Introduction: Criticism without Footnotes

This book represents my effort to write a different kind of criticism from the academic mainstream. It fuses the techniques of literary journalism with scholarship to report on contemporary theory, intellectual life and culture, politics, and the university. One way to put it is that this book offers criticism without footnotes.

Journalism and scholarship usually inhabit different planets, with different gods, languages, and forums. Journalism pays homage to Hermes, favoring speed over the lumbering pace of academe, the timely report over the arcane investigation, the straightforward account over tedious elaboration. Its language is colloquial and direct, and it typically appears in the newspaper, magazine, or blog. Scholarship looks to Apollo, favoring rumination over snap judgments, careful qualifications over broad generalizations, and time-consuming research over the quick surmise. Its language is often hieratic, employing specialized terms specific to those in its particular fields, and it resides in small circulation academic journals or books. There is occasional commerce between the two planets, but rarely dual citizenship, and there is the constant suspicion that one violates precisely what the other values, academics thinking that journalism yields superficial over serious knowledge, and journalists thinking that academia opts for its own obscure cubbyholes over actual relevance.

If a fundamental task of criticism is to explain our culture, I think that scholarship needs better means of exposition than it usually employs and that enjoins an audience beyond a narrow academic field. (We often hear about interdisciplinarity, but most scholarship does not reach an audience outside of its field or period, so perhaps we should start with interfieldarity.) Conversely, we need journalistic accounts that filter from the deep well of

scholarship and do not condescend to academe nor make it sound like a distant planet called Geek. So I have tried to develop a kind of writing that resides between the two, tapping into the scholarly but taking the form of the reportorial or exploratory essay. To that end, this book collects thirty-two relatively short essays, at least by academic standards, some five or so pages, drawing a portrait or giving my angle on a topic, and others ten or twelve pages, elaborating on a comparison or larger issue.

We sometimes call critical articles "essays," but as a kind of writing they have more in common with the social scientific article or research report. Think of how they look: usually twenty-five or thirty pages, with full academic paraphernalia. The critical article is a curious development in the history of the literary essay, occurring only in the last fifty years, when criticism not only moved to academic quarters but also adopted the protocols and measures of advanced academic research (a story I tell here, in "The Rise of the Theory Journal" and elsewhere). The very form of the article, I think, broaches a contradiction: while many critics claim to question normative practices and problematize received opinion, most of their writing follows this staid form unthinkingly and is slavish to authority, intoning "as Deleuze argues," "as Butler has written," "in Foucauldian terms."

It is easy to complain about academic writing, but part of my point throughout this book is that much in academe is valuable, particularly its scholarly core, building the reservoir of what we know, and its protocols, testing what we know and resisting venal pressures. However, there is a difference between scholarship and scholasticism, and too much contemporary criticism tends toward scholasticism, toward the worst traits of the word "academic," so that it is overly technical, hermetic, and without much use—except, as the saying goes, for a CV line. Rather than the conventional distinction between academic and journalistic criticism, perhaps the more salient distinction is between scholasticism and criticism, and we should militate against scholasticism.

It's also easy to complain about journalism—that it's shallow, reproduces received opinion, and so on—but we can learn lessons from the tautness and pointedness with which good journalists write. However, Edmund Wilson, often held up as the paragon of the public intellectual because he lived by literary journalism, actually had some cautionary words about it, remarking in "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed" (1943) that even serious journalism "involves its own special problems," such as trying to put "solid

matter into notices of ephemeral happenings" and avoiding the dictates of editors and their "over-anxious intentness on the fashions of the month or the week." In other words, there was not a halcyon time before our own to which we should return. My point instead is that journalism presents one solution for responding to the particular problems we have now, serving to bridge the distance and difficulty of contemporary theory and research, to dispel canards about the university and defend its public purpose, and to renew literary culture.

A more modest way to put this is that we should consider criticism a craft like other forms of literary writing. This does not mean that criticism vies with fiction or poetry, although it might aspire to the literary essay. Or perhaps its role is similar to translation. The pieces in this book translate the work of critics and other writers as well as the recent history of the university so that people not fully embedded in it might understand it, and so that people more versed in it might see it afresh. A work of literary translation is not to popularize its topic or to dumb it down, but to convey it in a way that is both faithful to the material and legible to a reader who has a different idiom.

