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John Guillory. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. xvi + 407pp. ISBN 978-0-226-82130-6. \$29.00 paperback.

Younger readers may not be able to remember a time long, long ago, when academics, critics, scholars, and students in departments that taught that mystical and capacious subject, English Literature, all felt the need to read a book that one of their own had written. Love it or loathe it, you had to read Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1983); you would probably be a bit embarrassed if you had not read Kate Millett's demolition job on D. H. Lawrence, *Sexual Politics* (1970). And there were sub-field blockbusters; if you worked on Renaissance Literature you had to read Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), and, if Romanticism was your thing, you should really know about M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). Previous generations of readers would have found books that started life as academic tomes in bookstores, printed by major publishers. It was not hard to find shiny blue paperbacks by F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, Basil Willey, E. M. W. Tillyard, or Ian Watt, next to banks of novels by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (for this was the Cold War) and Jean-Paul Sartre (existentialism was still hip) and not far from glossy magazines about sport, fashion, and D.I.Y.

How times have changed. It is hard to see that we have a common culture in English departments anymore, or that there is a forum for shared ideas, let alone to entertain the notion that thinking about literature, which originated in universities, is connected to a wider world. There are either books written for a commercial audience—*Growing Up in Milton Keynes with Vita Sackville-West: A Critical and Creative Memoir* by Hermione Blowhard (Hackett) (“A work of genius!,” *The Guardian*)—or you have *Sheep Shearing and Renaissance Literature* (Spaniel

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University Press) by Prof. Robin Swan (seven downloads, three of Chapter Two, and four of Chapter Five; no reviews).

But perhaps things are changing again, and maybe the crisis in the humanities is actually giving us a renewed sense of purpose and possibly even something resembling a common culture. John Guillory's insightful new book is an attempt to think through the current state of fear and trembling that has (rightly) gripped besieged English departments with falling student numbers, internal divisions, uncertainty about the curriculum, the perception of a hostile management culture, and so on. Accordingly, it is a rare work that many are now reading and discussing together, eager to get some sort of grip on a future that seems to be disappearing at a vast rate of knots.

Professor Guillory will be known to many readers of *The Spenser Review* as the author of distinguished and perceptive works on literary history and the formation of the literary canon. It is surely no surprise that he should have cut his academic teeth on Edmund Spenser and John Milton: challenging authors who force readers to take stock of how allegory and influence function in the world of literature and how wider reading cultures are formed and constructed. The book is a substantial collection of long essays written over some twenty years, which provides it with a reflective strength, but perhaps also a weakness of coherence. All of the essays are concerned with the nature of English as a subject, its chaotic and contradictory history, the relationship between the subject as a discipline and a profession, the ways in which the subject works within institutions, and the way forward, especially for early career scholars entering the profession. *Professing Criticism* is divided into three sections: Part One, "The Formation and Deformation of Literary Study"; Part Two, "Organizing Literature: Foundations, Antecedents, Consequences"; and Part Three, "Professionalization and Its Discontents." Part Three is much more obviously focused on the American Academy so I will concentrate more on the first two sections.

The author has some rather sobering reflections for English academics in his preface. One of the central problems that we face as professors of a discipline is that we both undervalue what we do and overvalue what we think we can and should do. All too many of us imagine that we have the power to influence society directly because "the discipline [English] and its institutional structures, especially the curriculum, [have been] reimagined as surrogates for the social totality" (xii) and, as a result, a great deal of scholarship has been directed "to concepts and problems defined by their

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contemporary relevance” (xiii). This may not be a bad thing—*may not*—but it is problematic and a dangerous position for the subject to be in. First, far too much emphasis is placed on the relevance of the study of literature, something that becomes an article of faith, and which is hard to sustain in an intellectually coherent way when “literature continues to contract in social importance” (xiii). It is the familiar story of the lower the stakes the grander the claims, a problem more fully explored in the second section, which charts the history of a discipline that was able to make significant critical claims when literature could more reasonably be equated with writing in general, but which has inflated these claims to compensate for the restriction of the object of study to literature as imaginative fiction. As the first chapter demonstrates, the moment at which literary criticism became possible as a university discipline—alongside many others—was when it became a circumscribed and restricted object of study, one of the many paradoxes that Professor Guillory makes visible. Alongside these disciplines developed a concomitant management class: the figures who would run the newly created university system beyond the old university based on the study of rhetoric.

