The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

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Merve Emre. Photo: Sondre Lund Haaland

To ask, «What is the function of criticism at the present time?» is also to ask two related questions. «What was the function of criticism in the past?» «What could be the function of criticism in the future?» These are anxious questions. One would not ask them if all was well in the state of cultural production and circulation. Nor would one ask them if the established sources of authority, whoever they may be, had already provided clear, compelling, and sound explanations for what criticism does, how it does what it does, and who it does it for.

Anxious questions often produce anxious or self-serving answers. Some people have identified the function of criticism by appealing to the ideas and careers of individuals. For instance, Terry Eagleton's recent book, *Critical Revolutionaries*, picks T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams as «the most original and influential of modern times» to argue that «a vital tradition of literary criticism is in danger of being neglected.» Other people create typologies of critics based on their methods and approaches, their professional affiliations, or their social networks. Eagleton's first critic, T.S. Eliot, in his 1961 address «To Criticize the Critic», describes

the four types of critics that one encounters in print: the newspaper critic (or «the super-reviewer»), the critic with gusto, the academic or theoretical critic, and the poet critic. «It is into this company that I must shyly intrude,» Eliot writes, not seeming in the least bit shy. His argument represents only a superficial elaboration on the typology in his 1920 book *The Sacred Wood*. In it, he divides critics into just two types, perfect and imperfect, to make much the same point: that there are as many varieties of imperfection as there are people writing, and that the perfect critic, the possessor of a «rare, unpopular, and desirable» sensibility, is one with the creative artist – just like himself.

I am disinclined to anchor our thinking tonight to the authority of individuals or types. I am wary of claims to exceptionality and warier still of the imperious exercises by which bank clerks and bureaucrats create categories in order to sort people into them. By focusing so intently on the individual, whether five or fifty of them, these approaches misrecognize what is really at stake in the question: the fate of a genre that has, for almost its entire modern history, struggled with a crisis of authority – or, as John Guillory has put it recently, a crisis of legitimation. To misunderstand the nature of this crisis is also to misunderstand what the genre needs to regain its footing. It does not need men of genius or idealized figures. It needs an anchoring set of concepts, or rationales, that are both expansive and specific enough to guide the astonishing variety of writing, reading, and speaking that passes under the sign of criticism today.

It is my belief that criticism's rationales ought to be derived from its long history as a genre. By genre, I mean that criticism marks out a category of discourse, a set of utterances that conform to distinct conventions. Genres are mostly historically continuous formations. They do not change overnight, although they can, and ought to, evolve. They cannot be changed according to the whims of individuals, although they can, and ought to, make room for the free play of individual talents. Genres are influenced by the contexts by which they are produced and disseminated – for instance, institutions like *Vinduet*, the magazine that is generously hosting my talk tonight, or a technological platform like the *New Yorker*'s website, where the *Vinduet*'s editors first encountered my work. These contexts are, in turn, shaped by broader political and social considerations – for instance, the Norwegian government's funding for the arts and humanities, which allows a magazine like *Vinduet* to thrive, or its national legislation protecting the freedom of speech, which allows the *New Yorker*'s website to load instantly in Norway, but not always in my birth country of Türkiye.

The most illuminating way to analyze the function of criticism is, first, to situate its authority, or lack thereof, within the politics of the state; second, to relate it to the institutions of cultural production and distribution; third, to orient it to the intellectual practices by which the genre is produced; and fourth, to credit it as the product of the critic's idiosyncratic mind. To narrate the authority of criticism in all its richness and variety requires starting from the inside of this arrangement, from the critic's mind, and working our way outward, to the contexts in which criticism circulates. I would like to proceed by offering you four historical concepts keyed to the four levels of analysis that I identified. The concepts are wit, discrimination, judgment, and advocacy.

What I described just now as «the idiosyncratic product of the critic's mind» can be summarized in the single word «wit» – a word that suggests humor, curiosity, delight, imagination, and the play of the intellect; a word that transports us back to the middle of the seventeenth century, and to the beginnings of English literary criticism. In *The World's Olio*, a 1655 collection of writings on poetry, history, and romance, the Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, names wit as «the swiftest motion of the brain,» the wild and fantastical «essence of all thoughts» when they come into contact with objects in the world. Wit «makes use of all things», «it encircles all things,» Cavendish writes. In encircling all that appear in *The World's Olio* – painting, literature, music, science, politics, and society – wit turns excited and associative. It hears voices. It draws connections. It gaily hops, then skips its way to ever grander and more generous ideas. Wit refreshes «the variety of discourse» by placing «words to its own becoming, delight, and advantage.» This delight and this advantage only deepens the pleasure wit takes in the drama of its own emergence, in its ability to fabricate its own material.

