

DOING CRITICISM

ACROSS LITERARY AND SCREEN ARTS

JAMES CHANDLER



WILEY Blackwell

Doing Criticism

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Doing Criticism: Across
Literary and Screen Arts

James Chandler

WILEY

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For my students at the University of Chicago,
1976–2021,
and those yet to come

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Preface

This is a book about the act of criticism, about what might be worth saying in the encounter with a poem, a novel, a play, a film, or a television series. This act of saying can assume many forms, but I attend most keenly to it when it assumes the form of a critical essay. At the same time, I also stress that there are no fixed rules for what counts as a critical essay. An essay can be a short review, an artful fragment, a course paper, or a long scholarly article. Sometimes the critical essay appears as a dialogue—as in Henry James’ published *Conversation* about George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Scripted critical conversations can also be embedded in a film, or a novel, or a television series episode. Think of critical discussions of contemporary poets in the Bath sitting room of a Jane Austen novel, or arguments about the relative merits of contemporary rappers on the Brooklyn streets of a Spike Lee film. Such embedded moments, indeed, can convey a sense of criticism’s relation to everyday life, how it matters in and to everyday life—a recurring theme in this book.

The critical essay can assume other forms as well. In a once familiar but now unfashionable case, Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (1711), composed by the poet in heroic couplets at the age of twenty-three, it takes the form of a poem, one that includes the following memorable couplet:

’Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
Go just alike, but each man trusts his own.

Pope’s witty conceit allows me to pose another central question of this book: what makes criticism tick? The question of course presumes that criticism is actually still ticking, which perhaps does not always go without saying these days. I address that question about criticism’s possible demise, too, and also, though less explicitly, that of why it is that the analogy of critical judgment to the mechanism of an eighteenth-century timepiece, with its underlying assumption of fixed rules in both cases, is ultimately inadequate.

This book began with an invitation to write one toward a slightly different title, *How to Do Criticism*, for a series at Blackwell. Prior entries in the series had included David Damrosch’s *How to Read World Literature* and Wolfgang Iser’s *How to Do Theory*, books that proved it was possible to get a lot done in an introductory format. Blackwell’s specific proposal to me

offered the prospect of doing something in support of what had come to seem a beleaguered intellectual enterprise. My only condition, on accepting the charge, was that the book must embrace both literary criticism and criticism in the screen arts, especially cinema. Although it eventually evolved beyond its initial brief, the book also profited by that first conception. The ambition was to reach a range of readers, including undergraduate students and non-academics, with an accessible approach to the subject, but without confining discussion to strictly elementary matters—and yes, to include some “how to” advice for undertaking criticism in the present time.

The book that emerged—*Doing Criticism: Across Literary and Screen Arts*—thus keeps faith with the original objectives of *How to Do Criticism*, which had included advice not only about how to engage productively with a critical object—a poem, or a novel, or a film—but also how to sustain analysis in argument, how to reach judgments, and how to support them. Over time, however, it became a book not only about the *hows* of criticism, but also about the *whys* and *wherefores*, the *whats*, the *whens*, and even the *whethers*. It came to concern itself, that is, with criticism’s reasons and motives, its objects, occasions, and sustaining conditions. Such questions are addressed most directly in Part 1, but they are also elaborated in the introductory sections to the four chapters in Part 2, where a range of specific categories central to my approach to criticism here are identified and explained: *conversation*, *adaptation*, *genre*, *authorship*, and *seriality*.

From the start, it had been part of my plan for the book not only to prescribe guidelines for effective criticism but also to perform them, to offer examples of criticism in action. Each of the four chapters of Part 2 thus also includes not only an exposition of a critical category—genre, say—but also a pair of critical essays that I have written for this book. If I have done my work well, these essays should *both* illustrate how the five categories of Part 2 are actualized in practice *and* lend a more concrete sense to some of the “how to” guidelines discussed in Part 1—especially Chapter 2’s advice about the essay form itself as a vehicle for criticism. To be clear, these essays are not offered *merely* as illustrative exercises. In each case, I have sought to produce an original piece of critical work on a topic I take to be of genuine interest. I have, in other words, tried to strike a balance between lending a degree of autonomy to the essays and ensuring that they play their role within the larger framework of the book.

There is also another balance I have tried to strike. On the one hand, I view criticism as a recognized field of codified endeavor with an ancient pedigree extending back two and a half millennia. On the other, I acknowledge that criticism has seen many incarnations and reorientations over its long history—changing functions with the changing times. The criticism that

flourished among the slaveholding male culture of the ancient Greeks and the criticism that draws energy from post-structuralism, feminism, and Critical Race Theory diverge dramatically on many scores. Although the varieties of criticism have been many over the centuries, many more than I have been able to acknowledge here, even some of the most divergent practices, as I try to suggest in the book's final pages, may be seen as part of a larger disciplinary frame of reference involving the critical relation of analysis and judgment.

