

Recall This Book  
Episode 113  
John Guillory (JP, Nick Dames)  
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John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events.

I'm one of your usual hosts, John Plotz. Today's topic is a brilliant new book, arguing that modern literary study remains anxious about the century-old professionalism that betrays the discipline's relation to its amateur precursor, criticism.

That book's subtle genealogy of what it means to be bound by a discipline or to have a vocation (which is quite different from having a salary or what Joseph Conrad called, "Two good addresses ...") has immense implications for how we think about and value humanistic pedagogy and how we understand the function of interpretation, understanding, and delight.

Those are all topics I hope we come back to, as well as making sense of literary works as both monuments and documents. The book is *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*, 2022, from Chicago. And its author, I'm happy to say, is with us today. John Guillory of the New York University English Department [is an] award-winning teacher and scholar, author of a numberless influential articles and books that include *Poetic Authority: Spencer, Milton, and Literary History*, Columbia 1983, and the field-transforming *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, which was recently reissued to mark the end of its third decade as a profound influence on how we understand the sociology, not just of literary studies, but of the academy generally. John, welcome to Recall This Book.

John Guillory:

Thank you, John, for inviting me.

John Plotz:

It's a great pleasure. I'm happy to say that John did not come alone. I'm honored that today's *Professing Criticism* conversation also includes one of my favorite critical professors, Nick Dames. Hi, Nick.

Nicholas Dames:

Hi, John. I'm happy to be the token non-John in this conversation, I guess.

John Plotz:

That's true. Well, we're all here gazing at one another through the smoke today on the eastern seaboard, and you can just call out, "John," and you'll be right. I should say that Nick is the co-editor of the wonderful journal, *Public Books*. He's professor of humanities at Columbia and the author of such prize-winning books himself as *Amnesiac Selves*, Oxford 2001, and *The Physiology of the Novel*, Oxford 2007, as well as, hot off the press, a fantastic new book that I recently devoured called *The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*. That's Princeton 2023.

I should say my guests today are both brilliant excavators of questions that may seem arcane, and in fact, actually frequently *are* arcane before their excavation, but that reveal themselves as pressing everyday problems. Thank you both so much for being here today.

John, the usual Recall This Book format with a new book under discussion is to invite the author, if he or she chooses, to start by laying out what strikes you as the key questions or key claims of the book.

John Guillory:

So the basic idea of the book is implied in the title, *Professing Criticism*. What I wanted to show ultimately was that there was something odd, something anomalous about this discipline of literary criticism. And that the idea of professing criticism is in some ways a contradiction. If we look at the longer history of the study of literature—going back to antiquity, where the study of literature meant actually the study of all forms of writing that had any value whatsoever in the perception of readers in antiquity—if you look at that long history, it's only at the very end of it in the 20th century that we got something that is professional, that can be called criticism, that has to do specifically with the judgment of literary works. And then, following shortly on that in the early 20th century, the interpretation of literary works. There are lots of ways in which writing in the largest sense in literature, and in much more a limited sense, as I describe it, has been treated over those two millennia.

But I was interested in the book in exploring the ultimate and very difficult and maybe even intractable consequences of this dual history in which we have forms of literary study that are not disciplinarized, not professionalized, and in which we have a form of engagement with literature. Namely, something called *criticism* that emerged in the 17th century that had, first of all, mainly to do with judging works of literature, but which was taken up in the period between the World Wars in the university and submitted to all of the procedures and rituals of professionalization.

And in consequence of that, it became a discipline where it had never been a discipline before. Professing criticism is a contradiction and maybe even a impossibility. I'd like to hope that it's not, that it's just an innovation, historically. But there are aspects of that internal division between the long history pre-professional, pre-disciplinary literary study and its disciplinary professional form that continue to trouble us.

The book is really an attempt to engage repeatedly and from different angles and in relation to different areas of the discipline with that tension, contradiction, impossibility of professing criticism.

Nicholas Dames:

Here I'd love to pick up a dyad that you mentioned there, which I was looking at in the last chapter of the book, which is that between *interpretation* and *judgment*. You have a lot of interesting things to say about the professional prestige or importance of interpretation. On page 396, you say "we (I guess meaning we scholars) do not like to acknowledge that literary artifacts do not need to be interpreted."

