Review of *Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies.* Jonathan Kramnick. University of Chicago Press. 2023. 136pp. $20.00 (pbk).

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In Mike Judge's 1999 film *Office Space*, two consultants, Bob and Bob, are interviewing office workers at Initech, a Texas software company, to determine who should be fired. They bring in a middle manager, Tom, and ask him to explain his role. After Tom gives an unconvincing account of how he acts as an intermediary between customers and engineers, one of the Bobs asks: 'What would you say…you *do* here?' The humanities are currently under threat from the academic version of the Bobs: declining enrollment, a crashing job market for Ph.Ds, and culture warriors sniping at the value of non-STEM disciplines. Academics in the humanities are familiar with uncomfortable conversations in which we are asked to justify our existence and explain what it is we do here. In this short book, Jonathan Kramnick offers a defense of the methods and value his corner of the humanities—literary studies—but his defense sounds a lot like Tom in front of the Bobs.

While other disciplines cultivate skills like statistical inference, mathematical modeling, formal logic, retrieving novel facts from archives or archeological digs, fieldwork, laboratory and natural experimentation, and so on, Kramnick argues that the distinctive approach to human knowledge cultivated by literary studies is 'close reading'. Kramnick argues that close reading is not in fact a form of reading—it is a kind of writing. It is, he says, the 'craft knowledge' of turning old sentences into new sentences, creatively but aptly weaving the words of the text commented on into a new text using the methods of in-sentence quotation, block quotation, paraphrase, and 'a kind of critical free indirect discourse' (32) when describing and commenting on the content of a text. At this point, someone with a Bobs-like mindset might wonder: why do we need *you* to do that? After all, everyone in the humanities ends up having to quote and paraphrase at some point. What is genuinely distinctive about the methods of literary studies?

Kramnick argues that literary studies is characterized by a distinctive closeness to its subject matter: it shares 'a medium with its object' (71). That contrasts, on one hand, with fields like art history or media studies that translate visual media into writing (*ekphrasis*), and on the other, with fields like linguistics and philosophy of language that, as Kramnick puts it, 'move out of language entirely to something else…in a kind of reverse ekphrasis taken to the extreme' (74). To illustrate this kind of "reverse ekphrasis" in the case of philosophy, Kramnick pulls a single quote from a 2018 article in the journal *Linguistics & Philosophy*, a piece of formal semantics written in lambda calculus (del Pinal 2018: 169). Kramnick presents the quote with only a cursory explanation of what the article is about, and he gives no account of how the quoted material is supposed to function; it is simply displayed as a self-evident example of how philosophy of language is doing something very alien to literary studies. You wouldn't know it from this demonstration of Kramnick's practice of quotation, but the line he quotes is an example of extreme context sensitivity in language known as 'free modulation', a view according to

which we can shift the meanings of words drastically when the context calls for it, and that the article he quotes from is arguing against this view; and you wouldn't know that the article is itself making an important contribution to understanding the semantic gears that drive what the philosopher Stanley Cavell called the 'outer variation' and 'inner constancy' that characterizes the meaning of words: how words can both be flexible enough to be used in varied, novel, context-sensitive ways while retaining enough conventional stability to be learnable and make communication across diverse contexts possible. If you're going to argue that one of the distinctively valuable contributions of literary studies is sensitive, skillful quotation, then your argument that literary studies is distinct from philosophy shouldn't depend on pulling a single technical looking quote out of context.