Because this book has always been about the *doing* of criticism, it finds a special point of orientation in the work of I. A. Richards, the Cambridge polymath who is generally credited for establishing the discipline that he himself called "practical criticism." To rethink the work of practical criticism anew here, I found myself inevitably going back to Richards' bold pedagogical experiments of nearly a century ago at Cambridge, and to his democratizing efforts to challenge large groups of (almost exclusively) white male patrician students there at the level of their most fundamental intellectual formation: how they read. Richards' was a bracing project with enormous consequences for criticism. In the end, however, this book departs from his programmatic approach to doing criticism in three crucial respects.

The first has to do with the fact that Richards restricted his focus to literature, to reading—more precisely, to reading poetry on the page. I care deeply about the criticism of poetry, and it is my starting point here, but again my aim in this book has always been to broaden the scope of practical criticism to include not just literary arts but also screen arts. The stakes here are perhaps somewhat greater than they might seem, in that Richards made it clear that he saw the proper study of poetry on the page as the solution to a cultural problem for which he thought cinema partly to blame. The second departure is that where Richards insisted on taking the critical object in isolation—"the poem itself"—I stress the importance of considering critical objects in connection with one another, what I here call relational criticism. All five of the major rubrics that organize Part 2 of this book—conversation, adaptation, genre, author, and seriality—can be understood as relational in this sense. And finally, Richards did not much attend to the art of writing criticism. Instead, he gathered his students' responses to poems in the form of what he called "protocols," relatively informal reactions to the unidentified texts he distributed in his classroom experiments. This book, however, both discusses and illustrates the doing of criticism as a kind of craft—again, especially in the form of the essay, a literary genre with both a long history in its own right and a strong connection to the practice of criticism.

There are many worthy goals that this book does not pursue. It does not claim to offer a systematic method for criticism. Nor does it try to ground what principles or guidelines it offers in a general theory of criticism, though critical theory does inform the book at all points and is sometimes addressed directly. While working on this book, I have published essays in scholarly journals such as *Critical Inquiry* (on I. A. Richards and Raymond Williams) and *New Literary History* (on the question of critical sensibility) that pursue some of its key issues for readers interested in theory and the history of criticism; these are cited along the way. On another front, it must be acknowledged that there is little or no attention here to non-Western traditions, though important lines of criticism and commentary can be traced back centuries in many civilizations around the world. Many good books can be found about these traditions, and many more about how some of these traditions have overlapped and interacted with criticism in the line of the Greeks and Romans. I am not competent to undertake such tasks.

Indeed, it will be clear at some points, I'm sure, that my own intellectual formation, before broadening my literary horizons and ultimately joining and then chairing the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, was in the study of Romanticism, especially Romantic poetry. Some of the critical views that receive the most attention in this book belong to the poet-critics of that moment. Part of what has always been compelling for me about the Romantics, however, is their ongoing role in generating critical ideas and practices, even as they resisted the assumption of fixed rules on the part of writers like Pope. I. A. Richards himself was steeped in the poetic thinking of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and he recognized that it had broader implications for literature, media, and culture. It is surely fair to say that many subsequent developments in criticism over the century since Richards made his breakthrough have been made by scholars who began their work in the Romantic field. Romanticism may not have the same importance for criticism and theory as it once did, but it is still, I find, an intellectual and artistic movement to be reckoned with. I hope this book bears me out.

Acknowledgments

In a book that emphasizes the critical importance of seeing works of art in conversation with each other, I have perhaps not attended as much as I might have to the conversation that takes place within criticism itself. Aspiring to reach a wider readership than I typically have in the past, I have not always specified precisely how arguments in this book might matter to the various subfields in which they are explicitly or implicitly situated. To be sure, the book has plenty of footnotes—perhaps too many to suit the taste of some readers—but they tend not to stake claims within a larger critical discussion, nor even to admit the extent of my debts to it. A book premised on the value of criticism should fully acknowledge the importance of existing critical work to its making. I hereby offer that acknowledgment.