Chapter Two of the three in Part One shows how fluid and slippery the relationship between the discipline of literary criticism and the notion of critique has become in the modern university. On the one hand, criticism pretends to be a discipline with a specific aim but, on the other, it specializes in everything (48). Central to English is the notion of interpretation, another complicated and ambiguous term that is part critique and part explanation, and which replaces the older notion of “judgement.” In a Janus-faced maneuver, the university “permits the expression of a broad range of opinion—otherwise known as ‘academic freedom’— at the same time that its very structure exercises tacit control over the interfaces between disciplines and the public sphere” (60). Failure to engage with this complicated institutional structure, Professor Guillory suggests, leaves academics floundering, oscillating between an arrogant assertiveness in the value of their thoughts and actions and a fear that what they do may well have little purpose or value. Whereas criticism as a wide-ranging license to comment on writing and society made sense in the eighteenth-century intellectual landscape, the restriction of that term to the object of literature frustrated many academics who had an inflated sense of their calling as professionals. That was, before the advent of literary theory, which provided literature departments with a green light to return to their critical roots by providing them with the license—

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if not the knowledge—to make pronouncements about society, politics, morality, and beyond.

One of the great strengths of *Professing Criticism* is the author's ability to tease out various strands of argument and to show that, at different points in the profession's history, ideas and institutions combined in different ways to produce results that were often badly aligned with, or even the exact opposite of, earlier combinations, a reality that confuses many working in the subject. Greater specialism and professionalization increase subject knowledge and provide the tools for the critical ambitions of the most serious thinkers within the subject of English literature, while at the same time making their goals practically impossible by restricting the public they can address. That ubiquitous word—"interdisciplinarity"—something that virtually everyone working in English departments believes they practice and profess, is a dangerous goal, one that unfortunately might just as well argue for the death of the discipline as for its revitalized health. We could all end up being a "Johannes Factotum," surrendering the fields we survey to those with specialized knowledge in the history, politics, and culture that we struggle to find the time to master. And, if interest in literature is shrinking, then why bother using it to think about race, gender, and class, or, indeed, any other subject at all? As Professor Guillory warns his fellow professionals, we have failed to address the question of "the relation of literature to new media ... with consequences we have scarcely begun to acknowledge" (72). Making an increasingly threatened subject "relevant" may be an act of desperate plate spinning with an inevitable crash waiting.

Professor Guillory gives many of his more pious colleagues relatively short shrift, seeing them as those who want to grasp the bigger picture without actually having the means to do so. Accordingly, many professionals have "encouraged universally among the college-educated a desire to move beyond the injustices visited upon minority populations. Unfortunately, the success of this attitudinal shift ... does not mean that the college-educated fully understand the structural bases of social injustice or see clearly what must be done politically to transform these structures" (74). Again, ambition and desire are at odds with knowledge, professionalism, and disciplinary scope: if we want to have a direct influence on these serious issues, then maybe we should just move over rather than finding solutions that justify us rather than help others. Therefore, the emphasis on topicality does not work to sustain the nature of the discipline of English and can only ever be a short-term solution, working

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as a “surrogate politics” (76), not the real thing. The problem is not with the politics of literature—how can studying that not be a good thing?—but the politics of the profession.

Chapter Three is perhaps the hardest hitting in the book, although that award could also go to Chapter Eight. It makes what should be the obvious point that studying literature needs to be at the heart of the profession, because if we do not teach literature what are we doing and what is our purpose? The grand claims that literary critics and scholars sometimes make are a sign of weakness, insecurity, and marginalization, and returning to literary study should make us more rather than less powerful. However, doing this is not a straightforward task. According to Professor Guillory, we urgently need to rethink the role of literature in the digital age and its relationships with new systems of media. This judgment is undoubtedly right, but one might add other factors. There is surely also the need for academics within the disciplinary field of English to work out for whom they write, as in an age when many are encouraged to communicate with a wider audience there is always the risk of the market determining the message, not just the medium. There are institutional pressures to combine with other subjects, which will only get greater when so many departments shrink dramatically and universities, certainly in the UK, demand the income from large, successful grant applications to compensate for declining income from other sources, such as student tuition fees.

There are more pertinent critical words for some recent critical fads, such as “surface reading,” which is seen as a symptom of the declining power of literary theory rather than an actual idea or practice. For Guillory, “surface reading” eschews evaluation, providing a description of a literary work without apparent critical judgment and so confuses categories and critical purpose in pretending to be objective and disinterested. Put more forcefully a bit further on, such formulae are a result of an “equal measure of good intentions and the constitutional narcissism of the professional” (96). The real problem, one that returns throughout *Professing Criticism*, is how to read, and the relationship between the trained reading that is supposedly—and often is—the mode in the academy, and amateur reading for pleasure.