This is as much a corrective to some of my own habits and to my own training as to anything else. I was drawn to criticism through the power of the essay, reading those of Orwell, Wilson, and Susan Sontag early on, intrigued by their voices, seeing things differently through their observations, and admiring the confidence of their views. They were not afraid to make generalizations and to judge the material they discussed, and they conveyed a commitment to the importance of literature, culture, and politics. Through graduate school, I was taught to write very differently, avoiding generalizations and judgments, instead inventorying previous sources, "reading" passages in laborious detail, and making statements that followed the theory I had read. The results sometimes felt forced, not quite getting at what I really cared about or thought. But I do not want to make it sound as if I experienced a conversion, as some critics testified during the 1990s, renouncing theory for the unmediated enjoyment of literature, or something like that. Rather, I have tried to bring it a step farther, to synthesize the analytic edge of theory with the exposition of journalism, to distill the scholarly into essential points, and to tell stories about ideas so that other people might gain a handle to grasp and use them.

The short essay lends itself to distillation, like a snapshot offering a focused foray on an idea, writer, book, or issue. Perhaps I lack patience, but

I am disposed to the short form that can be read in one concentrated sitting, that carries its points on its sleeve, and that sticks in mind. (I have to add, somewhat defensively, that to make essays read easily does not mean they are easy to write.) I don't mean to say that all criticism should adopt this form—obviously some inquiries or issues require much more space, and I myself have long essays on criticism, contemporary fiction, and the university—but there is a good deal of critical writing that takes far too many liberties with our time and attention. Most likely it was written not to be read but to be measured, filling the quantum of the twenty-five-page article.

Of course, I am not the only one who works the space between literary journalism and scholarship. Louis Menand is a master of it, one of the few who is a genuine scholar as well as a high-level journalist, and I take notes from him. As is the British critic Stefan Collini, whom I profile here. (There is a tradition of academics who occasionally do reviewing, but it is usually moonlighting from academic work, and I am talking about those who make crossing over a regular if not fundamental part of their work.) Still, Menand is relatively anomalous among his academic cohort, which took up literary theory. In my surmise, the tendency to cross over has gained momentum over the past two decades, particularly since the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it has enlisted a number of critics of my academic generation, born around 1960, slightly after the Sixties Generation but not quite Generation X, did their graduate training in the 1980s, and began their academic careers around 1990. For instance, my contemporary, Michael Bérubé, issued an apt call for "public access" in the mid-1990s and has written indefatigably for a variety of audiences, especially on politics, academic and otherwise. Another contemporary, Laura Kipnis, has developed an arch but deeply intellectual style as a prominent cultural commentator on sex and politics. Likewise, Andrew Ross, Michael Warner, Judith "Jack" Halberstam, and Eric Lott each cross over to public venues, as I discuss in some of the essays here.

Generations are one of those concepts that everyone recognizes but no one quite agrees on, but I think that generations give us some traction to understand how historical change affects culture. Change arises not just from a lone figure who puts forth a new theory—the heroic model that often rules histories of criticism—but also from our social and cultural circumstances and institutions, which we experience in concert and which shape us. To talk about the shifts in contemporary criticism, I have marked off "the theory generation," those born in the late 1930s through early 1950s and coming through the expanding American university, who forged the new discourses of theory in the late 1960s and 1970s that revolutionized the study of literature and culture, shifting from explication and the affirmation of universal human values to theoretical speculation, investigating signs and structures.

Things were different for my generation. We entered the scene *after* the revolution, so theory was part of the groundwater, there when we got there. I have called my cohort "the posttheory generation" to indicate our lateness, signaling not the death of theory but our revisionary stance toward it. The change in feeling, I suspect, is similar to Lionel Trilling's description, in "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," of his students' reaction to modernism, taking its shock for granted; for us, theory was ordinary, and we took the ideas that everything was constructed, or disciplined and contained by power, or indeterminate, for granted. We also entered the scene, as I mentioned, during the fraught days of the culture wars, and we experienced the increasing squeeze on public higher education and academic jobs—coordinates that seemed to demand a more public response. For many of us, it was no longer enough to have effect only on "the level of theory," and rather than the theory guru, who disseminates a major paradigm or approach, like Paul de Man, the most influential American critic of the 1970s, our model moved to the public critic, who aims to reach a larger public, often in magazines or for trade presses (each of the people I noted before has at least one trade book).

