

[Upgrade](#)

My Account

- Sections
- Topics
- Magazine
- [Newsletters](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Audio Stories](#)
- [Ask Chron](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- **Events and Insights:**
- [Chronicle Festival 2026](#)
- [Improving Student ROI](#)
- [The Future of Tenure](#)



Thomas Allen for The Chronicle

John Guillory's Nonalignment Pact

Is the prominent critic stuck in the '90s — or the '60s?

The Review | Essay

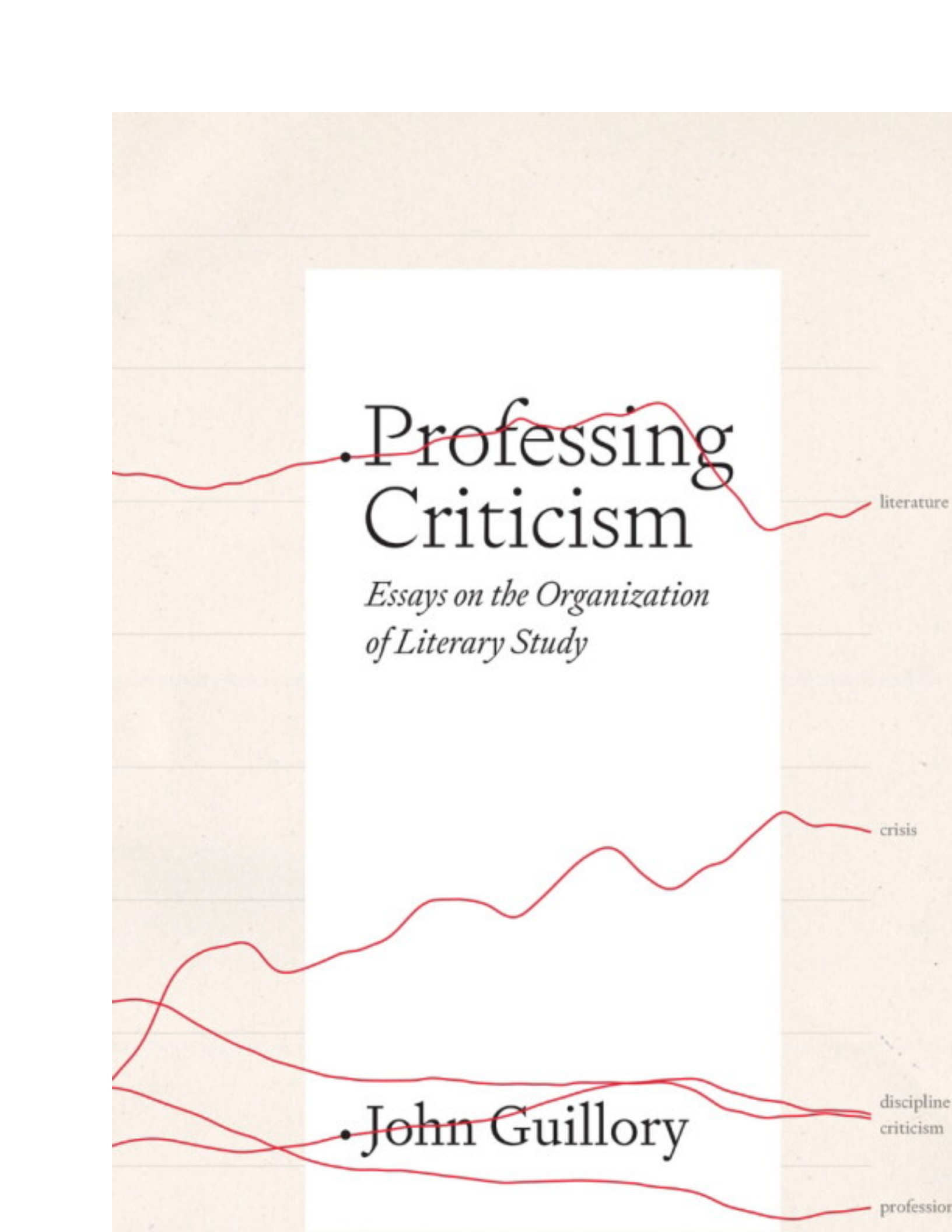
By [Bruce Robbins](#)

February 3, 2023

Since the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which have not gone away — John Guillory, in his new book *Professing Criticism*, refers to them as “our domestic forever wars” — opponents of literary criticism on the right have often imagined (in Guillory’s words) that the discipline “might someday cease to exist,” that it is already dead, and even that it has been assassinated. When the cry of murder goes up, the usual suspect is the social movements of the 1960s. In *The Death of the Critic* (2007), for example, Rónán McDonald

accuses “the anti-authoritarianism of 1968, with its student riots and revolutionary fervor” of offing the discipline by offing the author, then going on to “repudiate or ignore the idea of aesthetic value altogether.” It was politics that did criticism in — ’60s politics.

