

# The Medium Is Not the Method

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***Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies.* By Jonathan Kramnick. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. viii + 129 pp.**

Midway through Garth Greenwell's *Small Rain* (2024)—in the second paragraph of the fourth chapter—a poem appears. Reprinted in its entirety, George Oppen's "Stranger's Child" (1960), consisting of nine lines in three stanzas beneath an all-caps title, breaks Greenwell's immersive prose with a block quote for the first and only time in the book. Although the narrator of *Small Rain* introduces himself as a poet and alludes to poetry continually, only here are we treated to a sustained close reading. For more than fifteen paperback pages the narrator becomes critic (or perhaps autocritic) engaging in what Jonathan Kramnick argues is the "proprietary method of the literary humanities," a "skilled practice" of "creative action" that produces, like the proprietary methods of other scholarly disciplines, claims to "justified truth" (9–12).

Greenwell's close reading is exemplary even though it appears in a work of fiction. Like those Empsonian readings from *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that are often cited as the apotheosis (if not the origin) of this proprietary method, it is meditative and multimodal (Empson 1930), interpreting the poem as a whole and showing off the panoply of exegetical tools in the literary critic's belt: a brief philology of *sparkle*; a formal analysis of chiasmus; the myth and symbol of the sparrow; a matrix of allusions to Geoffrey Chaucer, John Keats, and T. S. Eliot; one provocative whiff of biography—George Oppen, a communist!—and delicate historicizations, subtly acknowledging that what's on the page is not Oppen's alone but is responsive to communities and conditions.

But first Greenwell's narrator simply stares at the poem. Confined to a hospital bed, he leaves a volume of the collected Oppen open in

front of him, his attention coming and going. Any fantasy of continuous, engaged page turning is lost in the haze of panic, pain, penitence, and intravenous oxycodone. “Stranger’s Child” becomes what Greenwell (2024: 178) calls a “prosthetic consciousness,” a configuration of familiar words that become unfamiliar, almost uncanny, by prolonged proximity, and then familiar again until they are absorbed entirely, like an annex opening in the reader’s mind. Poems “can create new spaces in our interiors sometimes,” the narrator marvels, “not just giving language to something that was mute before but generating something new” (178).

This would seem a version of one myth of close reading that Kramnick rejects in *Criticism and Truth*. Greenwell is describing a cognitive-textual relationship that is not intrinsically tied to the production of anything, except maybe to silent, deeply personal epiphanies. How can learning from an open book be our proprietary method? Is it not a method that belongs to every scholastic discipline?

In part because he is working in the novel form, Greenwell can perform the characteristic misdirection of close reading, as Kramnick defines it, even more adroitly than a conventional critic can, causing us (at least temporarily) to mistake as naturalistic, transitory stream of consciousness what is actually carefully crafted, reproducible expression. Readers are not just passengers aboard the narrator’s train of thought but the objects of a specific *techne*: writing. By Kramnick’s definition, close reading is not the cognitive eureka moment that Greenwell describes but rather the description of it. In fact, the eureka moment may not exist independent of an inclination to capture it in text. Paradoxically, Greenwell’s interpretation of “Stranger’s Child” does not become a “reading” until he writes it down.

All of Greenwell’s interpretative techniques are marshaled in this reading to advance a claim of “radical sympathy.” Over the course of the poem, Greenwell’s (2024: 188) narrator argues, Oppen transforms the reader from bird-watcher to bird. Each word, space, mark, break, and sound is carefully positioned to “crack open the door into the experience of the bird.” The narrator shows us how everything in the poem, down to the minutest detail, is about paving the path that leads into the consciousness of the sparrow, all the while keeping that destination invisible to the reader until the final full stop, until the position of radical sympathy has been achieved.

Nested in the novel, this reading can transfigure into praxis. The final phrase of Greenwell's chapter will be the same as the final phrase of Oppen's "Stranger's Child," such that a guiding interpretation of *Small Rain* (or at least this chapter in the novel) has been established by Greenwell himself the moment his scene ends. Without knowing it, even as the techniques for producing radical sympathy are being cataloged and explicated, readers are being primed for another experience of radical sympathy—that of a panic attack—and then for an almost instantaneous recognition of the artifice by which that experience has been thrust on them. It is a dizzying demonstration of what writing across its various modes—poetry, prose fiction, criticism—can do and thus supports Kramnick's claims that close reading is a craft, a skill, and one inextricable from the *techne* of writing.