The shift to literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s was sometimes encapsulated as "the linguistic turn," and I am tempted to summarize the tendency now as "the public turn," in criticism and in the humanities more generally. (At least I hope it is, although I can unfortunately imagine different outcomes, for instance its doppelganger, "the commercial turn," as the humanities are reconfigured along the line of Big Data and customer tastes, or simply "the archival turn," as criticism tacks toward literary history over theory.) One can see a turn in the heightened attention to the concept of "the public" as well as in the effort to cross over to wider audiences. The concept of the "public" runs through a good deal of contemporary scholarship, both historical and theoretical, for instance in examining the creation of the public sphere in Europe and America in the eighteenth century, its expansion in the nineteenth, and its fragmentation in the twentieth, in the work of critics such as Warner, Lauren Berlant, Amanda Anderson, and

many others. And, while most critics remain on the scholarly track, an active squad of contemporary critics, of my generation as well as the succeeding generation, like those clustered around the magazine *n + 1*, deliberately seek a public role and speak in a public voice.

Among my cohort, the beat I cover is criticism and theory itself. Other than sussing out its trends and directions, I have tried to build a material history of it, deciphering its formation in the American university through the twentieth century, as it served general education in midcentury and pure research in the post-Sputnik era. In addition, I try to give a lived sense of doing criticism, drawing on a series of interviews I have conducted that I hope build an oral history of criticism in our time. Another beat I cover, more than most of my cohort, is the state of higher education in the United States, how it has transformed over the past forty years from a flagship of the postwar welfare state to a privatized enterprise, oriented toward business and its own self-accumulation. Thus, I have focused attention on and analyzed the casualization of academic labor and the indebtedness of students, higher education no longer a respite but an induction into a kind of indenture. Last, I have probably been more self-consciously aware of adapting the literary model of the essay, particularly in the essays in the closing section of this volume.

While these essays traverse topics from Richard Rorty to working in prison, I would like to think that the book is not a grab bag but hangs together like an album of pictures that clearly come from the same eye. In general, I take an institutional perspective. A common metaphor for the operation of criticism is "a conversation," which is a hopeful metaphor, presumably welcoming all into the field, but it also suggests that literature, culture, and criticism are self-contained lines of discourse. Instead, I look to see how our institutions make us, framing the way that we do literature, culture, and criticism, as well as how we in turn make our institutions.

Thinking about institutions is a self-conscious habit, and I am drawn to questions about why we do what we do, what it means to be a critic and intellectual, and what it means to participate in academe. Hence the title of the volume, *How to Be an Intellectual*. Alas, it might disappoint those looking for a guidebook if it were shelved in a self-help section, or it might seem rather grand, but the phrase is more a constant question than a prescription, and many of the essays depict the various ways that people have fashioned themselves as intellectuals. The title comes from the first essay, which looks at Rorty's "Intellectuals in Politics." For Rorty, the critic has a special

position as an intellectual and a special obligation to engage the politics of our society. I think that Rorty is finally unfair in his essay—he attacks Andrew Ross for his merely cultural politics—but it foregrounds the tensions of our role, and it also illustrates the shifting idea of what it means to be a critic, for his generation and ours. While I primarily write about those in literary and cultural studies, like Rorty I use the extensive sense of the critic, nearly synonymous with "intellectual." This view contrasts with that of someone like Stanley Fish, who asserts a narrow definition, holding that literary critics should stick to literature and that politics is outside their job description. I think that Fish's argument relies on a disingenuous nominalism—if a "literary" critic, the critic should only deal with literature—and is historically shallow, as criticism has always had fuzzy borders and critics have often talked about larger issues of culture, society, and politics. Even the traditionalist T. S. Eliot remarked, in his first editorial in *The Criterion* (1926), that criticism should deal with "general ideas," "not merely on literature, but on what we may suppose to be the interests of any intelligent person with literary taste." This capaciousness invites confusion about literary criticism, particularly compared to other disciplines of thought, which seem to nail down a tidier object of study. Through this book I take criticism as the kind of writing that deals not just with intra-academic conversations but also with public education—that is, with educating as broad a public as possible and with public issues, as well as with literature and culture.