This book has also profited by conversations in the most literal sense of the term with many friends and colleagues over the years. At Chicago, I would like to salute Tim Campbell, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Maud Ellmann, Frances Ferguson, Norma Field, Berthold Hoeckner, Patrick Jagoda, Heather Keenleyside, Jo McDonagh, Rochona Majumdar, Françoise Meltzer, Tom Mitchell, Dan Morgan, Richard Neer, Debbie Nelson, Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, Jacqueline Stewart, Ken Warren, Lisa Wedeen, David Wellbery, John Wilkinson, and the late Marshall Sahlins. At Chicago, too, I was able to teach courses related to the topics of this book to the most intellectually committed students imaginable—courses on film and fiction, Irish literature and cinema, literary typologies, satire, melodrama, the literature of empire, media aesthetics, and, to be sure, Romanticism. It was a great boon to co-teach some of these courses with such talented colleagues as Martha Feldman, Jennifer Pitts, and Christiane Frye. Beyond Chicago, I wish to acknowledge colleagues whose learning and critical acumen I have come to depend on: Dudley Andrew, Ian Baucom, Homi Bhabha, Bradin Cormack, Peter de Bolla, Ian Duncan, Penny Fielding, Debjani Ganguly, Luke Gibbons, Sara Guyer, Paul Hamilton, Bill Keach, Margaret Kelleher, Rashid Khalidi, Declan Kiberd, Nigel Leask, Sandra Macpherson, Simon Schaffer, Laurie Shannon, Vincent Sherry, Ron Thomas, Domietta Torlasco, Katie Trumpener, and Clair Wills. I will sorely miss my conversations about

criticism over the years with the late Seamus Deane in the bar of Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel. Beyond the academy, I have enjoyed discussing films, over Zoom during the pandemic, with the brainy Hyde Park Film Group, who have helped me to imagine how to broaden the reach of this book. It was Iain McCalman who encouraged me to try such a book in the first place, though he is unsurpassed in his ability to craft one.

Very special thanks are due to that “fit audience ... though few” who read and commented on the entire manuscript once it was drafted. This generous crew includes two press readers, Deidre Lynch and Garrett Stewart, as well as Claire Connolly and Joseph Bitney. Together they saved me from errors large and small and decidedly improved the book overall. My friend Bill Brown, alas, was unable to read a full draft of this book, as he has so generously done for me in the past, but he did offer some shrewd advice about it, for which I am all the more grateful in the circumstances. My thanks go to Allyson Field and Michael Chandler for giving me the benefit of their considerable wisdom on the Spike Lee chapter. Eleni Towns did a timely bit of archival work for me on that same chapter. Catherine Chandler helped with matters of tone and tact, and her sons, Jack and Sam, have been a constant reminder of what it means to live and learn with what the great critic William Hazlitt called *gusto*. Elizabeth Chandler, beyond everything else, read and listened to much of this book, and assessed a number of key passages for clarity. Her judgments were unfailingly helpful. I've learned most intimately about doing criticism from the teaching and generosity of four scholars (only one officially my teacher): in literary studies, Jerome McGann and the late Marilyn Butler; in film studies, Tom Gunning and the late Miriam Hansen. To them as well, as the poet wrote, “I may have owed another gift”: the example of how to take real pleasure in such work. This book is dedicated to my students at the University of Chicago, from whom I have learned much about criticism, to be sure, but also, especially in recent years, about resilience in the face of challenging times for the humanities. Many have succeeded in becoming the teachers of others, some the authors of books of their own, but the pride I take in all of their accomplishments is both enormous and unwarranted.

I was invited to rehearse some of the arguments and commentaries of this book publicly in a variety of venues. Among them I wish to acknowledge the CRASSH Center at Cambridge; the Humanities Research Center at the Australian National University; the Glasscock Center at Texas A&M; the University of Iowa; the University of Cardiff; Yale University; Chawton House; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Pennsylvania; Northwestern University; Princeton University; Trinity College Dublin; and the Paris Center of the University of Chicago. It was particularly helpful to

deliver a version of Chapter 1 as the plenary address to a large public audience for Humanities Day at Chicago some years ago. I thank my hosts for these opportunities, and the audiences for some searching questions. Thanks, too, to Deans Martha Roth and Anne Robertson for granting the research time to complete this book. I should add that it consists almost entirely of previously unpublished material, but a version of my discussion of Seamus Heaney's "Casualty" appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Winter 2015). At Wiley-Blackwell, I have worked with many editors and members of staff, from Emma Bennett, who first commissioned the book, to Liz Wingett, who saw it through the press. I thank them all for their flexibility and professionalism. Last by not least, Eric Powell, my research assistant, logged hundreds of hours on this book in the course of both my researching it and preparing it for publication. The book owes a great deal to his meticulous work on it.

