

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Criticism as a Practice of the Commons

JOSEPH NORTH

Introduction

Over the last decade many literary academics have been reflecting on aims and methods. Those of us gathered in this section are, shall we say, tolerably united in our view that we should give new thought to the category of the aesthetic, though we understand this task differently. For my part, I have proposed elsewhere that literary studies would be better able to contribute to the central struggles of our time if our highly developed existing program of historical and cultural analysis (“literary scholarship”) were accompanied by an equally sophisticated program of aesthetic education (“literary criticism”). Some have found this proposal thought-provoking; others, not.¹ In any case, it has caused at least some to wonder what “literary criticism” might look like under such a paradigm. In this short essay I experiment with one idea worth considering: What if we articulated the aims of criticism by way of the category of “the commons”? I take it that a version of this thought has occurred to many people, and I am not proposing anything radically new—but I do hope to offer a clear point of entry into this line of thinking, the better to assess how promising it might or might not be. I suggest that the language of the commons may help us address two important problems: the problem of how a specialized critical institution might understand its relationship to critical practices circulating in the society at large, and the problem of how a specialized critical institution might justify its role in cultivating necessarily value-laden practices of aesthetic judgment (though because of space constraints I focus mainly on the first of these). I also briefly express some doubts about this line of thinking, chiefly the fact that many of today’s commons exist largely at the pleasure of states and markets.

JOSEPH NORTH is assistant professor of English at Yale University. He is the author of *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Harvard UP, 2017) and is at work on two further books: “Our Mobs” (a history of the concept of the “mob”) and “The Aesthetic Life of Centrism” (a literary and aesthetic critique of political centrism).

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151

Groundwork: Five Meanings of *Criticism*

To begin, let me list five senses of the term *criticism*, not as an exercise in semantics, but to bring some less remarked aspects of criticism into view. I have already alluded to the first, very specialized sense of *criticism*: this is “literary criticism” as a disciplinary program of aesthetic education, understood as distinct from “literary scholarship.” To many this meaning seems so narrow as to be negligible, but most major histories of the discipline agree that it was central to literary studies from the 1920s to around the 1970s.² More familiar within today’s literary studies is a second, broader meaning: “literary criticism” as “most of the research performed by literature professors,” including scholarly projects not necessarily connected to any explicit program of aesthetic education, such as the writing of cultural history, literary history, or literary sociology. These first two meanings of *criticism* are largely confined to the academy, but in wider public discussion the term usually bears a third sense, referring to journalistic reviewing carried out in the public sphere—book reviews, film reviews, and so on.

I have summarized these three senses of *criticism* in very bald terms; I hope they at least sound familiar. But somewhere at the outer border of this third category, things become more interesting. If I am the official music critic for *The New York Times*, then I am writing journalistic criticism—but what if I write my review of an album on a personal website, or post it on social media, or simply blurt it out unprompted at my friends? Which of these activities counts as “criticism” in our third sense? I am not interested in identifying a precise boundary, but it seems fair to say that at some point along this continuum—certainly by the time I arrive at “discussing music with friends”—I am performing a kind of critical activity importantly distinct from journalistic reviewing in the public sphere. Let me then propose a fourth and wider sense of *criticism* as, very roughly, any second-order evaluative discussion of matters of art, entertainment, craft, and beauty. To avoid ambiguity, allow me to call the various criticalish activities that make up criticism in this fourth

sense “lay criticism,” not to condescend to those activities, but simply to distinguish them from the more obviously professionalized forms. In passing I will add that I think this kind of everyday critical activity is of tremendous importance, and I wish we would study it more.³

This capacious definition rapidly opens outward onto a fifth and even wider sense of the term *criticism*. For of course ordinary social interaction teems with second-order discussions of art, entertainment, craft and beauty at various levels of explicitness, from recommending a book to a friend through asking your partner “what do you want to watch tonight?” all the way to turning off the car radio when you hear a song you don’t like, or changing the station in the hope of finding one you do. Aesthetic evaluation happens all the time, at a host of levels simultaneously, simply during everyday living, and it does not seem beyond the pale to think of these everyday habits of assessment as incipiently “critical.”