Yet among the first things the narrator says of "Stranger's Child" is that "it wasn't a special poem, or not to anyone I know of but me" (Greenwell 2024: 177). He reveals that he "had come to love [Oppen] in graduate school" and that Oppen composes "hard poems to teach, though I keep trying to teach them" (177). The narrator admits that teaching "Stranger's Child" in particular "never went well," just as "it hadn't gone well when I tried to write about it as a graduate student" (178). Thus, before any portion of the poem appears, readers have been conditioned to think of it circulating in a wider community and within a range of educational institutions (the narrator has, by this point, revealed that he has experience as a teacher of both secondary and collegiate students in the United States and abroad). Teaching and writing are positioned as two independent, if potentially intersecting, avenues for interpretation. And the success or failure of interpretation, according to the narrator, is determined, at least in part, by the ability to make it agreeable, or at least comprehensible, to a community composed largely of students.

Memories of teaching reappear throughout the extended reading of "Stranger's Child," making it evident that the narrator of *Small Rain* cannot separate his desire to explicate Oppen's poem from his perception that it *baffles* (a word he uses repeatedly) students. To put precisely into words how the poem works on him is to invigorate an ongoing conversation among many people, only a tiny portion of whom publish their contributions to it. The scholar writing in isolation relies on access to this

continuous, spontaneous, communal interpretation of the literary work to frame their close reading, even if the collective interpretation is not expressly cited (or even citable) therein.

To his credit, Kramnick acknowledges that teaching and writing “form an indissoluble whole” (20), but he defines the proprietary method and therefore the discipline of literary studies primarily by the standard of its written scholarship, because that scholarship converts the complex, multimodal processes of reading, reciting, defining, refining, discussing, and debating into “storage for reuse.” Recognizing that he is inviting allegations of exclusion, Kramnick claims that “focusing on scholarship doesn’t mean . . . that one puts the priority on metadiscourse or elite publications or famous critics at wealthy universities” (21). But given the prevailing working conditions that he himself describes, that’s what will happen, what already is happening.

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While teaching with close reading might be a near-universal obligation of literary studies instructors at every rank and type of institution, publishing scholarship is rarely an expectation in contingent contracts. Even tenure-track faculty at community colleges, public branch campuses, and small liberal arts colleges might go many years without a publication, in large part because of ever-increasing expectations for teaching, service, and other “student-facing” activities in their contracts. As I have argued elsewhere with Annie McClanahan and Louise McCune, scholarship is being intentionally “unbundled” from teaching as part of the casualization, deskilling, and gigification of academic labor pursued by administrators of the neoliberal university, by educational technology firms, and by the investor class that influences both (Seybold et al. 2023). We are already approaching the time when academic scholarship in literary studies will be exclusively published by “famous critics at wealthy universities,” because few others will have the time, resources, or incentives to publish it. By Kramnick’s definition, these are the legitimate practitioners of a professionalized literary studies. I suspect that many administrators, donors, and technophiles will happily capitulate to his definition, conveniently espoused by an elite member of the profession, because it can be misused to justify further depreciation of the overwhelming majority of the labor done by literary studies PhDs.

Increasingly, the unbundling and bifurcation of literary studies determine not just who publishes peer-reviewed scholarship but who reads it, which makes Kramnick's skeptical analysis of public criticism in the coda to *Criticism and Truth* particularly troubling. While Kramnick applauds the emergence of para-academic publications like *Public Books*, he attributes their preponderance, and the entire category of public criticism or public scholarship, to the broadly held "desire that academics write for audiences outside of the university" (100). According to Kramnick, this view presents three interrelated problems. First, if it is part of a promotional campaign for literary studies, public criticism risks capitulating to the manufactured narrative of the discipline's relative inferiority and to the tendency to "question the very idea of humanistic expertise" (100–101). Second, it offers only "piecemeal and poorly remunerated" work; a long-term career in public criticism is, according to Kramnick, realistic only for those who already possess "a mixture of patronage, connections, and elite bias that in certain ways echoes the old-boy network in its most extreme forms" (106). Finally, chasing the mirage of public criticism threatens to impoverish the "traditional venues" by discouraging contributions from the emerging scholars who are needed to continually reinvigorate them (105). "Disciplines survive by moving scholars up the ranks," Kramnick writes, "younger voices [who] keep inquiry alive by challenging what they have been taught" (107).