PART



CRITICAL ISSUES

CHAPTER 1

Doing Criticism/Doing without Criticism

1.1 Functions of Criticism

Our word *criticism* comes from an ancient Greek word (*krinein*) meaning both to separate and to judge. Those two ideas, connected as they are, provide a usable working definition for most purposes. To see the intimate connection between discrimination and evaluation in the critical act, consider the anecdote offered by eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume in an essay that explains criticism in philosophical terms. The story is one that Hume himself borrowed from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and it is told by Sancho Panza about his kinsmen, who were reputed to be great judges of wine.

Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it, and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it.¹

Hume, whose Greek was very good, means us to understand by this story that analytic competence—the capacity to distinguish the elements in a composition—supports evaluative authority. Assessing the *quality* of something requires discerning its separate *qualities*. This is why Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, broke Greek tragedy down to its six component parts and, in judging some tragedies better than others, analytically isolated special kinds of moments (like reversal and discovery). The relationship between analysis and judgment was crucial to his pioneering efforts in criticism.

Criticism has sometimes been accused of pressing too hard with its analytic tasks and of coming down too hard with its judgments. The poet Wordsworth hints as much, with some irony, when he has one of his characters exclaim: “we murder to dissect.”² The American critic Wayne Booth once even turned this worry into a witty question: “Must Critics Kill?”³ These days the news is more likely to be about the demise of criticism itself, though there is reason to wonder about what that might mean. One guiding question for this book about doing criticism, indeed, is what to make of the thought that we might do without it. The question is not an idle one, for such a prospect has not long ago been raised by Ronan McDonald in *The Death of the Critic* (2005)—though he raised it in the context of a defense of criticism. There was a time when only cultural conservatives made such defenses. Yet recently, even a left-leaning cultural warrior like the Shakespearean Marjorie Garber advocated reviving criticism in her book *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011), proposing a method she calls “centripetal” reading.⁴ Or consider the unlikely testimony of literary theorist Terry Eagleton, who now laments the near extinction of an intellectual practice that he sees as formative in his own career: “Like thatching, or clog dancing,” writes the Irish-Briton Eagleton, “literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art.” It has been dying, he explains, for at least two academic generations: students don’t learn it because their teachers don’t teach it, not having been taught themselves. In a moment of candor, Eagleton acknowledges that “the charge may seem pretty rich, coming as it does from a literary theorist,” adding: “Wasn’t it literary theory, with its soulless abstractions and vacuous generalities, which destroyed the habit of close reading in the first place?”⁵ The question, one suspects, is tongue-in-cheek.

Eagleton’s formulations are especially useful on account of his all-but-explicit connection of criticism with the practice of close reading a poem. This connection provides a key to understanding the current situation. To see why, let’s first remember that, like history and philosophy, but unlike post-Enlightenment disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, or

biology, criticism is an intellectual pursuit that has in fact been around since the time of those ancient Greeks who coined the term. Indeed, criticism dates back almost as far in the Western tradition as the invention of writing and theater, further than Aristotle's *Poetics* (fourth century BCE), which already makes reference to still earlier ways of inquiring about poetic objects—earlier, even, than those of Aristotle's teacher Plato. This fact alone ought to give pause to those who expect criticism's imminent demise. It is true that in English departments around the world, a course in the history of criticism that begins with Plato and Aristotle and comes down to the present is no longer the standard offering it was eighty, fifty, or even thirty years ago. It may thus be reasonable to speculate that criticism has undergone some change in status—or at least in “function”—within the last two or three academic generations. Post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory: these have all shaped what it means to do criticism in recent decades. Yet, altering its function is something that criticism has been recognized as doing for a long time, certainly since Matthew Arnold's famous 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.”

In that seminal essay, Arnold argued that Romanticism had decisively changed the game for those who call themselves critics by casting the creative and critical principles in opposition, with perhaps the further insinuation that the latter was parasitical on the former. Arnold thought this story misleading in that it underestimated the role of criticism in cultivating the ground on which poetry flourishes in the first place. “The burst of creative activity” in English Romanticism, he wrote, “had about it in fact something premature”: “the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough.” Diminished by both the French Revolution and English utilitarianism, the Romantic poets had thus left behind even more diminished prospects for poetry. Criticism in 1864 thus needed all the more to provide the environments of thought and knowledge—what Arnold called simply “culture”—that might allow poetry to flourish anew.⁶ We needn't accept either Arnold's diagnosis or his specific prescription to agree with the idea that criticism changes function over time. Arnold's own “time” is not so distant from ours, but, taking a longer historical perspective, we see that criticism has changed in many ways over its long history. There have been moments when criticism has been more aligned with rhetoric and communication (as in the case of ancient Rome), or more aligned with poetics and craft (as in Aristotle's Greece), or more interested in the rules of art (as in neoclassicism), or more oriented toward the author's life and values (the nineteenth century), or

more oriented toward “the poem itself,” as T. S. Eliot said criticism must be in his twentieth century.⁷