In some ways the least explicit of these are the most interesting. To get a bead on this, let us imagine that you and I are in the same room, and neither of us is explicitly thinking about literature, art, or similar. Even in the absence of “criticism” in any of the first four senses, it seems to me likely that our interaction will be proceeding against a background of habits and mentalities that can indeed be thought of as incipiently “critical.” Even though we are not discussing fiction in any obvious way, it may well be the case that to a certain degree, knowingly or not, I have modeled parts of my personality on one or another fictional character. Meanwhile, it may be that your sense of a plausible life trajectory is strongly mediated by your exposure to specific narrative forms. At the same time, my intuitions about what you are thinking might be based to a fair degree on the conventions of the psychological novel, whether or not I have read one; whereas you may be articulating to yourself your strong feelings of homesickness primarily in the form of a lyric cry, even if your lived habituation into the affective structure of lyric address derives most directly from your exposure to the “Oh baby, baby” apostrophes of popular song. This is all merely to trace a few

of the subterranean workings of literature, together with other narrative, dramatic, and lyric forms to which it relates: once we open out toward the artistic or even the aesthetic in general, things become geometrically more complex and interesting. Even though we're not discussing architecture, we both may be somewhat repelled by the space we're inhabiting, you because you encounter its sloping ceiling as formally dissonant, and me because I encounter in its stainless steel a range of off-putting social cues. Even though we're not discussing photography, we each perhaps sadly encounter the other's face as a bit lopsided, because our perceptual apparatus compares living faces with digitally adjusted ones. Even though we're far from discussing the politics of modern dance, nevertheless you tend to quote something like a hip-hop gesture when you're acting tough, and I tend to judge you for it, since it seems slightly pretentious or perhaps even racist to me, depending on how else you present yourself. And so on.

My examples may be wide of the mark, but I hope at least it is apparent that the phenomena we are now discussing are very hard to distinguish from the texture of social life itself. Such phenomena seem richly aesthetic, in at least some important senses of *that* complex term, and this means that they are also, crucially, matters of evaluation and judgment: in a sense, they are the substrate out of which more formal kinds of critical evaluation are built. What to call this fifth and broadest kind of critical or protocritical activity? I tend to think of it as the "critical function" operating within the social, but I don't have too much invested in the phrase; others may prefer other terms. In any case we now have five rough senses of criticism, from very narrow to very broad: first, specialized disciplinary efforts to cultivate new ranges of sensibility; second, the research work of academic literary studies as a whole; third, journalistic reviewing; fourth, informal or "lay" criticism; and fifth, the protocritical substrate (if you like!), or else the "critical function" as it extends throughout the texture of the social itself.

Now, I have run these off very rapidly as a simple list, each item of which is in some ways an expansion of the last, but let me now turn and treat them

instead as a chain of mediation. For if we aim to build a critical project within literary studies that possesses a limited agency with respect to society at large, then at some stage it will become important to trace a causal chain that leads from criticism in the first sense to criticism in the fifth. This brings us squarely up against the first of the two problems I mentioned at the start of this essay: the problem of how a specialized, institutionalized practice of criticism might relate to the less choate, more widely distributed critical practices that extend throughout the texture of the social. How ought we to articulate this relationship?