John Guillory:

Right. Right.

Nicholas Dames:

Can you say more about that? About the distinction between interpretation and judgment? Or interpretation and understanding? Because that seems like one of the really fascinating moves in the book or fascinating discussions in the book.

John Guillory:

Interpretation is a relation to texts that we can consider to be very old. In fact, aboriginal. We're always engaged with texts and particularly complex

texts with an effort to understand them. That often requires a complicated procedure. It comes to be known as interpretation.

Interpretation has its own history, but criticism in its origins was not a procedure of interpretation. It was from its beginnings in the 17th century all about judgment. And it was only in the 20th century that judgment and interpretation came to converge in a practice, which was the practice of New Criticism in the US and Practical Criticism in England.

Nicholas Dames:

That discarding of judgment though, John, it feels to me ... This is coming out of your analysis, but also just my sense of having been in the profession a while. It's never quite complete. It can't be quite complete.

John Guillory:

No.

Nicholas Dames:

It becomes the shadow activity or the secret of the discipline. I'm wondering if ... You do think, I assume, that there are costs to this, to the severance from judgment?

John Guillory:

Yes.

Nicholas Dames:

And the fact that that is something that's not ... Maybe that's changing. I think that's part of your analysis is it might be changing at the moment. It's not professionally respectable, but inevitable. Right?

John Guillory:

Right. I do think that there are costs. There have been costs for us. One of the costs—a number of people are pointing this out now, because we're in a renaissance of judgment in the discipline. It's becoming an activity, again, that people are trying to perform and also to make sophisticated.

But the cost of it, we've come to realize, is that interpretation is something that isn't obviously necessary for most readers of literature, as also for consumers of the other arts. It isn't the case that people encounter novels and plays and poems and feel the need, after those encounters, after those

engagements, to interpret those words to say what they think, in any kind of elaborated way, or what they mean.

What's happened then is that literary critics who started out as principally the ones who showed you how to judge, how to make the appropriate determination of the quality of the work ... Literary critics have gone off in this other direction and become interpreters, and they've been cut off as a result from the mass leadership of literature.

Now this is something, as I say, that's happened to a certain extent in the other arts, with the scholarly disciplines dealing with the other arts, but I think with literature it's become much more consequential. By virtue of the capacity of that break with criticism as judgment, it's become much more consequential as the driver of the separation of mass readership from academic literary critics.

John Plotz:

John, this might be a distinction without a difference. Is your understanding at bottom that people are still practicing judgment, but only with this super-added layer of interpretation upon it? Or that they've literally discarded the judgment?

I guess this is another version of Nick's question about what the act of implicit judgment is, whether it's still present or it's actually something we need to recover.

John Guillory:

That's a necessary question, and it has to be a little bit reformulated to arrive at the terms I was using in my book. What I wanted to show was that by the later 1960s, judgment was returning in the mode of, not the criticism of the literary work, but the criticism of society. The use of the interpretation of the literary work in order to arrive at a judgment of society.

What happened was what I call the "reassertion of criticism," but the reassertion of criticism with this different end, with this different purpose. Some of that judgment redounded back on literary works, so that it was possible for a number of scholars to judge the literary works themselves as morally and politically objectionable.

And to feel that this had to be pointed out in literary work, in the interpretation of literary works ... The interpreting for the service of judging, in some ways adversely, literary works. That's presented us with this perennial problem of, when we do talk about literary works in the context of

the criticism of society, what do we want to say about the value of literary works themselves in that context?

Is the value of the literary work, its capacity to disclose aspects of society that need to be judged adversely? Or is the value of the literary work its transcendence of those conditions in society that need to be pointed out, condemned, and ultimately be averted?

Nicholas Dames:

I feel like, John, the way you present it in your book, it's as if this question of judgment and its place becomes also tied into a social psychology of what a literature professor is. Or even a deep psychology of....Even with myself, I don't know if I have quite a handle on what that looks like.

Is it that we repress judgment? We are aware of making judgments implicit and explicit all the time, but they're not spoken. They're in bad taste or it's something that's professionally unwise.