Kramnick also attributes a dubious virtue to the method of close reading as he understands it: unlike the human sciences that have suffered from a replication crisis in the 21st century, the work of literary studies is not replicable, 'because there is no result independent of perspective that could be replicated' (91). But the idea that the sciences produce results or run replicable experiments that are 'independent of perspective' is a myth. No two experiments are conducted in exactly the same conditions; participants differ, time has gone by, the mode of presentation of the experimental materials changes. The philosopher of science Edouard Machery has argued that the notion of a replication itself has so far not been well understood, and that the right way to think of replications is as 'resampling the…components of an experiment' (Machery 2020, 547). In a 'direct' replication of an experiment using humans as participants, only participants are resampled (different people encounter the same materials in the same experimental design), but experimental materials themselves can be resampled in the same way: you could give participants relevantly similar prompts to make sure they're not just responding to idiosyncratic features of the original experimental materials, for example. Understood in that way, replication is possible in criticism. The art historian Michael Baxandall says that his explanations of what is happening in paintings should be repeatable and open to testing by other people, in the sense that if his explanation 'does not prompt other people to a sharper sense of the pictorial cogency of Chardin's *A Lady Taking Tea*, then it fails: I reported an experiment and it has been found not repeatable' (Baxandall 1985: 137). The idea of the replicability of critical judgments by other judges is part of the venerable philosophical idea that aesthetic judgment aims at agreement. For example, Cavell says that the vindication of a critic's judgments can only come from getting the audience to see, hear, or taste what they find in the object being judged (Cavell 1976: 87). Contrary to Kramnick's claim, not only can you repeat someone else's reading of an object, you need to, to see if it rings true (24).

In her study of interdisciplinary fellowship prize committees in the humanities (like the ACLS and an Ivy League Society of Fellows), *How Professors Think*, sociologist Michèle Lamont (2010) describes the different disciplinary self-conceptions of history, anthropology, English, and philosophy, and how members of each discipline explain the relative success of historians and the relative failure of applicants from English and philosophy to win awards. According to some of the interviews Lamont conducts, history has a clear sense of itself as a discipline, with shared and easily communicable criteria of novelty and quality—namely 'careful archival work' (90). In contrast, philosophers have a strong sense of disciplinary identity and quality but are bad at explaining 'the significance of their work' to non-philosophers, and even insist that only other philosophers are qualified to judge the merits of a philosophy proposal (64). That, obviously, is a

huge disadvantage for philosophers applying for interdisciplinary grants! And there is a 'widespread perception that literary scholars are divided, or perhaps even confused, about issues of quality' (78)—which makes it hard to argue convincingly for their preferred candidates. Contrary to the widespread perception of the discipline expressed in Lamont's book, by examining the practice of his fellow scholars Kramnick makes the case that there is in fact a solid disciplinary core to literary studies, namely close reading. But that method is shared across those humanities disciplines that work with texts: history, classics, and the more literary side of philosophy (Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams are two exemplars). Literary studies has no special ownership over the skills of quotation and paraphrase. Philosophy too sometimes makes overblown claims about having special ownership over certain methodologies. For example, a focus on arguments is one skill that philosophers sometimes claim a special attention to.[1] But philosophy does not have a monopoly on argument.

Philosophy has undergone significant disciplinary change since Lamont's book was published. It has become more interdisciplinary, more "synthetic" than analytic, to adopt Eric Schliesser's term (Schliesser 2019: 18–19). In a manifesto arguing for more eclectic methodology in philosophy written during the early stages of philosophy taking its synthetic turn, Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols argue that "The thing to do now is to cast off our methodological chains and go after the important questions with everything we've got" (Knobe and Nichols 2008, 14). And according to data collected by Eric Schwitzgebel, philosophy has started to recover from the steep decline in undergraduate enrollments that the other humanities disciplines continue to suffer, stabilizing and becoming more racially and gender diverse.[2] Kramnick may have identified the common craftwork that unites literary studies, but the skill of weaving new sentences from old sentences (13) will not produce a strong enough fabric to withstand the storms battering the discipline. The central character in *Office Space*, Peter Gibbons, flourishes after his meeting with the Bobs because he tells them uncomfortable truths about his job. One uncomfortable truth about the contemporary humanities is that no single methodology, including close reading, is enough to go after the important questions.

References

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[1] https://sootyempiric.blogspot.com/2023/09/arguments-in-philosophy.html
[2] https://dailynous.com/2022/08/24/the-philosophy-major-continues-to-recover-and-diversify-in-the-u-s-guest-post/

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