Eliot’s notion of “the poem itself” came to be a kind of shibboleth for what is called the New Criticism, a movement inspired by the important early-twentieth-century British thinker I. A. Richards. Richards boldly established literary criticism at the center of an ambitious campaign to rehabilitate cultural values in his contemporary Britain, and he established the study of poetry at the center of literary criticism. The story of how he set out to achieve this goal is by now a familiar one. In 1925, the year after he published *Principles of Literary Criticism*, he undertook some far-reaching pedagogical experiments requiring students to respond in writing to clusters of poetic texts from which all markings of date or authorship had been removed. He attracted to his project some of the best literary minds of the period: William Empson, Muriel Bradbrook, and Eliot himself among them. Richards’ poetry courses had such an enormous following that classes had to meet in the streets of Cambridge for the first time in centuries. He published his findings from these classroom experiments in *Practical Criticism* (1929), one of the few genuinely seminal works of criticism in English since the nineteenth century.⁸

With these books, and through this group, and not least by the powerful force of his own charismatic example, Richards changed the way literature was studied. He made criticism the primary activity of the field of English, and he installed the notion of “close reading” at the center of that field. The American New Critics of the 1930s—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt—all acknowledged the leadership of Richards in showing them the way forward. In America, this enterprise of “practical criticism,” with the study of lyric poems in isolation, indeed became a centerpiece of liberal education for decades. And one of the most important features of this program was that it implicitly identified itself as a kind of activity or doing, for *practical* also derives from a Greek word (*prattein*), which means, precisely, to do.

The commission to write a book about how to do criticism thus necessarily returns me to this question of “practical criticism.” It will become clear, however, that I assign practical criticism a somewhat different function from that of Richards. It is one that builds upon Richards’ idea but enlarges the sphere in which criticism is called on to do its work.⁹ My aim is to illuminate how practical criticism might be effectively sustained in our moment partly by understanding its application to poetics in an *expanded field of reference*. I will explain what I mean by that in due course. By way of introduction to this book and this mission, however, I turn first to the task of providing

a sense of what it means to “do criticism” in the sense that Eagleton intends, just to provide a reminder of what criticism feels like when, to adapt a phrase from Keats, it is proven upon the pulses. I will then broaden the horizon of poetics beyond the study of lyric poetry to include not only literature broadly considered but also film and the motion picture arts. I wish not only to show a viable path forward for criticism “at the present time” but also to suggest that doing without criticism is not only imprudent but also perhaps impossible.

1.2 Two Thought Experiments

In the spirit of Richards’ experiments in criticism, then, let us now attempt a thought experiment of our own. Imagine that you share a refrigerator with someone—a sibling, a roommate, a partner, or a spouse. One groggy morning you go to open it, and you find stuck to its door the following message (Figure 1.1):