The Language of the Commons

This is where the language of the commons might seem promising. Would it help to conceptualize the practices that make up "criticism" in our fourth and fifth senses as "commons"? These practices are governed mostly by custom rather than explicit law or regulation, and are not usually the sole property of individuals, corporations, or states, but instead are held in solution within the social body itself, circulating relatively (but only relatively) freely by means of the medium of culture, in a manner that is difficult (though not impossible) wholly to privatize, fence in, or enclose. In some respects, then, they bear an initial resemblance to phenomena often described as "commons," such as early modern village greens, the atmosphere, and the sum of human knowledge.⁴ In fact, one might even propose that the whole discourse of the commons is an attempt to solve a problem of the kind I have just outlined: an attempt to find a language in which to articulate the relationship between specific institutions and resources that are both widely distributed and somewhat fuzzily defined. Provisionally, then, let us posit the existence of something we might call a "cultural commons," a "commons of sensibility," or an "aesthetic commons," which encompasses the bodies of cultural capability that constitute criticism in the fourth and fifth senses.

What might we gain or lose by conceptualizing criticism in this way? Three things seem promising about this move, though I must add some words of

caution after listing them. First, as soon as you describe something as a commons, you are inclined to pose questions like, “Who has access to this, and who controls that access?”—and you are inclined to want to answer both questions by nominating groups, rather than individuals. Thus, to reconceptualize the final object of criticism as an “aesthetic commons” is to call attention to the question of who accesses which parts of the aesthetic commons, and who controls or regulates that access—and it raises those questions in such a manner as to suggest the importance of something akin to common, communal, or popular access and control. What would it mean to insist on communal or popular control over the aesthetic commons? One advantage of this idiom is that it allows and inclines us to ask questions of this kind.

Second, when you describe something as a commons, you quickly find yourself inquiring into its quality. Is this commons healthy, fertile, viable? Which uses enrich it, and which degrade it? Is this manner of use sustainable? In the past decade many literary thinkers have argued that we need to make a programmatic commitment to aesthetic judgment, while others have argued that we need to consider aesthetic texts from the standpoint of their utility.⁵ To speak of an “aesthetic commons” is to make both these claims simultaneously, in that it inclines us always to be assessing aesthetic value, while presuming that aesthetic value means value for some use. Moreover, it asks us to consider value and utility over both the short and the long terms, which is crucial for any discussion of culture. Positing the existence of an aesthetic commons makes you want to ask, of each aesthetic practice, not simply, Is this proving effective for the people using it in this immediate situation?—though that remains an important question—but also, Is this practice compatible with the continued health of the aesthetic commons as a whole? That is a restatement, in new terms, of a classic question in the history of criticism, though it is one that often has been asked with some very snobbish assumptions behind it, instead of being asked against the background of a strong presumption in favor of popular access and popular control.

Third, once you begin to inquire into the quality of a commons, you see the need to identify threats, and defenses against those threats. What degrades, pollutes, or encloses this commons? What defends its quality, its long-term viability, and its communal character? Are these defenses robust enough to resolve disputes about access and use in a fair manner, even when doing so means facing down powerful actors? When one asks such questions of an aesthetic commons, they too turn out to be classic critical questions, newly stated. Critics have always identified enemies to the aesthetic and cultural values they hold dear. The idiom of the commons makes one want to identify those actors who are exploiting or enclosing the aesthetic commons and to create mechanisms for defending against them, thereby helping ensure the richest, most sustainable forms of communal use. Surely under the right conditions one (just one!) of these mechanisms for the defense of the aesthetic commons may be “literary criticism” in our first, narrowest sense. To illustrate a single, small aspect of this—in the hope that you won’t misunderstand me as claiming that it covers the field—let me recall the strong emphasis that many twentieth-century critics placed on arming people against the pernicious effects of industries devoted to manipulating the aesthetic commons for private gain: the industries of advertising, marketing, public relations, and so on. In the UK and its colonies the culturally, though not politically, radical Leavisites were especially emphatic about this, and their emphasis on it fed directly into the politically radical work of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Now, from a left perspective this was always a partial project, the real implications of which were never fully embraced. But the project of fighting to enrich the aesthetic resources of the culture, precisely in the face of those who would manipulate and pollute them for private gain, still seems to me a damned good project, as far as it goes—and I will go so far as to add that today some version of that project seems more necessary than ever, given the stunning corporate capture of the social texture that has taken place over the last fifteen years, with so much of our subjective and collective lives now routed through, and directly

manipulated by, social media driven by big data. Among other things, this has been a remarkably successful attempt to produce, exploit, and enclose a vast array of aesthetic commons. Another benefit of understanding criticism as a practice of the commons is that it puts the spotlight directly on these new forms of exploitation and enclosure, and asks us to do something about them.