Kramnick makes a pretty compelling case that whatever you think you can do only in an online magazine, under the watch of a journalistic editor and free from the dreaded reviewer no. 2, you should be trying to do in *PMLA* or *MLQ*. "Let us also bring to traditional venues more of the inventiveness that critics have found in modulating their voice for public consumption," Kramnick pleads (105). I agree with him that there is no reason why most of what gets published in the para-academy should not find a home in a peer-reviewed journal. Para-academic essays, as he shows, deploy the same methods and are sufficiently rigorous. But I dispute his interpretation of what motivates scholars to choose para-academic venues.

When Kramnick (106) selectively quotes Katie Kadue (2023) quoting Gus Stadler, it becomes clear that he regards public criticism as an extension of public intellectualism. It is an illusory promise of celebrity, influence, and prestige that comes from outside academe rather than

from within. “‘Adjacency to *The New Yorker*,’ as one English professor describes the new model of prestige, already exists for some more than others,” is how Kramnick parses it (106). Stadler’s full quote, answering Kadue’s question of whether the academic star system still exists in 2023, is, “I feel like it does, but when once it was measured by adjacency to the English Institute or MLA presidency, it is now measured by adjacency to *The New Yorker*.”

If the *New Yorker* is a venue of public scholarship, then we are indeed hopelessly fucked.

If those of us committed to public scholarship are “preoccupied with PR,” with building a brand we can “scale up and face out,” or with creating “synergy . . . well-suited for troubled times,” then we deserve the scorn Kramnick’s ironic invocations of corporate jargon invite (100–105). He is right that the corporatization of institutions and individuals provides no answers to the crises in literary studies, because it causes those crises. In Kramnick’s account, *public* is a shorthand for that corporatized EdSpeak. For him, the antonyms to *public* in *public scholarship* or *public-facing criticism* are *private*, *peer-reviewed*, *unpopular*, or *specialized*. Going public is what you do after you scale up and face out.

For me, however, the only antonym to *public* that matters is *paywall*. Public criticism is not trading the subscribers to *Critical Inquiry* for the subscribers to the *New Yorker*; it’s circumventing the subscription model altogether. And the goal is not to condescend to “general readers” from outside the academy. It’s to reach the thousands of my professional peers, outside the academy *and inside it*, who are on the other side of those paywalls.

I write this review essay knowing that my colleagues and I at Elmira College will not be able to read it until 2034 because our library, through a combination of austerity budgeting and platform profiteering, has been priced out of every tier of access to *MLQ* on publication.

By my definition, public criticism is certainly not the *New Yorker*, nor is it exclusively the para-academic publications to which Kramnick alludes; the conventional peer-reviewed journals committed to circumventing the paywalls, like *American Studies* and *Post45*; or the fully accessible text projects sponsored by academic organizations, like the digital clusters at *Modernism/modernity* and *ASAP/J*. Public criticism, for me, is also multimedia ventures like *Left of Black*, a web series sponsored by the John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University, and *American in*

*the Nineteenth Century*, the crowdsourced podcast produced by C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists. But these latter two forums are not, by Kramnick's definition, scholarship because close reading, our proprietary method, is preserved only in writing. Right?

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"Can the four of us make a little list of ambiguities that are created by those insistent periods?" Al Filreis asks, referring to "How She Bowed to Her Brother" (1930), a poem in which Gertrude Stein demonstratively abjures the comma in favor of the full stop, as the poet herself explains in the recording that Filreis plays for listeners to *PoemTalk* (Filreis et al. 2015).

*PoemTalk* is a collaboration of the Kelly Writers House and Penn-Sound, both residing at the University of Pennsylvania, where Filreis "conven[es] three friends to collaborate on a close, but not too close, reading of a poem." On this occasion, those friends are Julia Bloch, director of creative writing at Penn; Sarah Dowling, assistant professor and affiliated faculty at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto; and Maxe Crandall, associate director of feminist, gender, and sexuality studies at Stanford University. All hold PhDs in English, as does Filreis, who is Kelly Family Professor of English at Penn, as well as director of the Kelly Writers House.