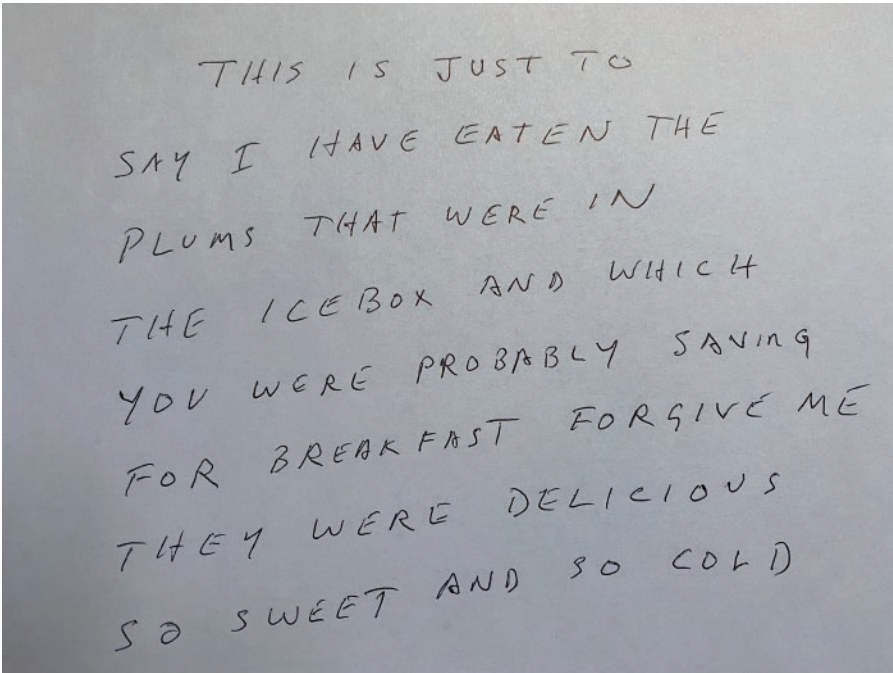


FIGURE 1.1 Prose transcription of Williams Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say,” handmade for this book by its author.

It is a fair guess you might be a little annoyed by this note, and perhaps a little puzzled. It might be said to raise questions. Why is the person who stole your plums telling you how good they tasted? Is this a confession or a declaration, an apology or a taunt? The answers to such questions would probably depend upon what terms you were on with your sibling, roommate, partner, spouse, or child. So would your general response: bemusement, irritation, anger. You might do something *on account of* this message. You might steal your sister's yogurt, confront your roommate, ask your partner if you have done something to deserve this bizarre treatment, scold your child. You might even laugh it off. But such a message doesn't call on you do anything *with* it. It doesn't call on you, that is, to "do criticism." Its questions tend to be of a different order from those of criticism.

Now imagine, instead, that you open a standard anthology of poetry, and you find the following:

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

(William Carlos Williams, 1934)¹⁰

This arrangement of words (twenty eight of them, not counting the title) asks for a different kind of response. Such words, so disposed, along with the context in which they appear, do ask you to do something with them. They ask you to perform an act of criticism. They do so, furthermore, by raising a further set of questions. Why should so apparently plain and simple a statement be produced in a formal arrangement of twelve lines in three stanzas? Is the title part of the poem or separate from the poem? Given the fact that the words seem to take the shape of a poem, why does the title emphasize the idea of words reduced to the most basic message they can communicate: "This is *just* to say"? Why is a simple statement given such an arrangement? Why does it include the detail about how good the plums taste? Is the speaker asking forgiveness for taking the plums in the first place or for not being able to resist an evaluation that adds insult to injury?

Some of these questions might loosely connect with those we might have asked ourselves if the note were in prose form and left by someone with whom we shared a fridge. The differences are nonetheless important. In this case, for example, we don't know who the speaker of these words is supposed to be. We have to imagine both a speaker and an addressee, because neither is given. We don't know if the two are on good terms or bad. In the *Norton Anthology*, the poem is identified with an author, William Carlos Williams. We may or may not know that the author was one of the foremost American poets of the early twentieth century. We may or may not know that he is from Rutherford, New Jersey. There is a date of publication, too, 1934, which might lead us to think about this composition as belonging to a past moment in time. That was the middle of the Great Depression, when money was short and food was scarce, especially luxury foods like plums. Does that matter to the way we respond to these words? "Icebox," in that light, might thus come to seem less like a peculiar expression that our grandmother would have used than perhaps a marker of the poet's historical moment. How might that sort of historical indicator figure in what we do with this form of words, this thing that seems to be proposing itself as a poem?

The more we look at the words in this way, critically, taking them as making up a poem, the more we are likely to experience the effect that the Germans call *Verfremdung*, or defamiliarization, and the Russians *ostranenie*—and the stranger its apparently simple "message" becomes.¹¹ The request to be forgiven for stealing the plums (which seems to lie in the realm of ethical responsibility) is followed by the description of what it was like to eat them (which seems to belong to the realm of sensual pleasure). Is the description of the pleasure meant to explain the act of theft? To excuse it? To justify it? "I know I stole your plums, but all I can say is they were so good to eat." Is that implied "all I can say" what the poem has "just to say"? And then there is another range of questions. If this is supposed to be a poem, how are we to judge if it is a good poem? How does its versification matter, the fact that it is arranged in very brief lines and stanzas? Is there a logic to these line breaks and stanza breaks? Is the poem's versification—its management of rhythm—handled well or badly?