Literary Studies Now



•Professing Criticism

*Essays on the Organization
of Literary Study*

•John Guillory

literature

crisis

discipline
criticism

profession

This is one of two reviews we're publishing of John Guillory's *Professing Criticism*. ([Here's the other](#), by Eric Bennett.) The book has attracted such broad interest — *The New York Times* even [covered](#) Guillory — because literary criticism, despite the field's diminished prospects, remains a potent symbol of intellectual life in the academy. For more of *The Review's* best essays on literary studies, check out our special collection, [Reflections From a Damaged Field](#).

Although Guillory, too, tends to finger the '60s, he doesn't belong in the company of such fact-allergic foes of multiculturalism as Roger Kimball or Dinesh D'Souza. Guillory cites approvingly David Bromwich's polemic against the politicization of the discipline, *Politics by Other Means* (1992), but he himself makes a visible effort not to sound polemical, whatever his true feelings on the subject. He does complain, with uncharacteristic inaccuracy, that the study of imperialism "is the dominant tendency in literary study today." But he puts this over-the-top complaint *in a footnote*.

Those who do not feel called upon to pick a side will have easier access to the substantial virtues of Guillory's book, a dazzlingly erudite and attractively wacky investigation into the long-term fate of literary criticism. Like Sherlock Holmes, and unlike most of those who imagine academic criticism as a murder victim, Guillory shuns high-minded sentiment. His writing is cool, rigorous, dispassionate. The name he gives his project is historical sociology. By way of cheerleading for the profession, he doesn't go much farther than suggesting that an icy bath in the waters of sociology need not be fatal.

Guillory's main object is not to decry politics so much as to show how writers doing something like criticism managed to do without it. Chapter by chapter, from the period of classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, he brings to vibrant life a gallery of criticism's Others — rhetoric, oratory, grammar, philology, literary history, belles-lettres, and poetry. None of these, he tells us, meant then what it means today. Once upon a time, it was these discourses that occupied the space that criticism now fills. The weird ways in which they were *not* criticism, and yet were and often remain quite alluring, give the book its wacky anthropological vibe, a Borgesian sense of the arbitrariness of the categories by which knowledge has been and continues to be organized.

From the Chronicle Store

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION



The Outlook for International Education

**Understanding the trends buffeting
U.S. institutions and their foreign students**



[Article Collection](#)

[The Outlook for International Education](#)

[Effectively assess instruction and improve learning outcomes](#)

[Visit the Store](#)

From Guillory's sociological viewpoint, however, there is nothing arbitrary about the fact that criticism came to be organized as a profession whereas its Others didn't, or did so with less ultimate success. The culprit is specialization, which Guillory posits as the key to modern professionalism: "In order to recover a more grounded understanding of what it means to profess criticism, I begin with the very basic concept of *specialization*, from which the social forms of 'occupation,' 'discipline,' and 'profession' all developed. The premise of my argument is that the most highly specialized, highly skilled forms of cognitive labor entail a correlative disability, or what has sometimes been called a 'professional deformation.'"

Readers who know something about criticism as it is practiced in the university will be able to guess some of the deformations Guillory has in mind. Young scholars often feel weighed down by period specialization, a seemingly obligatory identity — obligatory, Guillory suggests, because it compromises between the opposing demands of interpretation (you interpret what works on readers now) and scholarship (you do research into what worked on readers then but doesn't work on readers anymore). Criticism interprets, Guillory argues, but (unlike amateur reading) it does not evaluate. Once cut off from evaluation, interpretation is deforming by its very nature: It impels the professional machine to churn out endless novelties of acrobatic reading performance, each one distinctive only by its difference from previous interpretations. It is unable to produce knowledge that can be seen as cumulative, knowledge that can be seen as *advancing* and that would therefore help the field make the case for itself in public.