Part two explores the complicated history of English. Professor Guillory has little time for arguments that, because English was once used as a colonial tool, notably in India, it is a fatally compromised subject and can never escape its origins. The

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discipline has multiple early phases—it was also used to provide an education for women and working-class men who had little or no access to the classics—and cannot be reduced to the most shameful one, important though that undoubtedly was. Such fallacious arguments have flourished, according to Professor Guillory, because most of us lack a proper understanding of our subject as a discipline and its history, making us vulnerable to the apparently greater rigor of other subjects within the modern university and, as such, cowed and defensively assertive when put under pressure. We work in post-rhetorical times, with universities providing a modern, disciplinary-based education, one that has succeeded the medieval and Renaissance education based first on philosophy and theology, then rhetoric, the art of speaking, writing, and persuading. Of course, such changes in education were necessary, especially with the rise of science as an ever more complicated series of subjects requiring specialist knowledge and the transformation of the social and religious contexts in which universities functioned, but that is an argument for a wider understanding of the history of education, not, as is often the case, simply accepting it as a given. For Guillory, the essence of the major change was from “the arduous system of embodying knowledge as *techné* to one in which access to knowledge was ‘methodized’” (161). Put another way, the shift was from a system of knowing to a collection of different types of knowledge that can be accumulated.

There is a careful analysis of the reasons why certain incarnations of literary study failed to take hold of English. *Belles-lettres* was not really appropriate for an expanding discipline moving away from its roots as a subject for aristocratic young men—another reason why it is problematic to imagine that origins explain everything. Philology was too scientific and restricted in focus, although it remains a presence through the on-going complicated relationship between English language and literature. What happened was that culture became a field of knowledge, not a question of the acquisition of taste, an issue that has haunted the discipline of English ever since, as debates about “judgement” and “value” indicate. The battle for English became one between “scholars” (philologists) and “generalists,” with the latter winning out but, in the process, transforming themselves into literary critics as they moved from a vague sense of literary history to a belief in the value of literary analysis and study, one that is at the heart of current debates.

The time lags in the history of English are important to note. The possibility of English literature as a subject only occurred with the rise of literature as a form of

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“mass entertainment” (206)—the decline of which in the face of fierce competition is one that those teaching the subject need to understand. However, the “institutionalization of literary criticism as an academic discipline ... marks the waning of literary culture” (211), a sign that the subject has become restricted to literature rather than writing. As a result, academic literary criticism no longer has the range to stand as social critique, despite its pretensions. Literature will always be a “historical object” (223), defined in terms of the forces that produce it at any given moment, and problems arise when many professional and non-professional readers mistake “this object for something like a natural kind” (223).

The final chapter (Eight) in this section considers the “Contradictions of Global English” and presents a bold and consistently interesting argument. Professor Guillory has a genuine talent for gnomic pronouncements, and I especially admired his critique of attempts to decolonize the curriculum: “One ironic consequence of this process is that Western ‘high culture’ has become the low-hanging fruit for the decolonial project” (226). He might have added that with all the different forms of media competing for the attention of readers, arguments that one does not need to read the works of “great white dead males” are especially welcome, even among those who have chosen to study a subject that would seem to require such intellectual grappling. As Professor Guillory reminds us, these debates are not new and “rehearse many of the same arguments for canonical revision undertaken decades earlier in the ‘culture wars’” (227) that flourished in the 1980s. Moreover, concentrating on egregious figures such as Cecil Rhodes in the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign (the statue is still there above Oxford High Street, and has sadly not yet suffered the fate of the Edward Colston monument in Bristol), may also be less than helpful in terms of thinking about literature because “his career tells us nothing about the relation of *literature* to the global system of cultural production today” [Guillory’s emphasis] (226).

The problem of what we study, who makes decisions, and what we are doing in English departments is likely to be fraught, especially as universities become ever more marketized and vulnerable to the fashions and forces at large which shape them, their agency restricted. If readers and students believe that literature must be “relatable” then “only contemporary literature has any chance of representing real-world diversity” (229), which means that the curriculum will have to become more focused on the contemporary and limited in historical range. People in the past are not necessarily those one would choose as friends and lovers, and they often think strange,

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challenging, and weird things. Professor Guillory is very clear about what needs to be done: the curriculum can have elements of choice, but “a curriculum in which there is no coercion is not a curriculum at all” (231), whatever universities may advertise to draw students in. For him, it is vitally important that students do not spend their time studying works in which they “see themselves,” because if they are allowed to do so they will probably choose to study the present, and one wonders whether they will continue to come to study a subject if it simply tells them what they already know and enables them to dismiss people in the past as stupid misogynist racists (although some clearly were ...).