In wit begins criticism, but there is nothing sneering or pushy or pretentious or doctrinaire about it. Wit is measured not by «mere jests» or by the demonstration of one's cleverness at the expense of others. It is measured by the ability to «move passions» and to «make passions.» To make a passion is not to invent a feeling whole cloth, to conjure something out of nothing. It is the ability to take one's initial perception or impression of an object and to subject it to the earnest, protean, and fleet-footed movement of consciousness; to expose what one has seen, heard, tasted, and touched to «the sun of the Brain,» so that it may receive its illumination and its fast-spreading heat. Wit «sweetens melancholy, dresses joy; it quenches fear, raiseth hopes, eases pains,» Cavendish lists. «It mourns with sorrow, mends faults; it moves compassion, begs pardon.» We should note that she describes both wit's enhancements and, more ardently, wit's compensations – that it can raise hope just as it can sweeten melancholy, quench fear, ease pain, and mend faults. In turning an object over and around, wit can change one's perception of what the true nature of a thing is.

What Cavendish describes as wit, and what I want to insist upon as the germ of the critical practice, emerges as a form of charismatic authority – an authority that orbits, but is not limited to, a single person. It is a tendency and a tool for joining feeling to thinking, mind to word, sensation to persuasion, and the individual to the world around her. «Wit is like a pencil that draws several figures,» Cavendish explains in one of her allegories in *The World's Olio*. Wit takes what is inside and invisible, what is artless and personal, and makes it intelligible to others, not directly, but through the objects that it engages and enchants. In communicating the intensity of thought, wit urges others to try to feel as one does – to appreciate the sweetness in melancholy or to be moved to compassion in a situation where one's first response might be pity or disgust. And in making this offering to others, wit becomes ever more emboldened by its own passions.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, wit's charismatic authority comes bearing an antipathy to the constraints of formal education. Throughout *The World's Olio*, wit's swiftness and its exuberance are opposed to what Cavendish derides as the «persuasions of rhetoric» –

a curriculum of academic study that was largely available only to men and that emerged during the sixteenth-century as an object of scorn for early modern women writers. Cavendish warned that wit was «not to be hidebound with nice and strict words, and set phrases, as if the wit were created in the inkhorn, and not in the brain.» Rules were devastating to wit's powers of play and persuasion. In her 1666 utopian romance, *The Blazing World*, she transforms this warning into a fantastical allegory, imagining a realm where animal-human hybrids speak and hold artistic and intellectual offices. The rhetoricians and logicians are cast as magpie-, parrot-, and jackdaw-men and encouraged by the charming and powerful Empress who governs them to «consider more the subject you speak of, than your artificial periods, connexions and parts of speech, and leave the rest to your natural Eloquence.» As Cavendish's husband put it in the poetic epigraph that precedes *The Blazing World*, his wife's imagination exalts «pure Wit,» a «Creating Fancy» that brooks no formulaic chatter by animals or men.

Cavendish's anxieties about scholastic authority let us turn from wit as the perfect freedom of thought to possibilities for how this thought could be guided and strengthened, as one might tone a muscle through exercise. We must leave 1655 and, making our apologies, leap over several familiar touchstones – the writings of John Dryden, Joseph Addison, Samuel Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater – and land on a less familiar one: the novelist George Eliot's 1868 «Notes on Form in Art.» Eliot's notes are less a comprehensive program for criticism than a series of jottings on how one should evaluate literature systematically, in relation to the second level of analysis I mentioned, genre and practice. Yet it is here that we find the most useful explanation of our second concept, discrimination.

If wit primarily heightens and deepens one's subjective impressions, then discrimination imparts to these impressions a shared language, a sense of definition, precision, and clarity. It molds them in a discernible shape. Or, to use Eliot's preferred term, it gives them a distinct form. «Form,» Eliot writes, is «the limits of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another.» Anyone can sense or intuit form, Eliot explains, but the function of the critic is to express it, to transfigure form from a matter of feeling into a matter of knowledge. This knowledge must be grounded in the complex process that Eliot describes as discrimination – «the discrimination of wholes and then on the discrimination of parts», whether in a painting, a work of literature, or a piece of music.