I am a critic of liberalism from the left, but since many of us work within neoliberal universities, it is worth observing that it ought to be possible to recognize the need for a critical project of this kind, in principle, even in liberal terms (though I feel bound at least to add that liberalism, no less than other political ideologies, has yet to live up to its best stated principles). If you recognize the existence of an aesthetic commons, and you also recognize the existence of a wide array of powerful actors who are manipulating or enclosing parts of that commons for private gain, then in principle it is apparent that you need to establish some new way of managing that commons in accordance with the common interest.⁶ What mechanisms does liberalism provide for protecting the aesthetic commons against state and market actors? It seems to me that in principle, part (never all) of the answer ought to be the formal institutions of criticism in at least the first and second senses. Critics are, or ought to be, among those charged with cultivating the health of the aesthetic commons, rendering it richer and better suited to human needs, while protecting it against enclosure and encroachment by state and market interests.

My larger point is that the language of the commons would seem to allow us to pose again the perennial question of “culture,” though in a new way. What does a good culture look like, and how can one enrich and defend it? Our answers to these questions have depended very much on our underlying conceptions of “culture.” In the early and mid twentieth century, much criticism (in the first sense) proceeded with a broadly Arnoldian model of culture: “the best that has been thought and said,” and so forth. This model of culture had the benefit of allowing us to make judgments about the value of different cultural forms, yet

famously this came at a considerable cost, since those judgments tended to reinforce regressive power relations (to take just one pungent example, the parafascism of T. S. Eliot’s aspiration to “purify the language of the tribe”). As a result, since the 1970s and 1980s our discipline, among others, has turned to a less value-laden, more anthropological conception of “culture” as something that by definition everyone has, not just the few: “you have your culture, I have mine; let us not judge.” I am thinking here first of all of the early Raymond Williams slogan “culture is ordinary,” and of the birth of cultural studies approaches more broadly, but one could also think of the whole history of the rejection of the aesthetic in this period, especially and crucially Pierre Bourdieu’s. This shift to an anthropological model of culture had the benefit of exposing the fact that hierarchies of aesthetic taste often reinforce evidently pernicious hierarchies, especially those of class, race, and gender. That was a real victory and I think we ought to defend it—but it, too, came at a cost. One cost was that it became more difficult to advance normative claims about culture, certainly including claims about aesthetic value. This abandonment of aesthetic judgment effectively left questions of aesthetic value to be determined by the market.

As many have noted, one task facing critics today is to find a way to make aesthetic judgments without simply reinforcing pernicious power relations. In some respects, the language of the commons seems to offer a way out of this trap. If you imagine yourself, Matthew Arnold-style, as the defender of high culture, then your natural enemies are the philistine, the barbarian, and the mass, and your default action may be to judge and sneer; whereas if you imagine yourself, cultural studies-style, as a defender of “ordinary culture,” then your natural enemies are the snob and the critic, and your default action may be to criticize aesthetic judgment itself—at which point it becomes difficult to advance critical claims at all. But if we imagine criticism as the defense and enrichment of an aesthetic commons, our natural enemies are privatizers and polluters—which in blunt terms mostly means corporations and states, to the precise extent that

they represent the interest of the class that seeks to enclose and exploit aesthetic commons, which ought to be kept accessible and viable for all. And our default action is continually to assess and seek to improve the aesthetic commons, while beating the bounds to exclude exploiters and ensure communal access and control. Viewed from this angle, the language of the commons would seem to provide us with a way of insisting on both the aesthetic principle of always praising the highest quality and the radical democratic principle of popular power.