For the sake of some guideposts, I have grouped the essays in four sections, each with a brief preface. The first section, "The Politics of Criticism," centers on battles, trends, and turns in contemporary criticism. We have not lacked for "historicizing" literature, but we usually see criticism as a march of statements or approaches. Rather than seeing criticism as a disembodied line of discourse, I focus on the institutional and social pressures that have shaped it and changed it.

The second section, "Profiles in Criticism," offers short tours of the work of a number of notable critics, recounting how they have fashioned their careers, through accident and intention, in the midst of postwar American culture. Since the New Critics issued a prohibition against the "intentional fallacy," there has been a tendency to discount talk of an author's life. But I think we need to see critics in their time and place. In addition, we tend to deal with a critic's work piecemeal, whereas I try to take

account of someone's work over a long span. I also try to dispel some received opinions about contemporary criticism—for instance, that the rise of theory was an import of "French theory." Rather, in the cases of a number of American critics, it was a homegrown development.

While I consider the formative influence that the university has had on contemporary American criticism, in the third section, "The Predicament of the University," I turn full attention to it, analyzing the predicament of students, conscripted into debt, and academic labor, deskilled into contingent positions. The university is not just a physical institution but also a cultural idea, and I also look at representations of it in recent fiction and film. Higher education is said to stand apart from "the real world," but given that about 70 percent of Americans travel through higher education, it has a leading role in American experience and speaks directly to the way that we apportion opportunity and rights in our society and culture.

Before it became a front-page issue, I wrote about student debt because it was something I confronted, and even more disturbingly something I saw my daughter and my students facing. It just didn't seem right that twenty-one- and twenty-two-year-olds had $30,000, $50,000 or even $100,000 in debt before they entered a full adult franchise, and in fact impeded their opportunity to a franchise. Though you don't have to wear it on your sleeve, I think that criticism comes from a personal root, from something that touches you, or the people around you, which in turn obligates you to say and do something about it. That is, criticism carries an obligation to work against injustice.

Still, criticism for me is not generated from a "position" but comes from the alchemy of training and accident, scholarly grounding and curiosity, political views and individual interests. The last section, "The Personal and the Critical," gathers essays that reflect on some of my experiences in and out of the world of books, from working as a correction officer in a New York State prison in the early 1980s to working in some of the nooks and crannies of the literary world, such as a used bookstore or editing a literary and critical journal. These experiences no doubt tint the filter through which I glean the world—for instance, working in prison gave me a little more worldly perspective than being a scholarship boy—and do criticism. Criticism is one way we have to reflect on how we live, what we have learned from it, and whether we should live differently.

PART ONE

The Politics of Criticism

Criticism in our time seems subject to frequent change. This section looks at some of the turns in contemporary criticism, such as the rise and fall of literary theory, the institutionalization of cultural studies, the resurrection of the public intellectual, and the embrace of quantitative methods. One question that runs through it is the political relevance, or irrelevance, of culture.

Sometimes the history of criticism is framed as a kind of relay race, with a topic handed from one runner to the next (the focus on the sign, for instance, passed from Saussure to Lévi-Strauss to Derrida to Butler). It is a history without history. In contrast, I focus especially on the institutional conditions of criticism, the material circumstances within which it is embedded and that make it possible, permitting certain work to be done or not done and inflecting its form. Since the 1940s, that history has had a lot to do with higher education, first with the aims of general education and more recently with the protocols of advanced research.

To examine that history, in several essays I look at some of the peripheral objects and vehicles of criticism, for instance the theory journal. Such entities usually recede to the mute background, like an Amazon.com box irrelevant to the book inside, but they shape criticism in their own distinctive ways. A great deal has been written about "the little magazine," but almost nothing on this newer, albeit more academic, genre. Or I look at the path of modern criticism through its keywords of approbation, shifting over the past century from "soundness" to "rigor" to the current "smart."

I begin with a longer essay that I originally wrote for *Dissent* comparing Richard Rorty and Andrew Ross. The pragmatist philosopher and the avatar of cultural studies might seem strange bedfellows, but their 1991