When we pose such questions of words that we encounter in this way, we are beginning to do criticism. We are beginning to engage with the words in an active process of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. This active process involves formulating questions and working out answers. This activity of posing and addressing questions, moreover, has its own medium and form of expression—in my case here, that of English prose paragraphs. As with other activities, the more we practice it—on such objects, in such a medium—the more adept we become. And with such adeptness comes the capacity to bring a new kind of value into being alongside the value of the object in question—and this will hold true even when, as must often happen, we find fault with the

poem. If one wanted to identify a small fault in this poem, for example, it might be the switch in relative pronouns from “that” to “which,” where, grammatically, “that” should appear in both instances. I can think of possible defenses of this switch. One might call it a deliberate performance of colloquial speech, for example, though I don’t myself find this defense very convincing. We might also defend the switch of pronouns as a sign of haste. We know that William Carlos Williams was a practicing physician in his native New Jersey, and that he sometimes dashed off short poems on a typewriter between patients. That would make a kind of sense of the inconsistency, though it wouldn’t explain it away.

Implicit in some of the questions posed in this rudimentary act of criticism is an assumption of some grounds for comparison, and comparison lends a further dimension to the act of criticism. David Hume strongly emphasized that practical criticism depends on, well, practice, especially the practice of comparing works with one another. Suppose, then, that we undertake another little thought experiment and imagine another piece of textual scrawl on an arguably similar theme (Figure 1.2):

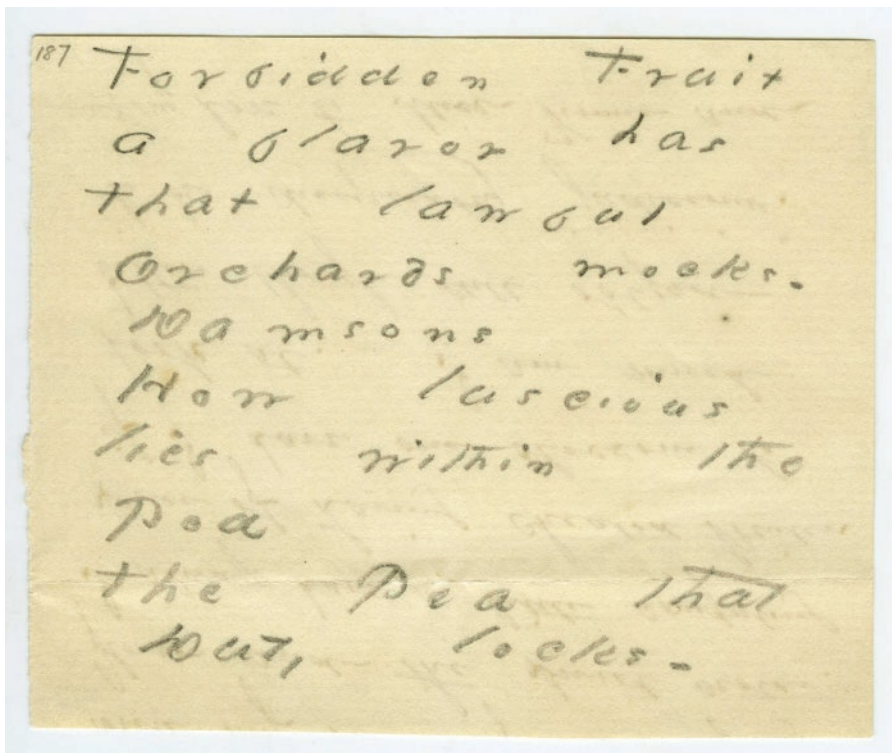


FIGURE 1.2 Manuscript copy of Emily Dickinson’s “Forbidden fruit a flavor has.” Emily Dickinson Collection, Amherst College, Manuscript 187.

This piece of writing is untitled, like the message we might imagine on the refrigerator door. Like that message, too, it seems a bit messy and informal. We may, however, be struck by some special features in this arrangement of words.

We might notice first that the words here compose two independent clauses, each consisting of exactly fourteen syllables. These two clauses are also marked by a certain rhythm, and by a peculiarity of grammar that we might call “syntactic inversion”: not “has a flavor,” but “a flavor has.” Not “that mocks lawful orchards,” but “that lawful orchards mocks.” We know that that second example involves an inversion because, if we look carefully, we see the inflected ending of the English verb *to mock*—“mocks”—needs to correspond to a singular subject. We might therefore first have imagined that the line involves the mocking of the flavor of the forbidden fruit before realizing that the grammar requires us to read it the other way around: it is the flavor, with its peculiar quality, that mocks the lawful orchards. This sort of device, which demands revisiting the lines, can expose and test our routine assumptions about the world, as the best poetry often does. We might also detect the dominance of *f* sounds in the first part of the poem, and how they give way to *l* sounds in the second part, with the interesting word “lawful”—with its *l, f, l* sequence—making the pivot from the one to the other. And some words, it turns out, rhyme with others.