John Guillory:

Reviewers have never lost this capacity to make judgments of contemporary work. Of course, that's what criticism was originally. In the 18th century, when people were writing criticism, they were writing criticism about contemporary work. The assumption always was that if it was ancient, it was good. The problem that we have is that it's very difficult for us to distinguish between what we do when we judge that, because it's something that we're wanting to do more and more of.

And it's part of that whole movement now that we spoke of, Nick, last time. The lateral movement of those who were trained in literary study in the academy out into the internet, where the activity is much closer to reviewing, but it's not exactly reviewing. I think it's something that mixes some aspects of scholarship with aspects of reviewing.

I don't think that a paradigm has especially gelled yet, but I do think that's an interesting new phenomenon. Because prior to this, these two things have just pulled apart. Reviewing is where judgment takes place, and it's with reference to contemporary work. Scholarship is where interpretation takes place, and it can be contemporary and also historical, but it doesn't necessarily involve judgment of the work itself.

It involves rather judgment in the transferred sense of judgment of society, the critique of society. That's where we went. That's where we went. But I think we're trying to recover at the present time, in these internet sites

and these journals like *N+1*, a capacity to straddle the scholarly and the critical proper domain in such a way as to sophisticate the practice that we recognize as reviewing. And also, to bring that practice back into scholarship in some way.

Nicholas Dames:

Your essay on monuments and documents is something we both find really helpful to think about. I bring it up, because the thing--at least, from where I sit, not being a creative writer, being on the professional critical side of things--the thing that seems missing or would be most immediately missing, would be any investment in history. Any investment in the history of forms, the history of national literary traditions.

It seems like we're confronting a situation where we're not sure what the value of that historical purview is anymore. That's constantly being called into question. So it felt to me like you were trying to offer multiple points in the book, but particularly in that essay, a way of thinking about the value of history that would be usable for us now, and not embarrass us with its naivete or make us feel more conservative than we want to feel. Something like that.

John Guillory:

Right. Right.

Nicholas Dames:

I know you, John Plotz ... I don't know if you got the same thing out of that portion of the book as I did, but I felt like a set of tools. I can use the distinction between monument and document to think about what I want, how I would defend the value of history in what I do.

John Plotz:

For sure. But also....Nick, you've given the positive spin on the power of that chapter as helping us think about the recoverability of history. But I also appreciate, John, in that chapter that you want to say that there's a rift here between monumentality and documentality, which is not going to be easily resolved.

It's not as if we can plump for, "Well, let's just go all in for documentality." It's more like we have to keep in mind ... I think at one point you talk about potentially infinite documentality and finite monumentality. That we can appreciate and experience artworks for their capacity for delight,

capacity for raising understanding. And that coexists with the capacity to document and contextualize and excavate.

John Guillory:

When I first came upon this distinction in Panofsky, I thought it was a brilliant insight and explained a lot of things to me. But I also guessed that when I would work this up into a contemporary presentation of the humanities and an attempt to shift the emphasis of humanities discourse from assertions of the value of the humanities, the mission of the humanities to the object of the humanities, that it was going to be problematic to have this double concept.

Because document is not monument. Monument is not document, but everything that is studied in the humanities is both monument and document. Or potentially both monument and document.

Nick Dames:

Potentially.

John Guillory:

I wondered, and of course, my worries were confirmed as my worries always are, that this was just going to be difficult to assimilate. Particularly, the language: *monument* has become a disgraced concept. Or a concept in which the disgrace of figures from the past is literally embodied. I worry that great works of literature, art, music, whatever, would drift into association or even identification with monuments like the monument of Cecil Rhodes, which was in South Africa.

That was the initial object of a program in the, "Rhodes Must Fall," movement, which then had a lot of consequences down the line for us. Up to and including the Confederate monuments that have been knocked down all over the South and elsewhere even in the South. Those monuments should never have been put up in the first place, but the word "Monument," the concept of monument has another history altogether, in which this narrow use of monuments for nefarious political purposes that you see in the South in the period of Jim Crow ... That's an anomaly.