How does the discrimination of wholes and parts produce knowledge? Consider a literary artifact like Eliot's 1871 book *Middlemarch*. Probably, we are inclined to describe it as a nineteenth-century novel, a discrimination that lets us differentiate it from a nineteenth-century history, like Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, or a nineteenth-century biography, like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. We may further describe *Middlemarch* as a realist novel, a discrimination that let us differentiate it from other nineteenth-century genres – for instance, a romance, like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, or a utopia, like Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora*. Finally, we may even further claim, as one or two critics have, that *Middlemarch* is the greatest achievement of English realism, which would require discriminating between its realism and, for

instance, the realism of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. Articulating likenesses and unlikenesses, we may situate *Middlemarch* as a whole alongside other wholes of its kind – that is, other novels – and as a part of a larger whole, like the system of genres or all the writings of the nineteenth-century that have been preserved in the present.

But how would we determine that *Middlemarch* is a realist novel in the first place, let alone the greatest achievement of English realism? For that matter, how would we begin to define realism? We would have to examine both *Middlemarch*'s parts and the parts of novels like it, and we would have to come up with a justification of how these parts made up a distinctive whole. As the novels' parts, we could identify words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters. Or we could identify plots, characters, settings, dialogues, narrators, or styles of narration. Ideally, we would proceed by separating and identifying all the novel's features, then drawing them back together, a process we would repeat over and over again, to construct an account of *Middlemarch*'s overall artistic strategy. We would not go about our work like Eliot's clergyman Mr. Casaubon, «a dried bookworm towards fifty,» in whose scholarly circles «cleverness implies mere aptitude for knowing and doing, apart from character.» Instead, we would work with the alacrity of a child who sets out to solve an especially forbidding jigsaw puzzle; first sorting the edges from the middles; then trying a piece here and there; turning it, fitting it, turning it again, until every piece is in its proper place, and a smooth and startlingly clear picture has arranged itself before her eyes – although, if she looks closely enough, she can still see the faint outlines of the joins. Or, as Eliot explains, «knowledge continues to grow through alternating processes of distinction and combination.» It «arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more and more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence.»

Crucial to the idea of discrimination is repetition, which takes the discriminating capacity of the individual and tethers it to form as a socially and historically constrained phenomenon. A form does not arise by fiat; one cannot simply claim to have created a new genre called, for instance, «Furry Sleuth» or «Canadiana,» and have it be so. (I did a Google search for «fake literary genres» and these came up.) Form is established through what Eliot describes as «the recurrence of its elements in adjustment with certain given conditions of sound, language, action, or environment.» Repetition stabilizes discrimination's claims about what is like and unlike. In turn, the capacity to discriminate trains writers to write themselves into specific traditions and trains critics to apprehend both the tradition and the variations from it. Form can be «sought after, amplified, and elaborated,» Eliot explains. But it can also grow predictable and be subject to «the abuse of its refinement,» «starved into an ingenious pattern-work.» The question that arises, but that is never answered, at the end of her notes is how a critic ought to discriminate between an interesting and purposive elaboration and a tedious repetition – between an innovation and a cliché.

This is not just a problem of the authority of discrimination, but a problem of the authority of judgment, which is our third term. Among the best readers of Cavendish and Eliot was Virginia Woolf. Her 1925 collection of essays, *The Common Reader*, includes spirited essays on both writers, as well as a concluding essay on what she perceived as the chaotic state of twentieth-century criticism, called «How it Strikes a Contemporary.» «In the first place,» Woolf begins, «a contemporary can scarcely fail to be struck by the fact that two critics at the same table at the same moment will pronounce completely different opinions about the same book.» One will call it a «masterpiece»; the other «a mere mass of waste-paper.» Is one wrong and the other right? Or does the hyperbole of both statements suggest a flaw in the entire apparatus of how judgment is approached within the institutions of literature, our third level of analysis?