English is evidently at a crossroads as a subject: having achieved a dominant position in universities through a claim to universality, it now finds its traditional texts looking almost irrelevant to modern readers in value and reach, not really “relatable” at all, and having to adopt positions that may achieve short-term success but at the expense of long-term stability and coherence. If everything is to be determined by current political debates and the latest manifestation of the “culture wars,” then it is hard to see what purpose the subject has as you can learn whatever it is designed to teach you through non-literary works and media.

Professor Guillory’s solution is to “Democratize the curriculum!” [his exclamation mark] (235), balancing the literature of the West with that of other cultures in a syllabus: as he writes, readers in “the formerly colonized world have a right of access to the literature of the ‘West,’ just as those who read literature in the metropolises have a right of access to the literature produced by writers of the former colonies” (235). Well, yes, it is hard not to agree, but this formula does not get us very far, certainly in terms of what might go with what and how things could be organized. But it is good to hear a voice that recognizes the issues, which is suspicious of a division of the curriculum into two strands, one “nationalist and imperialist” and one “transnational and postcolonial” (239), and which also recognizes that the global spread of English has surely “contributed to the disappearance of some of the world’s languages” (238).

Section three is much more concerned with the specific nature of the higher education system in the USA. Professor Guillory has a rather sanguine and sad understanding of the absurdities and complexities of the profession, which espouses “equality of opportunity” while, at times, failing to understand the brutal reality that no society can absorb an unlimited number of professionals, the principles of access

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and merit working against each other. Most interesting here is Chapter Twelve, which deals with the issue of “lay reading” and the relationship between the reading done by amateur readers and professionals, as the book moves towards its conclusion. Professional reading is work and has a disciplinary responsibility, unlike leisure reading, but I worried here that Professor Guillory had missed a trick in not seeking to argue more forcefully that the two forms of reading are related. One of the disappointing issues that has resulted from the severance of professional and lay readers is that amateur readers often assume that they can read as well as professionals and that professionals are too dependent on appealing to wider market forces to make the case that this is surely just wrong. Of course, you can like whatever you like—Thomas Mann, Stephen King, Dolly Alderton, or Ali Smith—but does everyone read in the same way and have the same resources to deploy? It is that vexed question of expertise, one that Professor Guillory skirts around frequently in generally astute ways. But you have to wonder what is going on when glowing reviews are distributed, and prizes are awarded to books on subjects that are almost bread and butter in the academy without anyone in a university being consulted. Or, worse still perhaps, that the rise of creative writing has spilled over into traditionally factually based subjects so that it can be claimed that a novel helps us understand the bits of a life that are not in the biographical record and that a hybrid book provides some very special insight that more staid forms of writing cannot provide. And, worst of all, that non-professionals with powerful media-savvy voices can dominate debates and assume, to take an example entirely at random, that it is just common knowledge that the death of Shakespeare’s little boy inspired his most famous play and that only very silly, pompous, small-minded people who work in the academy could possibly object. Maybe these are signs of the declining significance of books and newspapers, but they are only a shadow of what goes on in the digital world and do suggest that the relationship between English literature taught in universities and the understanding of it in the wider world could do with a major reboot.

Professing Criticism concludes with a plea for an understanding of reading and the need to make the case that serious readers suspend judgment and try to understand that works can be morally ambiguous and not deliver simple, instantly satisfying messages of self-help and self-validation. It is a nice irony that in times when there is a widespread plea for diversity, there is a concomitant desire for self-affirmation, that literature be written by those most like “us.” The last chapter, “Ratio

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Studiorum,” seemed a little too prolix and its conclusion—that we advance learning through the different methodologies contained in our complex and unwieldy subject—is somewhat underwhelming, even if true. Professor Guillory is able to countenance a future “in which literary scholarship might be regarded as unnecessary” (387), but that is surely a warning, a call to arms, cajoling the profession to unite around its significant virtues and to make a case for the need to read better and to tell the world that that is what we do before it is too late. Unfortunately, that runs the risk of also stating that perhaps others do not read as well as they think they do, which might backfire and release the hostility to professional academics that does not require much to trigger it, as the current cultural malaise indicates. I thoroughly admire *Professing Criticism*, even though I wanted it to be briefer and more to the point in places and more of a manifesto. Perhaps Professor Guillory could be persuaded to distil this book into one—God knows we need it, and he has an ability to see dangerous contradictions that most people miss, as well as having a carefully focused eye for the killer phrase and pithy maxim. For now, we should admire its thoughtful erudition, focused attention, mordant wit, sensitive historical overviews, and the fact that it seems to be bringing together a fractured and fractious profession that badly needs a common culture.

Andrew Hadfield
University of Sussex