

Critical Response

I

A Response to Jonathan Kramnick, “Criticism and Truth”

John Brenkman

Jonathan Kramnick opens “Criticism and Truth” with a question as bold as his title: “Does literary criticism tell truths about the world?” (Jonathan Kramnick, “Criticism and Truth,” *Critical Inquiry* 47 [Winter 2021]: 218). The question immediately acquires two prongs. The question “of telling truths about the world itself” will have to hinge on making “true statements about literary texts” (p. 218). It is axiomatic for Kramnick that “both lines of inquiry take aim at method and therefore at epistemology” (p. 218). I admire Kramnick’s general project of questioning various centrifugal tendencies in literary studies that often weaken the discipline in the name of sweeping but shallow interdisciplinarity.¹ Social theory, political theory, political economy, evolutionary biology, and cognitive science are among the fields that temptingly promise a more worldly discourse but whose own disciplinary complexity, traditions, methods, protocols, and debates are easily bypassed by literary scholars in search of usable axioms and theorems. Kramnick wants to wind the discussion centripetally back from the wide arc of interdisciplinarity to the specificity of the discipline of literary studies.

The article seems torn, though, between a polemic against influential theorists of literary studies who do not in Kramnick’s eyes understand method at all and, on the other hand, an emphatically antipolemical intent to identify the common denominator that gathers all us practitioners of literary studies together within a distinct, unique, and justifiable discipline. The common

1. See Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (Chicago, 2018).

denominator of “our actual on-the-ground procedures of reading and interpretation” in “the everyday practice of literary criticism as it is done everywhere, all the time” is, he proposes, the ubiquitous use of “in-sentence quotation” in the practice that for the last half century has been called “reading” or “close reading” and which Kramnick quite rightly points out is in fact a specific practice of *writing* (pp. 219, 220, 221). There is an art to critics’ splicing of phrases from the text being analyzed into their own sentences of commentary and argument. Criticism is a skill, “craftwork in a literal sense. It is something one does or makes with one’s hands,” as the fingers dance on the keyboard or move the pen across the page (p. 223).

The strongly stated two-pronged determination of truth—truth about the text, truth about the world—undergoes a series of refinements and mutations in the course of the discussion that transform it nearly beyond recognition.

First moment: in-sentence quotation is the exemplary, indeed essential skill in close reading and signals that “the epistemology of close reading is a subspecies of the epistemology of skill”; it is an instance, drawing on Gilbert Ryle’s conceptualization, of *knowing how*, which is distinct from but not necessarily inferior to *knowing something to be the case* (p. 225). Hence the two prongs of Kramnick’s initial question.

Second moment: Ryle does not provide an answer to the question raised by Donald Davidson concerning the deft use of quotation, namely, “how to get from the competence of the assembly to the truth of the statement” (p. 229). What is the bridge from *knowing how* to *knowing that*? The former, Kramnick asserts, could be seen as a “species” of the latter, a claim that partially effaces the difference between them (p. 229).

Third moment: because this second position suggests that *knowing that* enjoys some sort of priority over *knowing how*, as though what emerges from intellectual “rumination” determines what emerges from skilled practice, what is really needed according to Kramnick is “an account of know-how that describes the creation and discovery of truths in the practice itself. . . . The skilled practice of writing about writing makes something new in the act of interpreting it” (pp. 230, 231).

At this point the difference between the two initially postulated forms of knowledge has completely broken down. “Telling truths about the world

JOHN BRENKMAN is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and English, City University of New York Graduate Center and Baruch College. He is the author most recently of *Mood and Trope: The Rhetoric and Poetics of Affect* (2020). You can find more on his website johnbrenkman.com

itself” now has a meaning quite alien to the essay’s original question and far different from what knowledge and truth mean to Ryle or Davidson. The sign of the rupture is Kramnick’s abrupt turn to an altogether different tradition of thought, namely, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* with its Heideggerian lineage, in order to establish the creative dimension of literary interpretation. I’m left wondering, Why talk about Ryle, Davidson, and the debates around them at all? It’s not that there could not be an illuminating encounter staged between Gadamerian hermeneutics and Anglo-American philosophy of language and knowledge, but no such encounter occurs here. The way Gadamer’s thought comes into the argument in effect simply establishes an altogether different, and fruitful, starting point, not a refinement or refutation of Ryle and Davidson.