Certainly, part of the problem is that it is impossible to know which critic to trust; indeed, one suspects that both lack the necessary sway, or, as Woolf describes it, the «rule,» the «discipline,» that allowed the critics of eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries to consolidate their power. Somehow, by the twentieth-century, the cultural center has failed to hold; the form of literature and the integrity of criticism have fragmented. «The scattered dinner-tables of the modern world, the chase and eddy of the various currents which compose the society of our time, could only be dominated by a giant of fabulous dimensions,» she writes. Searching, she finds no giant to draw it together again. There is no Dryden, no Johnson, no Coleridge, no Arnold, no Flaubert. Hardy, Eliot, Forster, Lawrence, or Conrad will not do for her. «Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge,» she pronounces. Judgment strikes authoritarian notes because its practitioners know, if only subconsciously, how little authority they truly bear. (This is one way to understand the genre of the pan.)

It is worth lingering on Woolf's pointed and, to me, delightful metaphor to understand how authority lapsed into the illusion of it. Policemen correct behavior by enforcing the laws that are set by others. Judges use their interpretive autonomy to shape the laws themselves. Those of you who are familiar with Woolf's lectures in *A Room of One's Own*, concerning the education of women, may recall that the specter of the policeman haunts it too. He appears in the figure of the Oxbridge professor who stares disapprovingly at her for walking on the grass of the college lawn, instead of following the path that borders it. He appears as one of the «men of taste and learning and ability» who «are forever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead,» she remarks in «How it Strikes a Contemporary.» Just as Cavendish expresses her mistrust of rhetoric, Woolf, who was not formally educated, expresses her mistrust of the university, which bends to its will the minds and manners of all who inhabit it, men of taste and distasteful men alike. At Oxford, the grass is not to be trod on, but to be admired, while the books are not to be admired, but to be disemboweled, vivisected, taxidermied, so much so that «the too frequent result» of the scholars' «able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones.» Academia is where the general discipline of the critic has turned into the specialized disciplines of philosophy,

philology, history, and English, and so entombed, has grown weak and weedy, choked by the noxious professional cares that afflict, for instance, the poor, pathetic, and tyrannical Mr. Ramsay in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*.

Unlike the scholar or the policeman, the judge is self-authorizing. However, she is no more a renegade than the novelist. As the novelist is beholden to form, so the judge is, or should be, beholden to precedent. For Woolf, the critic's judgment of contemporary works must take place against a backdrop of expansive historical and geographical knowledge. One should not compare a contemporary novel to the novels published in that same year, in English, so as to decide, as Woolf puts it, whether to spend «half a guinea» at Hatchards or to walk to the London Library. Instead, one should judge it with reference to the history of the novel, in England, in France, in America, in Russia, which any given novel is almost certainly laboring to prolong, not to revolutionize. Readers and critics should «take a wider, a less personal view of modern literature,» Woolf urges, «and look indeed upon the writers as if they were engaged upon some vast building, which being built by common effort, the separate workmen may well remain anonymous.»

History is the scaffolding of literature and criticism. It protects the novelist from the pressure of making it new by writing a novel that aims to be exceptional. He may settle for being competent and entertaining, which are, it should be stressed, by no means minor accomplishments. The scaffolding of history also saves the critic the embarrassment of becoming hysterical in public. She will know better than to labor to praise or to savage a work that is sure to be forgotten almost as soon as it has been published. And it steadies the critic for when she can make truly forceful, truly meaningful pronouncements when the time is right; pronouncements that she can justify as a possessor of a willfully anachronistic discipline – as a consecrator, not a desecrator of the literary arts. Woolf thus invites her critics «scan the horizon; see the past in relation to the future; and so prepare the way for masterpieces to come.»

Yet preparing the way for the masterpieces to come demands more than wit's passion, discrimination's knowledge, and judgment's historicity. What we must consider now is our fourth and final term, advocacy, and its relationship to our fourth level of analysis: the state and its support, or lack thereof, for the arts. Among the most careful readers of Woolf is Toni Morrison, who, like Woolf, is skeptical of the institutionalization of the critic in the figure of the schoolteacher. As Morrison writes in her essay on Romare Bearden, «Separating art forms, compartmentalizing them, is convenient for study, instruction, and institutions.» However, it is not sensitive to the work of art itself, which often speaks across different areas of study, or to its publics, which are often constituted by different audiences with different desires. The uniqueness of art lies in how it can be many things to many different people. It can be an object of pleasure or instruction, just as it can be a commodity to be bought and sold. No one person's needs or desires can account for it in its entirety. Whatever the nature of the artwork might be, it benefits more from an approach that acknowledges its porousness, or its «liquidity,» as Morrison describes it.