"Well, first and foremost, is the question of whether Stein did or did not bow to her brother," Bloch says, followed by crescendoing laughter from her interlocutors. Permutations of the words in Bloch's rhetorical question appear more than three dozen times in Stein's characteristically anaphorated poem. Bloch's deadpan statement and the ensuing laughter thus operate as a kind of tacit agreement: this is the most basic premise of the poem, a place from which we can all agree to begin.

Over the next half hour the guests take turns, prompted by Filreis, deploying that multiplicity of techniques common to literary studies, much as Greenwell's narrator does across his extended reading of "Stranger's Child." Crandall unfurls a series of suggestive biographical incidents and intertexts, mostly recorded by Stein's partner, Alice B. Toklas, particularly about Stein's relationship to her estranged brother, Leo. On one occasion, which the critics unanimously agree the poem

must be referring to, Toklas witnessed Stein awkwardly bowing to Leo when they passed by him in their car, but the couple never spoke of it again.

Dowling draws attention to how subtle changes to the grammatical constructions of Stein's repeated phrases suggest conflicting accounts not only of this "modernist silence" but also of the potential intentions behind bows generally, the reactions they might elicit, and the effect they have on subjects, objects, and bystanders. "There's certain types of bowing where you give the gesture and you get one back," Dowling says. "So she kind of raises this possibility: Could they come to be nearly more than more?" This latter question is a paraphrasing of a line from the poem.

"It's a fuck-you bow, maybe," Filreis proposes, a phrase that will become the title of the podcast episode.

Both responding to Filreis's prepared questions and building on each other's recitations and research, the scholars dabble in genre analysis, historicism, biographical criticism, psychoanalysis, formal mapping, and deconstruction. And, almost as a matter of course, given the medium, in affect theory. One should not underestimate the exegetical power of listening to scholars listen to each other, as well as to the recording of Stein reading, which is played three times.

While there are a wide range of techniques deployed and sometimes quickly abandoned during "The Fuck-You Bow," everything Kramnick claims is intrinsic to the method of close reading in his fastidious analysis of its practice is evident over the course of the episode. Quoting and paraphrasing take place, and others' language is blended with the critics' own. Not just the poem but paratexts, intertexts, and secondary sources are integrated into the conversation, which becomes self-referential through phrases like *as Julia said earlier* or *as Maxe described*. There is signposting aplenty. Arguments and counterarguments are introduced, adjudicated, and sometimes synthesized. Verification takes place as each critic makes the effort to confirm and sometimes supplement claims made by their peers.

Perhaps most spectacularly, just as Kramnick claims that close reading involves the critic appropriating and imitating the authorial voice of the literary object being interpreted, by the end of the episode all the scholars have tried out Stein's cadence from the recording, not just while reciting lines but also when articulating their own ideas. Near the closing,

Bloch says: “I’m struck by the very last line. ‘She bowed to her brother.’ So there is no how. So it’s tantalizing a bit to read that more definitively. Yes, she bowed to her brother. This happened. It really happened. It definitely happened. It’s a fact. But I think we know better. We know better than to read it like that. Really.” At first listening, it is difficult to parse where the Stein quote ends and Bloch resumes speaking in her own words, because the brevity of her sentences, the repetitions and variations, the inside rhymes, and the mild pronoun confusions are all characteristic of Stein generally, and this poem specifically.

Not only does “The Fuck-You Bow” self-consciously pursue a close reading and fulfill all the obligations of the method as Kramnick describes it, but it manages to capture, store, reproduce, and freely distribute partial access to the interpretative community that informs all close reading. This is not to say that it is necessarily preferable to the close readings produced in writing or those that take shape in the cloister of a classroom, reading group, or symposium and are only ever accessible via the memories of the participants. It is to say that our methods are not intrinsic to a medium, and any effort to make them so capitulates to the reactionary efforts to turn literary studies into a finished product, a dead discipline, a collection of myths and symbols that can safely be packaged and automated, because it will never need to integrate new knowledge. For this, a few famous critics at wealthy universities will be more than enough.

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