

Come: The Future of Literary Criticism

... education should remain a conservative institution, like our gonads.
— Roger Shattuck

I. No Thought, Please, We're Doing Literature

If there is to be a future of literary criticism, its essence must be not literary but *critical*. This imperative (and this conditional, which, moreover, together constitute the *suspended essence* of literature as such) is brilliantly misunderstood by those who would conserve and consolidate literary studies in the name of an apolitical and antitheoretical "love of literature." The degree to which a position is susceptible to satire is in inverse proportion to its commitment to self criticism. At one extreme, then, are texts that are so dogmatic as to function at the same time as satires of themselves. Roger Shattuck's "Nineteen Theses on Literature," a kind of manifesto of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, renders superfluous the inevitable parodic response. The candor with which Shattuck states his dogma — the limits beyond which he is frankly unwilling to think, the prejudices that are not open to scrutiny — is clearly part of his overall strategy: disarm all criticism by remaining resolutely uncritical. After asserting the existence of nature, human nature and the ineffable, Shattuck proclaims that works of literature "offer revealing evidence about material nature and human nature and whatever may lie beyond. This is why we read and study and discuss literary works" (3). But any implication that this revealing evidence might contribute to an effort to know and reflect upon our material and social existence is negated in the very next thesis: "Ideas and abstractions... do not form the essence of literature and do not surpass it" (3). Ideas are incidental to the literary work, thought and literature are *essentially* divorced, and literary criticism becomes *per definitionem* an antiintellectual activity. Shattuck may be proud of his dogmatism, but on its own terms all that it leaves to the conservative scholars is a version of what, forty years ago, Roland Barthes designated "blind and dumb criticism." (The connection is not fortuitous: for Shattuck and the New Critics of the ALSC, Barthes in the mid-1950s was no doubt one of the first barbarians through the gate.) Proclaiming literature to be too pure for anything so base and obscene as thought, blind and dumb criticism, Barthes noted, holds that "culture should be nothing but a sweet rhetorical effusion, an art of using words to bear witness to a transient moistening of the soul" (Barthes 35). Barthes then provided the only necessary response to the efforts of the ALSC:

But if one fears or despises so much the philosophical foundations of a book, and if one demands so insistently the right to understand nothing about them and to say nothing on the subject, why become a critic? To understand, to enlighten, that is your profession, isn't it? You can of course judge philosophy according to common sense; the trouble is that while 'common sense' and 'feeling' understand nothing about philosophy, philosophy, on the other hand, understands them perfectly. (35)

II. How to Read' a Footnote (Time of Critique)

Marginal to the primary text, skeptical of its pretence to independence and stability, suspended between (and suspending in turn) its propositional claims, the footnote is the form and the performance of textual self criticism. This is true even of those notes which, as simple reference or as dialogical exposition, seem entirely defensive; the fortifications thrown up in a fit of scholarly anxiety form an intertextual archive that can, in principle, just as well serve as a source of counter-thesis and rejoinder (cf. McFarland, Lipkin). The critical character of the footnote is prescribed and exemplified by what could legitimately be called the first footnote of our time — the one with which, and in which, our time originates. The first footnote of the Preface to the first edition of the first *Critique* contains Kant's famous invocation of *unser Zeitalter*: "Our time is the authentic time of critique, to which everything must submit" (Kant, Axi). The note itself interrupts a sentence that marks the boundary between precritical and critical knowledge: "It is obviously the effect not of levity but of the matured judgement of the time [*Zeitalters*], which refuses to be any longer put off with illusory knowledge" (Axi). The initial pronoun of this sentence refers back some distance to "indifference," which has appeared at the exhausted end of the history of precritical metaphysics, and which appears, precisely, as nothing other than the *suspension* of that history and its time. The non-event of indifference announces only (but this is everything) that nothing short of a *new time* can effect a genuine escape from that history and its illusory knowledge. What the footnote makes evident (that is, says and shows) is that "our time" is not in the first instance "ours." It is essentially, and "authentically" [*eigentlich*] the time of critique, it is *critique's own time*. "We" participate in "our" time just insofar as we submit to critique and its time. The footnote thus performs a dual function, corresponding not only to what precedes its superscript key (as if it were merely providing revealing evidence of the "matured judgement"), but also and *in the first instance* what follows it. The footnote interrupts the propositional unity of "matured judgement of the time" — but it *must* do so if "the time" is to be the time of critique and if, *as a result*, the judgement is to be other than yet another impotent gesture on the battlefield of metaphysics. Critical philosophy and the "age of critique" are initiated by this suspension. The project of locating and securing the boundaries of knowledge (and so of being able to determine, say, what is proper to literature and literary studies) is rendered coherent only by breaching the textual boundary and communicating with what is marginal, parasitic, secondary and improper. This Kantian legacy, all the more evident in the heterogeneous cultures of the present day, determines who "we" are. Our pedagogical task is precisely — borrowing the phrase from William Bennett — to reclaim this legacy. But the transmission of a critical heritage cannot possibly amount to handing down a collection of cultural artifacts, "pass[ing] on to the young the customs, restrictions, discoveries, and wisdom that have afforded survival so far" (Shattuck 5). The paradox of the "critical inheritance" (cf. Derrida 54-55) is a paradoxical imperative: it is necessary to *maintain the suspension* — to remain true to what "we" are by resolutely resisting a commitment to some fixed and static notion of who we are.