This liquidity is not only aesthetically and intellectually preferable, but also materially necessary for art and criticism to thrive. To accept the separation of art for the purpose of studying it is to drive a series of wedges between all who might be invested in art's preservation. To follow the lead of the market and its producers and consumers is to leave a great deal of art that might be perceived as experimental or avant-garde vulnerable to «carelessness, whimsy, and disdain,» Morrison writes. For her, it makes little sense to accept as natural or normal any structures that cut people off from one another at a time when the tools for making art matter to ever larger, ever more diverse populations; at a time of «drought,» Morrison laments, when the state no longer supports either the creation or the study of art.

The term that Morrison uses to describe the critic's active, collective, and integrated expansion of art is advocacy. She is quick to differentiate the authority of arts advocacy from what she dismisses as «mere advocacy,» which she describes as the expectation that, as a Black woman, every statement that she makes will necessarily agitate against racism and sexism; even, or especially, when those statements are made in settings that perpetuate inequality, like the Ivy League university or the museum. Arts advocacy is not about the individual and her symbolic gestures. The dramatic fiction of the «beleaguered, solitary individual struggling against Philistines, willy-nilly, who somehow breaks through the walls of ignorance and prejudice to acclaim» is, for Morrison, just that – a fiction, and not a particularly novel or interesting one at that. True advocacy is about developing wide-reaching and comprehensive «strategies in state art organizations, educational institutions, museums, foundations, communities and neighborhood groups,» she argues. It is about organizing the work of making and circulating art and criticism in fundamentally different ways.

In Morrison's discussion of advocacy throughout her essays, the figure of the critic is often paired with another figure: the figure of the citizen. We should not understand the citizen as the passive recipient of rights based on the accident of his birth; this understanding of citizenship, Morrison notes, has «troublesome nationalistic associations.» Instead, we should understand the citizen as an active participant in the shared project of creating and disseminating access to a common good like art; the citizen as an agitator for what Morrison calls «an intellectual home» and «a spiritual home» for all. Sometimes the critic-citizen's advocacy takes the form of soliciting and distributing material support through private and public institutions, with prizes, grants, and endowments. Sometimes it takes the form of editorial work, which Morrison performed assiduously throughout her career. But most of the time it takes the form of nourishing what Morrison calls the «public life» of the community, which benefits from small, daily demonstrations of reading, writing, and speaking; from the maintenance of spaces that remain free and open to all and that kindle a warm reciprocity of exchange. She imagines her audience in these settings as «student-citizens» of all ages, who know that they are «welcome for more than the ticket purchased or the applause.» They are welcome as interlocutors, as creators of criticism and advocates of literature in their own right, in their own way.

Where can we locate the most robust, exciting, and self-secure communities of critic-citizens and student-citizens today? It can be difficult to know. Neither the university nor the institutions of the print public sphere presides as the epicenter of cultural influence anymore. The old mechanisms of gate-keeping and the old hierarchies that the gate-keepers once upheld have eroded and, in some cases, have crumbled. The centrality of the U.S. and the U.K. – indeed, the centrality of the English language – to the production and circulation of a globalized culture has started to dwindle, especially across new media forms. The major instruments of production and distribution are digital technologies controlled by billionaires, who have designed new and insidious ways to profit from our verbal acts. They also make it possible for anyone with basic literacy skills and access to the internet to produce commentary about any cultural object across a vast range of forms, genres, platforms, mediums, and languages. This commentary can be of very low quality or of very high quality, depending on who you ask. It can circulate faster and wider, and it can generate more responses and at a quicker rate, than commentary could at any previous moment in human history. It seems like criticism – or at least, the potential for it – is everywhere. And, because it is everywhere, it is nowhere, having scattered into billions of apparently unrelated utterances, in billions of apparently unrelated corners of the world.

From one angle the rapid and largely unregulated proliferation of criticism has caused a great deal of anxiety within the traditional centers of cultural authority in the English-speaking world. From another, there is a latent democratic spirit to these disorienting developments. I do not mean to suggest that we are witnessing a textual free-for-all or even the radical democratization of writing; it is worth bearing in mind that forty percent of the world still does not have internet access and that the basic literacy skills that I invoked remain unequally distributed, with 773 million illiterate adults worldwide, most of them women. But for a not insignificant portion of the world, there has been a veritable explosion in the ability to evaluate and to engage with cultural objects, and for others to engage with these evaluations, without significant barriers to entry.