If you think about the other context, like the context of the "Monuments Men," who saved all of that wonderful art from the Nazis during World War II. That's the concept of monument that Panofsky was working with. This is the concept of Yeats, "monuments of unageing intellect." There was for Panofsky a



way of taking these two data. You're working always as a humanities scholar with objects that you value in some way. Not because they're intrinsically good, but because they're intrinsically memorable, because they constitute our history.

And then, you have all of this stuff that we bring around those monuments, those objects of memorialization, and use in order to gain insight into those monuments. You need both. He saw brilliantly that the objects of humanities scholars shifted around constantly. Such that the same object that in one context was a document functioning as a document could function as a monument in another context. I thought that was extremely useful.

I don't think that people have taken up on this essay yet. There is the problem with the monuments concept, but I think the theoretical problem that lies behind that is the one that you were pointing to, Nick, and I think John as well. When we look at these objects over the long term, what are we looking at really? History seems very central, and yet not exclusively history in the sense of past time.

This is Michael Berube's trouble in his review of *Professing Criticism* with this particular chapter, what he saw as the reduction of humanities to history. You can see that in Panofsky, maybe. But I think a better conception, at least I hope, was the one that I came up with of long time, in which you have past, present, and future. And all objects within that scope of long time are the objects of humanities research, of humanities enterprises.

So any object you study in the present may not have historical documentation that you could bring to the study of it, but you are studying it because it's situated in long time. Because at some future point, this object will become the monument that you want to invest in and say, "This is a valuable thing to invest our time and our research into, because it belongs to this sequence of long time." I contrasted it to geologic time, which is human time. Even though we interact so horribly and disastrously with geologic time.

John Plotz:

If this conversation could be a series of loops, this would actually be a wonderful time to return back to judgment and to think about the concept of judgment in the terms that you're describing, John, which is always about the general or the universal concept intersecting with a particular.

I'm really remembering this from Arendt's account of judgment in her response to Kant. But that notion that, when we say judgment, we're not really talking about a empyrean view from above for all time. We're talking about,

"How does this particular instance usefully relate? What general categories do we need to bring to bear on this one object?"

John Guillory:

Right. Right.

John Plotz:

The account you're offering here of the aesthetic is helping us think about the one-by-oneness of our act of judgment.

John Guillory:

Right. Exactly. Exactly. Every instance is different. This is one of the reasons why I wanted to use the example of the Holocaust at the end of the humanities essay, because this is not something that no one would have the slightest defense of who was a credible human being. But it's a monument.

It's a monument. It is something that needs to be remembered and addressed and understood. How do you distinguish that monument from the kind which is the Mona Lisa, to make the most iconically monumental of monuments? Or anything like that, that has a seemingly ineradicable substantiality. If you see what I mean?

Judgment can occupy this spectrum from the strongest possible affirmation of the value of a monument, of preserving it to the strongest possible deprivation, which at the same time posits the necessity of memorialization. We cannot forget the Holocaust, but our not forgetting the Holocaust is different from our not forgetting a monument like the Mona Lisa or *King Lear* or Joyce's *Ulysses*. Or any number of the cultural monuments that we judge positively.

Nicholas Dames:

One way to put this is (and this is why your reference to statuary can be really misleading in certain ways or confusing)—

John Guillory:

It is.

Nicholas Dames:

Because what you're referring to with the case of the monument is something that has to be alive for us. You have a great term to describe the

passage of monuments into documents. At one point, you call it, "Stonification." It's where the thing ossifies and it literally turned into a statue. That's the moment where it ceases to live. Inevitable. There's a Pygmalion aspect to this distinction, I suppose.

John Guillory:

It becomes forgettable.

John Plotz:

Doesn't George Eliot have a line about the thin music of Samuel Daniels that we can no longer ... If the music isn't thick for us anymore, it's just thin.

John Guillory:

Just a sidebar, I've been very interested in those kinds of monuments that lose meaning for people by virtue of stonification. Songs that you hear too often. *Pachelbel's Canon* has always been the prime instance for me. Musicians hate having to play it, because they've had to do it too often. And yet, it's unmistakably a wonderful piece of music. But it can be subject to stonification, if the process of memorialization is not done right.