Seeing all this, we might conclude that this piece of writing is a poem, even before we ever see it laid out in a book of poetry in this form (perhaps the same book in which we found the Williams poem):

Forbidden fruit a flavor has
That lawful orchards mocks;
How luscious lies the pea within
The pod that Duty locks!¹²

Looking at these two poems together, critically, we might ask a new set of questions. Which is a better poem? What is the difference between their treatment of the question of how sweet it is to taste fruit that one is not supposed to be tasting? How much does it matter that the second poem was published some forty years earlier and composed well before that? How much does it matter that it was written by a woman? By Emily Dickinson, in fact? Is there an allusion to the book of Genesis in the Dickinson poem? Is there an allusion to the book of Genesis in the Williams poem?

As we think about these two poems in broader contexts, other critical questions come to mind, especially if we learn a little more about the authors. One of Emily Dickinson's only sojourns beyond her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, was a brief spell in the nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Does this piece of information matter to how we think of this poem's relation to the book of Genesis? Williams, for his part, was active in a twentieth-century poetry movement that rejected a heavy reliance on poetic diction, on simile and metaphor, and on figurative language generally. Should "This Is Just to Say" be paired with another famously brief, elemental poem by Williams, the one about a red wheelbarrow—"glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens"—in order to see both poems as advancing his effort to, as he put it, clean off the words of American English?¹³ Should its straddling of verse and prose be paired with another short American poem about food and sustenance, Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Bean Eaters" (1960)? In this poem, two rhyming quatrains, both relatively terse and formal, about an old, impoverished African American couple, eating and remembering, give way to a final stanza that seems to dissolve its verse into prose: "And remembering.../ Remembering, with twinklings and twinges, / As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes."¹⁴ What does this formal dissolution convey about conditions of their daily life and the circumstances of their acts of remembering? What does it convey about lived experience on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s?

1.3 Limits of the Lyric Paradigm

These are the sorts of questions that will be familiar enough, I suppose, to anyone who has taken even an elementary course in the subject we call "English." It has, however, grown fashionable in recent decades to think of them as questions not particularly essential to the great issues of the modern world, or even to the hard work of getting on in life. At the outbreak of the Second World War, W. H. Auden famously wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen," and even Wordsworth, for all his faith in the mission of the poet, confessed that he sometimes felt that his attempt to address the great problems of his time by resort to poetry might seem merely a "feeble effort."¹⁵ Questions of social efficacy aside, however, there has been a clear demotion of the study of poetry since the decades when it was enshrined at the heart of

liberal education, an essential part of what it meant to learn to read well. This book can be thought of in part as resisting that demotion.

An initial response is simply to declare that engaging with poems in the way I have begun to do with Williams, Dickinson, and Brooks is a pleasure in itself; that the sheer joy of articulate response, as we put our pleasures and our puzzles into words, is already a great deal. The drive to do criticism, H. L. Mencken wrote, “is no more and no less than the simple desire to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to ... make an articulate noise in the world.”¹⁶ One might go further to claim that this sort of activity opens the mind and liberates the spirit; indeed, that its interplay of analysis and judgment brings, as I put it earlier, new value into the world. In our engagement with Williams, Dickinson, and Brooks, to be sure, the question of value is dynamically in play: the poems seem to analyze and judge us even as we attempt to analyze and judge them.¹⁷ The guiding assumption behind Richards’ influential program in practical criticism is that the organized and “articulate noises” of a lyric poem provide a particularly good—even paradigmatic—starting point for this activity.

Two questions thus emerge here and now. First, how do we extend the scope of criticism’s subject matter beyond the lyric poem—the poem itself—so as to identify a range of things that might serve the work of practical criticism as well as the lyric poem does? Second, how do we extend the benefits of critical engagement beyond the circumference of personal growth and gratification? Both are important questions for addressing the question of how to do criticism at the present time.

To the question of extending the scope of practical criticism’s subject matter, at least two important lines of response have been pursued in the past. Both will be familiar enough, but one is more limited than what I propose here, the other more expansive. The former approach is to extend the subject matter of criticism to include a domain called “literature.” Indeed, when the subject of “critics and criticism” arises in academic circles, the default understanding is that the object in question is in fact “literature.” This is easy to see in a quick sampling of titles, as in the case of the volume bearing that very title, *Critics and Criticism*, in which the Chicago Aristotelians produced one of the most weighty essay compilations of the mid-twentieth century.¹⁸ We might also think of landmark books such as Georg Lukács’ *Writer and Critic* or Edward Said’s *The World, the Text, and the Critic*; or the major anthology by Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and