

Jonathan Kramnick. *Criticism & Truth: On method in literary studies*. The U of Chicago P, 2023.

Jonathan Kramnick begins *Criticism & Truth* with a quote from David Pye's *The Nature of Art of Workmanship* that succulently captures the objective of his monograph: "If I must ascribe a meaning to the word craftsmanship," Pye asserts, "I shall say as a first approximation that it means simply workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works" (qtd. in Kramnick 1).

Criticism & Truth's strongest argument is found not in its polemics but rather in its approach towards its quandary—literary criticism—the same way a woodworker might approach a hammer, or a runner might look at their shoes, offering that "everyone in a discipline employs highly rarefied skills peculiar to their field of study [...] learned practices" (10). This examination of the mechanics of the field, literary criticism, is refreshing in its graciousness: a sort of "this is how I approach the work, this is how practitioners approach the work, and as long as you are committed to the work there isn't one perfect way to grind the stone," so to speak. However, one of the book's rare weakness comes from Kramnick's sometimes overly gracious admissions that he is wrong, or that his perspective should not be understood as the totalizing assessment on what literary criticism is, or the importance of criticism in the world and academy; Kramnick observes these debates, but does not engage with them, offering instead that "I take no stand in these debates, except to say that no discipline can be relevant without having a secure lock on knowledge, and that no discipline *is* relevant if it ceases to exist" (11). That second point is true, obviously, but an odd concession to make at the beginning of a text about a specific disciplinary practice.

Criticism & Truth attempts to de-mythologize literary criticism, viewing it as craft (a kind of work) and its craftspersons as the bearers of a long disciplinary and interdisciplinary history. Its methods and technologies, the place it has in our institutions, and our understanding of it as a practice helping advance the knowledge and practices of interpretation, creativity, and analysis have also evolved with it.

The book, published in 2023, was likely being drafted during the height of COVID-19 lockdown and distance education and the deepening of austerity management of humanities programs in particular in higher education. The author states this very clearly in a table-setting forward: "every humanities field had for some time been subject to conditions of austerity," Kramnick here is referring to financial challenges plaguing disciplines like Literature Studies, but observes that "the decimation of higher education during the COVID-19 era would all but eliminate jobs for younger scholars, threatening intellectual continuity from one

generation to the next, and so put in peril the very existence of the discipline itself” (viii). Setting the stakes this high is admirable, and Kramnick is clear in his aim to focus merely on the granular. In this aim, *Criticism & Truth* is successful, offering a helpful survey of what literary criticism is, what it is for, and how the previously mentioned early-career scholars might engage in the art form within the rhetorical norms of their discourse communities. However, there is room in this tiny volume to explore with more vigor the forces that seek to oppose or inhibit the humanities which this reviewer believes is both of grave concern *and* impossibly connected to how we understand criticism to function. It would be harsh to say the book falls short, but Kramnick’s point of view is so clearly motivated by a broader social commentary that would have made a good book better.

Criticism & Truth, first and foremost, puzzles the epistemological skill of criticism: “knowing how to write about texts” becomes as important as knowing what those texts mean (5). While this is the loosest definition of criticism offered in the book, its uncertainty allows more dexterity in how the book can be used by its readers. Craftwork, the author insists by echoing Pye, hinges on close reading, “a craft because it is a skilled practice of making sentences from sentences that are already in the world,” and more succinctly: “close reading is also a craft because it is a method of understanding [the immersive environment of the literary]” (7). Building on his discussion of craft knowledge, Kramnick discusses methods (“Method Talk,” the chapter keeping with the conversational tone of the book), but presents a less definitive idea of what methods of criticism are. “Close Reading,” the following chapter, is as prescriptive as *Criticism & Truth* gets. I could imagine readers who are early practitioners of literary criticism finding much use in this chapter, and established scholars in the field finding a new (and concise!) perspective on their methods as a productive refresher, especially in light of new(ish) contexts from within the work of the field now operates.

Criticism and Truth was published the same year ChatGPT went public. Kramnick could thus not have anticipated that generative AI would exhaustively dominate every single discussion going on in the humanities, especially in disciplines centered around the written word. Had the work been published later, a discussion of generative AI’s impact on literary criticism would be welcomed. The perfect location to discuss this would have been between “Close Reading,” the chapter exploring a skilled practice that undergraduate literature students now offload to AI, and “Skilled Practice,” the chapter singing the praises of repeated practice, another part of the literary criticism processed challenged by generative AI. Particularly with the great concern Kramnick gives to government interference, austerity, and COVID-19, it feels like a big absence in light of these other expressed concerns.

Still, it is in the “Skilled Practice” chapter where *Criticism & Truth* is most successful. Using a performer doing performance as an extended analogy to help

readers understand the workmanship necessary and, implicitly, the practice required for mastery I felt nothing short of enthusiasm for doing literary criticism – a rare feat! This exploration is anchored by a long engagement with the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, culminating with the expression that “the skill of the performer determines the quality of the performance” (57). Unable to hide behind shoddy work, the skilled performance reveals not just well-executed criticism, but offers a window through which one can access truth.

As a creative writer myself, I was similarly moved by Chapter Four, “Interpretation and Creativity,” which reframes some of the more mechanical aspects of criticism, such as working with quotations most commonly in the chapter, as an act of creative writing. One of the book’s more alarming conclusions comes in the form of statistics regarding jobs in English presented in this chapter that “ten years after the 2008 financial crisis, the number of tenure track jobs in English would drop by 55 percent,” but that “in the years after COVID, the market as we knew it would disappear” (81). This observation is necessary in a book that attempts, despite its humble assertions on the contrary, to offer a big-picture view of a major craft for knowledge creation in the humanities and literary studies; however, the book never quite recovers from this moment.

Criticism & Truth concludes with a coda discussing the public need for literary criticism, which even in the short years since its publication has worsened. In the United States, where Kramnick works, where this book’s publisher is based and anti-intellectualism is soaring. The federal and states’ governments’ are attacking higher education ideologically and with systemic violence in the form of budget cuts, dismantling and criminalizing DEI initiatives, eliminating tenure, and censoring “sensitive topics” in classrooms, to name a few. The inciting incident of this book, COVID-19’s remote learning and the advanced speed of austerity management, was only the tip of the iceberg of crisis our discipline, and many others, now face. I choose to believe we do not sink, as I suspect Jonathan Kramnick does believe too.

What I admire most in *Criticism & Truth* is the level-headedness its author approaches the existential problem of our discipline, seemingly, by rolling up his sleeves and helping us understand the most fundamental muscles we must flex in order to continue advancing knowledge. The best way to face an uncertain future is to be certain of our past, our traditions and to preserve them for future generations of scholars to utilize. Viewed from that lens, this book is nothing short of a gift.

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