Let me venture to reformulate Kramnick’s endpoint: *Criticism is a skilled performance that transforms its ostensible object into something else, something new, which is bound up with the critic’s own various literary and worldly concerns.* That is indeed a viable understanding of the vocation and art of criticism. What, though, constitutes the validity or truth of the performance? There is considerable ambiguity, or polysemy, in the idea of performance. Kramnick sometimes means the successful exercise of a skill (a surgeon performs an appendectomy) and sometimes suggests performance as something enacted for an appreciative audience with shared values. There is also the undeveloped hint of performance as an act whose validity lies solely in the enactment, a means without an end: “To look at embedded quotations is just to see criticism and its objects gotten right (or wrong) in the fine structure of the performance” (p. 239). The equivocation remains as to where the validity or truth of the critic’s performance lies.

I think Kramnick is barking up the wrong tree in seeking an “epistemology of literary criticism” and declaring that “literary criticism has a method that aims at truth just as the sciences do,” albeit without “the same method as the sciences or the same understanding of its method” (pp. 237, 239). Having edged toward a purely performative sense of validity, he comes close to a consensus view of truth as a critical statement’s “aptness to compel our assent” (p. 237). Consensus in literary studies is highly provisional and always contested; ours is a field of inquiry in which claims of validity are indeed inseparable from method, but there is permanent contestation among a plurality of methods. The vitality of the discipline lies in *not* having a foundational or universally embraced method. That’s why Kramnick must ultimately offer the clarification that the well-nigh universal discursive practice of in-sentence quotation that he so cogently describes is not after all a method: “In-sentence quotation is not literary critical method itself nor is it all of close reading” (p. 237). If it is not a method, then it does not have a claim on truth.

“Asking whether a reading is true,” Kramnick writes, “is just another way of asking whether the critic has applied her ‘special criteria’ to her ‘special tasks’ and so ‘gotten it right’” (p. 237). It’s more accurate to say that we never get a text *right*, but we can get it *wrong*. This is the import of the statement that Kramnick cites from Gadamer in arguing for criticism’s creativity: “‘There is something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation’” (p. 233). By the same token, I think that a careful reading of *Truth and Method* would bring out that Gadamer’s view is that for hermeneutics it is a question of truth *or* method. He associates method with the objectivating procedures of the natural and social sciences in contrast to the hermeneutical understanding that needs to prevail and be preserved in the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The reason there can be no “unique, correct interpretation” is that the meaning of a cultural creation unfolds in time in the strong sense that it continues to be meaningful in successive decades and centuries because its meaning changes; at any particular moment in history the interpretation of those works that still speak to the interpreters do so because they can be integrated into the tradition from which the works come and from which the interpreters derive their capacity to understand, in a kind of global circular interplay of part and whole. At that moment in the present, the valid interpretation is the one that most fully, however tacitly, engages the tradition as a whole in understanding the part. In that sense, at a given historical moment there is in fact a valid interpretation. In short, Gadamer offers neither the linkage of method *and* truth that Kramnick seeks nor the plural and contestatory conception of criticism and interpretation that I am affirming.

Let’s reset the problematic one more time. Kramnick is mistaken, in my view, in the way he distinguishes literary criticism from other disciplines. He overlooks the fact that the skill of in-sentence quotation is essential to analysis and interpretation in many disciplines, most obviously among historians (especially intellectual historians), political theorists, and those philosophers for whom commentary on philosophical texts is key to *doing philosophy*, not to mention theologians and legal scholars.

What is missed in turn is the very thing that distinguishes the practice of literary criticism. The import of quoted passages in a critical essay does not lie in what the phrase in itself signifies nor in its new resonances within the critic’s prose. Rather, it stems from the fact that the passage does not stand on its own but derives its significance from the work to which it belongs and to whose significance it contributes. Such is the missing hermeneutical insight, despite the evocation of Gadamer. Also missing from Kramnick’s account, or perhaps assumed to be so self-evident that it ceases to be evident, is the aesthetic provenance of literary quotations. Each quoted passage

belongs to a literary work, that is, an artwork, which is, has been, and must be experienced aesthetically. The validity, the *truth*, of aesthetic experience and judgment, as Immanuel Kant first recognized, refers to no standard or precedent. Assent cannot be compelled. The urge to persuade is internal to aesthetic judgment, and when that urge eventuates in critical discourse, the appeal to others' agreement is made without the presupposition or guarantee of agreement. The art of criticism lies just there. It is an effort of persuasion that commits itself to the ordeal of universalism even as it recognizes the impossibility of universal agreement. It enacts a performative universality. As an art, its values include, as Kramnick enumerates, *aptness*, *adroitness*, *elegance*, and *perspicuity*. Truth is undoubtedly at stake, but what sense of *truth* has slipped through his fingers.