"The advancement of learning": Francis Bacon's phrase, to which Guillory ventures a wistful backward glance, seems so unfashionable today as to be almost unspeakable. Like Bacon, Guillory brilliantly reconciles ancient and modern learning. Yet like Bacon again, he is finally more of a modern. He thinks criticism might make a better case for itself if it could offer knowledge that can "*accumulate or progress.*"

Skepticism about whether scholarship can indeed accumulate or progress is one of Guillory's less fortunate inheritances from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, whom Guillory has been championing since his classic *Cultural Capital*, now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Bourdieu lies behind Guillory's conviction in that book that the knowledge content of scholarship is of much less political significance than access to the cultural

capital the university distributes, however defined. Bourdieu is also skeptical, logically enough, of political claims made within the university. For Bourdieu, righteous politics talk was merely a jockeying for position, a competition for dominance within a given institution, the pursuit of personal and disciplinary self-interest. Crying politics is never anything more than a move in a game. In *Professing Criticism*, Guillory strikes some similar notes. He warns critics against “assembling a politically coherent phalanx of writers,” as if political coherence (on the occasions when it is to be discovered) were a cardinal sin. He warns against too much thinking about “the depredations of colonialism or the anti-colonial struggle,” preferring “the use to which writers on the global scene have put the English language.” Think about this. It’s as if the uses to which writers on the global scene have put the English language didn’t *include* wrestling with “the depredations of colonialism or the anti-colonial struggle,” or as if this wrestling could not possibly have resulted in the sophisticated, refined uses of the English language that he is clearly looking for. Anyone who feels the tug of Guillory’s position might have a look at Ousmane Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960), one exhibit among many of the most aesthetically and morally refined anti-colonialism.

ADVERTISEMENT

In theory, if the deformations that come with modern specialization are unavoidable under modern conditions, as Guillory suggests they are, then they can’t really be denounced. But Guillory does not hesitate to denounce the tendency of critics to overestimate their own significance — as he sees it, another of professionalism’s deformations. Criticism has no business claiming “larger social and political aims, far beyond the interpretation of literary texts.” What drives Guillory to the brink of incivility is criticism’s political self-importance, the insinuation that it matters to the larger world by virtue of the “topicality” of its materials. For example, by identifying authors (say, authors who are women) with “currently defined social identities,” that is, people (say, women) who might appreciate seeing their experience acknowledged by a wider public. Identity shouldn’t matter to criticism. If identity is understood to matter, it’s the fault of the 1960s.

Like David Bromwich, Guillory is impatient with the idea that scholarship should ever respect the taking of sides. The prospect of individuals joining their judgments together with the judgments of others seems like the betrayal of a sacred trust. If the issue of side-taking arises, his characteristic move is instead to withdraw and reflect on the social context in which the sides were drawn up. Let the less enlightened do the choosing. The world being what it is, it’s hard to imagine what criticism would look like if withdrawal like this were to be a categorical imperative, or a professional one — if, whatever the issue, every critic felt obliged to perform a similar backing off to a nonaligned distance.

Nonalignment is one of the attractions, for Guillory, of writing like a sociologist. Given a controversy, his diagnosis is: one “selection bias” in tension with another “selection bias.” No participant in that controversy would use this sociological language. To use it is to suggest that no sides need to be taken. This neutrality-enforcing vocabulary models a very academic way of being in the world — a way of life that arguably drains the life out of the subject, and does so at a moment when, as so many have said, its life is in jeopardy.

The pressure to take sides might be seen as an existential necessity, but in historical terms it comes to us from the “new social movements” of the 1960s. According to Guillory, it was these movements that made criticism of the discipline itself into a surrogate (his word) for criticism of society. Activism is the self-inflicted wound that has put the discipline’s survival at risk. Guillory does not disparage the “specifically *political* aims” of the ’60s; he says nothing against a concern, say, with the injuries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. He argues only, carefully, that these aims are out of place in the academy. And they don’t do the political movements themselves any good. All the self-proclaimed representatives of those movements can do in the academy is make self-affirming noises, thereby promoting their careers. The academy is its own place; it has its own rules of operation, disengaged from the gains and losses governing the social world outside it.

Newsletters

Jagged Intelligence

Sign up for Jagged Intelligence, your one-stop shop for understanding AI’s impact on higher ed.

Sign Up

Bourdieu’s cynicism, muted but still present, will always be persuasive to some. Who doesn’t believe that the narrowest self-interest explains much of what happens in the world? Then again, from this perspective what would a sociologist of sociology have to admit about the motives of the sociologists? And about his *own* motives in revealing *their* motives? The regress is potentially infinite and finally stupid.