experimental culture [*Kulturexperiment*], the present is an opening to the future. The present is in essential communication with the future, it is *the leading edge of the future*. Such a culture is oriented toward the future and for *this very reason* it does not have and cannot have a secure position from which to judge what is coming. The answer to the implied question is again "no" – for the culture of experiment, there is no future and for this reason it is also necessary to grant that the experiment is *perhaps* itself an illusion. "The primacy of the intellect," Freud writes, "certainly lies in a distant, distant future, but probably not in an *infinitely* distant one" (53). Far from being a marker of doubt or hesitation on Freud's part, this "probably not" is on the contrary the sole possible indication of his *strongest possible commitment to the experiment*. For if the experimental culture is the one that is open to the future, the one that is not consolidated, solidified, dictated, predictable and prescribed, then its essential, constitutive and proper condition is *the conditional*. The experimental culture has a future and is a future – but only to the precise degree that it surrenders the possessiveness of actuality and to the ontology of consolidation; only to the degree that its future is not *sure* but rather *pure*, and thereby radically and essentially open. The difficulty of thinking an *open essence* is reflected in Shattuck's misapprehension of the processes of biological and cultural reproduction. For of course our universities, like our gonads, are institutions of conservation only when they are not really fulfilling their function. The potential they harbor must be released, exposed to a future that is always only coming.

University of Rochester

III. The Illusion of a Future

Freud concludes the first chapter of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) by highlighting the distinction between European civilization [*Kultur*] and "the great experiment in civilization that is now in progress in the vast country that stretches between Europe and Asia" (Freud 9). Because the Soviet experiment is not concluded, Freud notes, it does not serve the investigation of the religious illusion "for which our own long consolidated civilization affords us material" (9). This distinction between "experimental" and "consolidated" cultures is the key to understanding the convoluted and seemingly quite confused argument in the last two chapters, where Freud's debate with his imaginary opponent takes on a nearly schizophrenic quality. The strongest possible assertions of the truth and power of reason and "our science" are interspersed with Freud's persistent acknowledgment that "perhaps" the scientific alternative is *also* an illusion and that "perhaps" the experiment will fail. Freud seems unable to decide just how much faith to place in science; or rather, he seems unable to decide whether this alternative is worthy of any thing *more* than faith. The answer is to be found if one takes up the question implied by the book's title: Does illusion have a future? Freud's eagerness to accentuate "the difference between your attitude to illusions and mine" (154) indicates that the answer to the question will vary according to the orientation one adopts. For the "consolidated" culture represented by the imaginary opponent, the answer is "no." Illusion has no future; the future holds nothing for it but its dis-illusion and dissolution. This is not, however, because of Freud's dogmatic (and entirely extrinsic) assertions of the inevitable victory of reason. Rather, illusion *has* no future because, in a consolidated culture, there is no future. The condition of consolidation is one in which the present has become the past. The present is fixed upon, oriented toward and in essential communication with the past. In a consolidated culture, *the present is the leading edge of the past*. Only this condition, Freud argues in the first chapter, offers a secure vantage point from which to judge the future. But the present, by becoming the past, has become rigid, solidified, consolidated. It can no longer serve as the membrane through which a culture could relate to the future. The judgements about the future typical of a consolidated culture reflect this ossification and rigidity; they are restricted to statements of "fact" that are grounded in the artifactual residue of the culture. In the first chapter, Freud plays at adopting the constraints of consolidation, and the results are assertions about the "future" which highlight the inability to let it be something other than the continuation of the past, to let it *be* future. In the final chapters, on the contrary, Freud is entirely committed to the experiment. For the "experiment in culture" or