The fear and the hope borne by these developments prompts me to revise the questions with which I opened this talk. What is the function of criticism in a future in which the means of producing and disseminating commentary have been partially democratized; the cultural capital of universities and media institutions has been devalued; and the styles and audiences of critical commentary have multiplied? What is the function of criticism when everyone is, or could be, a critic? Scanning our fragmented scene of writing and reading, which Ulrich Beck and Pierre Bourdieu described as a scene of «organized irresponsibility», we may wonder if it is it possible or desirable to elaborate any shared practices or rationales for criticism. And how could we do so without reinscribing the authority of specific individuals or of powerful and exclusionary institutions? How do we encourage the cultivation of fair-minded judges rather than foul-natured, badly behaved, and incompetent policemen, to tweak Woolf's distinction for the internet era?

The opposite of individual authority is collective history. To follow the lead set by history is to free oneself of the expectation or the desire that a single person or a select group of people in the present can make criticism anew, or pronounce on how to make it better, than how it has been practiced before. Yet I want to stress that the history I have sketched for you is really a repressed history of expertise, a history of non-authority. Its concepts are derived from the writings of women who, in their respective times, were often dismissed as faddish, fame-seeking, unserious, and marginal, even if they now appear to us as the fixed luminaries of English letters. With the exception of Morrison, these women were largely excluded from academia and its reading publics – and even Morrison, as we have seen, routinely expressed her vexed relationship to academia and grounded her advocacy outside of it. These women worked hard to create their own reading publics, whether by publishing under pseudonyms or distributing their works themselves or starting their own presses to publish their writing and the writing of those they judged to be culturally important. And because they knew that women were rarely credited as having legitimate authority – or rather, that whatever authority women had frequently was attributed to politically and morally dubious sources – they designed more sophisticated, more playful, kinder, and less self-serious approaches to their own powers.

If these women have played no role in recent histories of meta-criticism – that is, criticism about what criticism is or does – that is because they kept, or were kept at, a distance from its institutions of production and dissemination. And if they were denied the rewards of institutional membership, then they were also buffered from its peculiar – and not always healthy – social and psychological dynamics. Perhaps this is what explains their admirable epistemic humility; their broad social and historical vision; their ceaseless effort to reconcile ordinary and common readers with extraordinary and uncommon ones; their refusal to separate passion from ratiocination, advocacy from critique; their ferocious intellectual discipline; their will to curiosity; their utter lack of complacency. Their inclination is not to bully or to boast. It is not to taxonomize or to type. It is to explain what criticism can do, and to model how it can be done, with integrity and pleasure. In this, they are not exceptional; there are others among us who do the same, day in and day out. They are all, to my mind, exemplary.

Paradoxically, it is their non-authority, forged on the outskirts of once-powerful institutions, that gives their concepts the collective authority to fill the void of the present. Cavendish's wit would tell us that the function of criticism is to entwine feeling and thought, so as to create passion anew and press it into the service of persuasion. Eliot's discrimination would tell us that the function of criticism is to craft a precise language of form that puts parts and wholes in relation, so as to produce knowledge about the systemic nature of literature. Woolf's judgment would tell us that the function of criticism is to shape general tastes subtly but irrefutably, so as to expand what people read along the axes of history and geography. Morrison's advocacy would tell us that the function of criticism is to preserve the writers, the works, and the communities that one deems essential, so as to salvage the art that will not survive the logic of the market and the politics of the state.

Individuals come and go, but collective history is ongoing and continuous. What began in 1655 really began much earlier. And it advances as I speak, with gatherings like this; with conversations like the ones that we will have once I stop speaking and we can have a drink; and, if I may fantasize a bit, with an international and collaborative effort to transform the concepts that I have described into a shared project of criticism. This project would traverse and exceed the institutions of the university, the publishing house, the library, the magazine, the festival, and the bookshop. It would touch our ordinary activities and conversations; our habits, our routines; the well-worn fabric of our lives. What I am suggesting is both future oriented and very old-fashioned. It looks back to the eighteenth-century's optimism about civil society and its ability to forge free, voluntary, and active associations between readers and writers. These are the associations that permit wit, discrimination, judgment, and advocacy to cross the continents and the oceans, the languages and the institutions that separate us. They need not divide us.