Three decades ago, Guillory and I found ourselves on a stage together at the University of Washington in what devolved into a sort of debate. Listening to Guillory, I suddenly found myself telling him that he was more of a Weberian than I had thought he was, implying (perhaps with a touch of malice) that he was less of a leftist. Without missing a beat, he informed me that I was more of a Durkheimian. I think I was right, but so was he. Like Durkheim, I tend to give positive value to membership in a collectivity — in this case, attachment to the profession — that cooler and more Marxist heads would be more skeptical about. Shortly afterward, I found myself making a case (in *Secular Vocations*) that

professionalism was not the enemy of the left. I was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War movement of the '60s, a movement centered in college students, which is to say in the middle class, and I was inspired by my fellow professionals, who despite their relative privilege seemed to me oddly and enthusiastically critical of the status quo. It wasn't an orthodox position either for the Marxist left or for the '60s movements.

That division within sociology remains relevant to Guillory's new book. For Durkheim, organizations are artifices of sociability that can warm up the chill of anomic modernity and make it more livable. Perhaps naïvely, Durkheim wishes scholarly conferences would be more frequent and would last longer. Guillory, like Weber, sees organization as more of an iron cage. (Channeling Weber, Nicholas Dames calls Guillory our profession's "great disenchanter.") For Durkheim, who was a socialist, the division of labor of course disguises structural inequality, but it also teaches people that they are bound together in reciprocal dependence, a lesson that rural, more self-sufficient households are unfortunately slower to learn. It teaches people the habit of living with difference. For Weber, on the other hand, the division of labor means specialization, which is alienating and dehumanizing. Specialization is part of the bureaucratic rationality in which, partly because of the real protection its fairness offers from the whim of tyrants, we cannot but choose to remain entrapped. On this point as well, Guillory follows Weber.

As specialists, scholars may be socially marginal, but the other side of their marginality is autonomy.

If specialization is a fall, it is what Christians call a fortunate fall: bad as it is, it's hard to imagine living without the advantages that resulted from it. At the same time, it really *is* bad in a very practical sense. It leaves us unable to explain our work in public. Weirdly, that inability is no longer our fault, for Guillory, even if it leads to Guillory's "hypothetical scenario of extinction." It is "the differentiation of functions" that forces us to imagine a future in which our discipline will be so specialized as to seem superfluous, a luxury society will decide it can do without.

In the meantime, like Weber again, Guillory is not all that unhappy with the minimum-security incarceration to which scholars have been remanded. After all, the iron cage is not so very uncomfortable, is it? As specialists, scholars may be socially marginal, but the other side of their marginality is autonomy. No one listens to us, but no one tells us what to do. We should be grateful for the autonomy, and we should consider that perhaps marginality is not too high a price to pay for it. Specialization is both the disease and the cure. If critics would only focus their attention on their legitimate object, literature, and forget everything else, they would look more legitimate in the public sphere. The media would not be full of incensed talk about trans books and critical race theory.

ADVERTISEMENT

If only the survival of the profession were not imperiled from within as well as from without! Guillory seems certain that the “crisis of legitimation” the discipline is experiencing is *not* “the collapse of the job market for Ph.D.s, funding reductions, or a decline in the number of majors,” but a crisis “internal” to the discipline, a crisis of “justification.” Elsewhere, however, Guillory departs from the Weberian problematic of legitimation, throwing the final responsibility for criticism’s possible demise onto the outside world. How well the profession presents itself in public may finally be irrelevant. Corporate America has no use for our object of knowledge or for us. There is no profit to be made from either. “It does not matter how politically ambitious the aims of literary study might be if literature itself continues to contract in social importance.” Of course, if literature has indeed contracted in social importance, and done so conclusively — Guillory seems appropriately clear-eyed about that — then it wouldn’t help if criticism were to forsake political critique, as Guillory advises, and go back to praising the well-turned patriotic sentiments of “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” (Incidentally, a more interesting poem than it might seem.) However it tries to legitimate itself, it seems to be a dead profession.

All this wriggling and writhing suggests both a lively mind and a profession that has not yet passed into the great beyond. As Guillory knows very well, the contraction of literature’s social importance is not really the profession’s death sentence. The reason is simple. Criticism has never depended for its survival solely on literature, that hyper-specialized object of knowledge. When Matthew Arnold got the enterprise rolling in 1864 with his essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” the examples he gave of criticism as it was supposed to function at the present time weren’t about literature at all. They were about the present time. The foundation Arnold offered to the nascent discipline was *culture*, an object of knowledge and concern that has surrendered nothing of its significance in the intervening years. Specialization was no doubt part of the story, but criticism’s professionalization could not have been as successful as it was without an appeal *beyond* literature. The literature of the past provided one measure by which the truth of the present could be envisioned and assessed, but it was not the only measure; the one thing needful was holding the present up to scrutiny.