John Plotz:

I wish we had time to continue this, but I actually think this is probably a great moment to turn to the final section of our conversation, which is what we call Recallable Books, where I invite you--Maybe Nick, I'll invite you first, since you have a different name--to name an older book that those who enjoyed this conversation might also enjoy reading.

Nicholas Dames:

I thought about this, John, and I thought, "What would be an older book that is appropriate for the context of the discussion we were just having?" And I suspect ... I don't know if this counts as one that really needs recalling or not, but the one that comes to mind for me is Cather's *The Professor's House*.

John Plotz:

Wow.

Nicholas Dames:

Which for me is still the best treatment of what it means to be in the career of teaching something like literature. And one that, contrary to a lot of other books that take this up, it's not comic. Nor is it suffused with self-pity.

And it's the self-pity now that tends to get, I think, a lot of attention. There are books like that out there. Not to say that it's entirely about the thematics of what it means to be a professor of literature, but that is one of its subjects, and it does so in a way that nothing else I know does.

John Plotz:

That's great. Well, so John, in order to give you the last word, I'm actually going to piggyback on Nick's. Because I was going to recommend *Pictures from an Institution*, which is ...

Nicholas Dames:

It is comic.

John Plotz:

It's comic. In fact, it's subtitled *A Comedy*. So it is, but it's also an attempt to think about the lived experience (Elaine Hadley talks about *Living Liberalism*) I guess it's like living professorship or something. What it means to be on a campus and to be teaching literature, trying to make literature.

And it is suffused with gentleness. I completely agree with you, Nick, *The Professor's House* is a greater work if it comes to judgment. And yet, there's something so delightful about the tone of *Pictures from an Institution*. Over to you, John.

John Guillory:

Right. I wasn't thinking of a work of literature. I wasn't taking the directive as pointing me necessarily to a work of literature. I'd have to think about that.

John Plotz:

You should take the directive anyway. No, if you were thinking ...

John Guillory:

I was thinking that we would probably get to the issue of professionalization and professional deprivation and that conceptual

framework. We didn't get to it. That's all right. There'll be other occasions for talking about that with you guys or someone else.

But the book that I'm always trying to point people toward, and in a way, I'm trying to point people in a direction that's not Bourdieu. Because I think people conflate my work too closely with Bourdieu. Actually, I have pretty significant differences from Bourdieu. But the closely related work, which is yet very different from Bourdieu that people tend not to read is Alvin Gouldner's work, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*.

That's where I originally started to think about the issue of the professional managerial class, and the possibility of thinking about literary study in the context of the sociology of professions. Particularly, the professions as constituting a central form of the organization of labor in modernity.

This is something that I think Bourdieu does really ... Not Bourdieu. Sorry. That Alvin Gouldner does in a way that's very different from Bourdieu. The same concept as *Cultural Capital*, the same concept throughout his little book, and it's just a brilliantly suggestive book. And it was secretly important for many of the chapters in the book, including ones that you might not have connected with it.

But it was where I began thinking about where to go with this deliberate disenchanting to use--let's use your term from the event at Columbia--This disenchantment of the profession. The attempt to disabuse literary scholars, literary professionals from the idealizations that we cling to so strongly and don't want to give up.

But this was a place to go. This was a place where I got started thinking about these issues many years ago, before I read Bourdieu. I just feel that I owe to this sociologist of the 50s, 60s, 70s, a huge debt that I've never been able to acknowledge, because he's been so overshadowed by Bourdieu.

John Plotz:

Well, that's great. I look forward to reading the book. I haven't read it. That's wonderful. We'll put up links to all of those books as well as to other things referenced in the conversation in the show notes. John and Nick, this peripatetic conversation has really been a great pleasure. Thank you both so much.

John Guillory:

Thank you.

Nicholas Dames:

Thank you. Thank you, John.

John Plotz:

The same thanks.

John Guillory:

Both Johns.

John Plotz:

Yes. The same thanks to all of you out there listening, whether your name is John or not. The same thanks go to you listening at home. And if you are enjoying this conversation, please do check out the Recall This Book archives on our website. For all of us at the podcast, I'll just say goodbye for now.

Recall This Book was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It's sponsored by Brandeis and The Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department.

We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts. If you liked what you hear, please subscribe, rate, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcast. From all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.