the things that Rovee's work points up as having gone missing between his period and ours. But, in our time, one of the projects that sails under the flag of affect is the attempt to reclaim a level of investment, albeit now under the auspices of an anxious disavowal of any notions of quality or judgement. Often this is allied with the loosely postcritical campaign against close reading, thus completing the sort of photographic negative of Rovee's New Critics and suggesting the power of, and hence nostalgia for, a mutually reinforcing synthesis of professional consensus, standards of aesthetic judgement, and close reading.

New Critical Nostalgia is perhaps best appreciated as a loosely connected series of capsule studies in intellectual history. As is often the case these days—another byway of thought that the book suggests—the threads are not brought together into anything so definite or argumentative as a conclusion. While scholars like Rovee are still comfortable with having an 'Introduction' in their works, they are increasingly averse to 'Conclusions', and prefer to peter out with a whimper of codas, postscripts, and, here, epilogues. The interest in passion and affect is coupled with the sort of signposting that suggests an absence of the sort of rigour, strength, or certainty that could be capable of rousing any. It is difficult at times to extract anything so definite as an opinion out of this interesting book. Some of its ideas come so hedged and qualified that they almost dissolve in the attempt to grasp them. In his very first footnote, for instance, Rovee takes out some insurance against the use of the word 'our':

I use the collective pronoun in my chapter title ['Introduction: Our Elegiac Professionalism'] and throughout this book not to claim a

uniform universal identity for the discipline or to incarnate a false sense of community, but simply to denote a general formation with a shared professional membership—‘the discipline’—in which I assume most readers to be co-participants. However, following Eve Sedgwick, I also employ the universalizing claim to explore complex problems associated with it, including the extent to which it even holds true. (p. 197)

So ‘our’ is and will continue to be used, albeit while disclaiming liability for its use. The word retains its natural and ordinary meaning—‘denot[ing] a general formation with a shared professional membership’—so the only point of these contortions was to insure against fictive and fanciful claims, for when did anyone seriously posit a ‘uniform universal identity’ for anything? So the cake-eat-too approach works hand in hand with using straw men to add an artificial distinctiveness to what are perfectly straightforward claims. Thus, on page 14, a claim about ‘varieties of reading’ in the mid-century academy is carved out against (non-existent) notions of a ‘monolithic consensus around close reading’ that ‘[w]e conventionally assume’. Moreover, just as the contortions about the collective pronoun did nothing to stop Rovee using it, the protestations against the idea of consensus are immediately followed by an explicit acceptance that close reading was ‘the very thing that made us a discipline [and] transformed us [...] into a profession’, which sounds remarkably like a functional consensus. This mode of argumentation is not a quirk of Rovee’s writing. It is another widely shared ‘micropractice’ in our field that bears upon the sort of knowledge that we can claim and assert—and it is not going too far to suggest that the nostalgia of which Rovee speaks would include among its objects the sort of rigour, clarity, and decisiveness that were characteristic of his *dramatis personae*.

Finally, Robert T. Tally’s Jr.’s *The Critical Situation: Vexed Perspectives in Postmodern Literary Studies* is a collection of essays on various topics, which are held together by Tally’s theme of the ‘situation’ of criticism, which carries the properly layered meaning of both ‘assessing other situations’ (i.e. the object of criticism) and simultaneously maintaining ‘a persistent consciousness of its own situation’ (p. 1). That sort of attitude probably should go without saying, but a stint as ‘Theory on Theory’ correspondent reveals it to be rare indeed. And now, in the spirit of ‘Theory on Theory’, it is time to add a further layer to this by taking Tally’s book-assessing-situations-while-remaining-conscious-of-its-own-situation as our ‘situation’.

After Rovee, it is impossible not to notice what some might see as the ‘nostalgia’ of *The Critical Situation*. Throughout Tally’s book, and particularly in Part III, certain names come up—Northrop Frye, Edward Said, Jonathan Arac, Erich Auerbach, and, of course, Tally’s own lodestar, Fredric

Jameson—that testify to a project of reorienting literary criticism in what he acknowledges is, on one view, a rather ‘old-fashioned’ direction that he nevertheless sees as possessing ‘new urgency and relevancy for scholars today’ (p. 196). (One could add to Tally’s list the name of Hayden White, whose two-volume *The Ethics of Narrative* was cruelly left on the cutting-room floor this year for reasons of space.) In place of bandying about embarrassing claims of instrumental relevance, Tally is content to defend, say, Frye’s rather modest claims for literary study: ‘Literature speaks the language of the imagination, and the study of literature is supposed to train and improve the imagination’ (p. 196). That might have been orthodox or even conservative at one time. But in a moment when the Hollywood philistinism of *Cool Runnings* is being peddled as political art that can inform and inspire radical action, perhaps we could use the reminder that there are virtues to the sort of discipline implicit in what Frye called (and Tally approvingly echoes as) the *educated* imagination. Indeed, citing Jameson, Tally suggests that weakness of imagination may well be the greatest obstacle to any utopian politics. Leaving that aside, we can, with more certainty, observe that the cause of political criticism is unlikely to be best served by intellectual tools as crude as homology and instrumentality.

Beyond these admittedly easy targets, there seems to be a wider suggestion behind the sorts of names that Tally is putting forward. For whatever else divides them (and Tally is also interested in probing such differences), his names are impressively historical in sensibility and sometimes awe-inspiringly synthetic in approach. What he says of Arac—that he has ‘consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of a blended approach to criticism, theory, and history’ (p. 238)—could apply to any of them. And all of them were (or are) utterly allergic to a version of scholarship that ‘thrives on its use of prefabricated marketing labels and reductive, bullet-point-friendly summaries’ (p. 229). Rather, in their different ways they all seem to be models of what, in his conclusion, Tally argues should be considered ‘the vocation of criticism today’:

the patient, meticulous engagement with a given text that we know as ‘close reading,’ yes, but with the view toward a certain ascent that is the aim and effect of literary studies [...] This ascent [...] is the elevation of a mind now equipped to apprehend, interpret, and perhaps even transform the worldly world (*irdische Welt*) today.
(p. 252)

In a humanities literature increasingly flooded with (self-)advertisements about their applied uses, and when it is becoming impossible to distinguish ‘academic positioning systems’ (p. 12) from the worst forms of marketing-speak, *The*

Critical Situation reminds us of a discipline that, yes, has its micropractices, but has probably made its more lasting contributions to the difficult labour of truth through an insistent macro-synthesis of criticism, history, and theory.

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