Ironically, given Guillory’s animosity to the legacy of ’60s activism, his skepticism about professionalization is itself very ’60s. Nothing could be more characteristic of the ’60s sensibility than a suspicion that anyone who had made it into the profession had sold out. Nothing could be more implausible than the claim that, once ensconced in the institution, such a figure continued to represent in any way the constituency whose activism had helped put them there. After all, who can justly claim to represent anyone else? As Edward

Said's *Orientalism* argued in 1978, there's been a whole lot of misrepresenting going on. To put this in Guillory's sociological terms, the immense social power of misrepresentation offers its opponents the gift of a professional rationale. When the discipline re-channels its attention to "others," social groups that have been excluded from a supposedly universal "we" by virtue of their race, class, gender, or whatever, it makes an implicit case for its social importance. Whereas the mainstream thinks that it knows those others, what we know (as a discipline) is the *limits* of that knowledge. Our knowledge is knowledge about the limits of knowledge.

This sounds paradoxical, and the two sides of the paradox mark a disagreement within the '60s movement. Should knowledge of the limits of knowledge *count* as knowledge? Or is it recognition of the impossibility of knowledge? Said would have said that it *does* count as knowledge, and I think this argument deserves to be taken further, thereby adding a key component to the implicit professional justification that the '60s have bequeathed to us. In the decades that followed the '60s, literary studies made a name for itself as the favorite site of "theory" (call it knowledge about the limits of knowledge) at the same time that it was serving as the equally favored site of "otherness" (call it the representation of previously marginalized authors, texts, and cultures). The two projects sometimes seemed irreconcilable. In retrospect, however, they can be seen as two sides of the same project: namely, the democratic work of representing the collective experience of previously underrepresented others, *but doing so responsibly, in full consciousness of the ways in which the representation of others can go terribly wrong as well as the ways in which others may not be so very other.*

ADVERTISEMENT

Like any professional *raison d'être*, my formulation here is helplessly crude. It needs complicating — for example, by recalling the discipline's analogous and ongoing commitment to representing the experience of those who are distanced from us temporally rather than socially: that is, its commitment to salvaging the experience of the past. Those who worry that there is too much politics in the profession are not wrong to detect a danger of presentism, the blinkered vision of history that might result if students were free to elect only readings that were contemporary or political or both. One problem with the Weberian perspective is that it flirts with nihilism. Why go to the trouble of assembling knowledge about the past? Why care about the past at all? The left has answers to these questions: meta-narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, the struggle from the beginning to wrest a realm of freedom from the realm of necessity. As the Marxist Fredric Jameson has argued, a political thematic can also lead into an intellectually richer concern with the past, even the very deep past — indeed, it may be the only way of sustaining our sense that,

despite the storm blowing out of paradise and piling up ruins before our helpless faces, we remain part of a “single great collective story.”

The collective story of humanity is not alien to Guillory. Indeed, his book is a fascinating contribution to it. In his chapters about what happened to the study of grammar (writing well), and rhetoric (speaking well), both restricted to elites, he makes it clear that vernacularization also meant democratization. When he gets around to today’s electronic media and the study of so-called “communication,” he is not wild with excitement, but he strikes a hopeful note: This may take us back to “writing” as it used to be before the modern concept of literature had been conceived, writing as “the first version of media studies in Western education.” In short, he shows some enthusiasm for the academic program that is most closely associated with the cultural activism of the ’60s: cultural studies. Cultural studies was, and perhaps is, “the name of a solution,” he says, offering “literary critics an escape from the shrinking island of literature.” The goal he lays out for us today, the “resituating of literary studies and of literature itself in a transformed cultural field,” is not a bad translation of what Raymond Williams and the activists of the 1960s were hoping for — though they didn’t get it in an institutional, departmental form.

Literature is a vehicle for the preservation, transmission, and interpretation of the experience of others. But it is not the only such vehicle. Democracy does not absolutely need advanced study in departments of literature. Helen Small is right to mock this professional rationale as both elitist and implausible. But democracy does need the representation of collective experience, especially the experience of previously marginalized communities, and literature classes are one place where substantial numbers of citizens are exposed to that representation. That is, they acquire knowledge of what other people have felt and thought, what other people are thinking and feeling. Guillory puts this kind of knowledge in simple and memorable terms: It is the knowledge we express when we say, “I know what you mean.” Knowing what someone means is a valuable form of knowledge even if it’s hard to convince scientists that it constitutes valid research. An increase of this sort of knowledge would imply that there has been, in the profession of criticism, after all, an advancement of learning. It would be a political accomplishment. It does not show that the profession is in the best of health — we all know its condition is precarious — but it’s proof that it’s alive and kicking.