Now, such a view of criticism certainly has its limits, and even as I propose it here, it fills me with doubts. Can anything framed as a “commons” truly stand against the forces that oppose it? As Akeel Bilgrami has incisively if sadly observed, “the subject of the commons is really the subject of its loss” (21). Though many of those who celebrate commons understand them as alternatives to states and markets, in capitalist modernity, whenever commons are threatened (as distinct from merely overlooked), their practical defense seems finally to require either the state or the market.⁷ But having noted these doubts, I am forced to leave them for another time, my aim in this short essay simply being to offer a basic introduction to this line of thinking. I find it helpful and, in some respects, promising; I hope others may, too.

NOTES

1. To my mind the most productive debate has been in the *New Left Review*. See Mulhern; Seaton; McManus; Nersessian; Kunkel.

2. I make this case in *Literary Criticism*, but see also Baldick; Graff; Guillory. For a recent dissenting view, see Buurma and Heffernan.

3. For example, it would be extremely interesting to learn more about the genesis of the key critical concepts people use to assess aesthetic texts in their daily lives, such as “reliability,” “relevance,” “truth,” and so on. Such a study would have something in common with Ngai’s study of “our aesthetic categories,” but it would focus on lay critical terms—on meta-aesthetic judgment, if you like—rather than on the affective character of the aesthetic experience itself. Of interest here is James English’s yet-to-be-published work on the critical judgments people express online, as well as the essays collected in Gallup, especially Warner.

4. For a good place to begin familiarizing oneself with the conventional discourse on the commons, see Laerhoven and Ostrom.

5. Clune, “Judgment” and *Defense*; and Felski offer key examples from each camp. Since Clune is one of the respondents here, it is worth taking this moment to clear up a misunderstanding between us. In “Judgment and Equality” Clune critiques me for trying to have an aesthetics without judgment. I can see where he got this idea: I do want to stress that posing questions of aesthetic value need not mean fetishizing the act of judgment. But that is a different thing, and in fact I wholeheartedly agree that a commitment to aesthetic value necessitates a commitment to making aesthetic judgments (indeed, I had thought that was implicit in my book *Literary Criticism*: for instance, it is the basis for my somewhat Felski-like insistence that we should always go on to ask “aesthetic value for what?”). There is a second misunderstanding between us on the question of equality, which the word count requires me to leave for another time, but briefly: yes, unlike Clune I think equality is crucial; no, I do not mistake it for a final value (“from each according to ability, to each according to need” is not a principle of equality); and, no, equality and expertise in aesthetic judgment are not fundamentally opposed, any more than equality and, say, medical expertise are fundamentally opposed—we simply need to have a nontrivial conception of equality. Apologies for my brevity here.

6. Yes, certain forms of free-market liberalism continually insist on Hardin’s fallacious “tragedy of the commons,” but other parts of liberalism have insisted on the importance of defending certain kinds of commons, the inevitable example being the Nobel Prize-winning work of Ostrom.

7. Bilgrami has proposed, in effect, that what he calls a “cultural commons” may be an exception to this rule, in that a certain set of background assumptions regarding the proper forms of sociality are the necessary foundation of any social order and thus can never fully be alienated or enclosed. In a sense his point is that some commons are always “overlooked” by their nature. This seems to me a rich insight (indeed the whole book is wonderful), but I am not as sanguine as Bilgrami about its entailments. More broadly, radical enthusiasts of the commons tend to celebrate commons’ ability to resist and even replace states and markets (the commons revolution is coming!), whereas liberal enthusiasts of the commons, looking at the same examples, tend to celebrate commons’ ability to cooperate and coexist with states and markets (phew, no revolution required). My sad sense here is that the radicals have tended to overstate the commons’ political potential (see, e.g., Caffentzis, who I think underemphasizes cooperation between commons, states, and markets in his treatment of the celebrated case of the Maine lobster industry).

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