



## Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture

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Review of

**Kindley, Evan. *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture*. Harvard University Press, 2017.**

As I sit looking out of a window of the building

I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.

—John Ashbery’s “The Instruction Manual”

Substitute “assessment report” for “instruction manual” and “curriculum” for “metal,” and Ashbery’s lines provide a pretty good sense of the plight of poet-critics in the university today. The dilemma can be traced back to the modernist poet-critics who found themselves abandoned by patrons after the Great Depression and forced to make a living by way of universities, “little magazines,” the federal government, and philanthropic foundations. Any writer (or artist) in a university recognizes the inherent tensions in these dual roles: to be creative and to serve the institution. Evan Kindley’s book *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2017) demonstrates that this duality is the very reason why one is hired. Following in the wake of recent studies historicizing creative writing as an academic discipline, Kindley extends this emerging field with a concise history of the rise of modernist poet-critics within bureaucratic institutions from 1920 to 1950. With lucid prose, thoughtful close readings, and historical context, Kindley provides a compelling account of how modernist poet-critics (or “poet-administrators”) tried to marshal their newfound administrative power (4).

Using T.S. Eliot as his model, Kindley finds that poet-critics viewed themselves as the ones best suited to comment on poetry, because they wrote poems themselves and had the unique sensibilities

needed to explain literature to the public. As Kindley puts it, Eliot saw poets as “aesthetic receptors,” capable of switching between writing poems and writing criticism (21). In addition to Eliot, the book explores the social roles of poet-critics Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish, Sterling A. Brown, and R. P. Blackmur. Kindley recounts, for example, how President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Archibald MacLeish to serve as Librarian of Congress, and, aware that MacLeish was reluctant to give up his writing entirely, Roosevelt said in a letter that he would “guarantee that I will not interrupt the Muse when she is flirting with you” (76). He was referring to his offer for MacLeish to take occasional writing trips, and Roosevelt even added that he would “go along as a cabin boy” if MacLeish wished to visit Easter Island one day (Donaldson, 295). Kindley describes the White House’s larger political motivation behind hiring a poet: “[a]ppointing MacLeish librarian of Congress was less about stewardship of the nation’s libraries than it was about legitimizing state cultural power, bringing ‘the intellectual distinction’ of modernism to what was an institution of otherwise merely ‘technological’ superiority” (75). The position of these modernist poet-critics within a governmental bureaucracy recalls those civil servants who wrote poetry during the Tang and Song dynasties, such as Bai Juyi and Su Shi, who wrote court poetry in the capital and, when in disfavor, wrote personal and more lasting poems when exiled to the provinces.

One of the book’s recurring themes is poet-critics “dramatizing” their anxieties about their social roles as critics within an institution (31). Kindley describes Eliot’s poem “Gerontion” as illustrating the fear of losing touch with poetry because of one’s critical work (“I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated?”) (33). Auden, employed as a teacher in the early 1930s, seemed to conflate British schools and the totalitarian state in his long poem *The Orators* from the same period (64). Of the African-American poet Sterling A. Brown, who worked as an editor for the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Kindley writes: “as is often the case with poet-critics, the anxieties that Brown resolved into dogmas or precepts in his literary and cultural criticism are manifested and dramatized in poems” (90). While these anxieties often made their way into a poet’s work, occasionally poetry appeared within bureaucratic writing. Kindley describes a wild memorandum written by Brown shortly after he resigned from his position: “The memo is playful, angry, and tender all at the same time, a kind of poem in itself” (107). Kindley also observes that whereas MacLeish’s sacrifice for the state was recognized and respected by Roosevelt, Brown’s service was unacknowledged in the WPA’s spirit of cooperative integration (105-106). Moreover, due to racial inequality, writers like Brown “had to compromise more than others, and that, in doing so, they exposed themselves to damaging accusations of complicity” (108).

Philanthropies were another option for poets in search of a living and institutional support for the promotion of literary culture. Tax free philanthropic foundations flourished during the first half of

the twentieth century—by one account the number of philanthropic foundations increased from 27 in 1915 to 1,488 by 1955 (113). In the mid-1930s, the Rockefeller Foundation, for instance, saw its role as promoting “the democratic goal of wide public dissemination of culture,” and it eventually gave funding to the “little magazines,” especially the *Kenyon Review* (115). Kindley claims that the implicit assumption at the time was that “[p]hilanthropy would act as capitalism’s conscience, and criticism would act as literature’s; each was conceived as a kind of guide, or mentor, making sure that its charge didn’t go too far or destroy itself” (128). Criticism as art surveillance, stepping in when artists transgress, is a key point for Kindley, who argues that by taking up positions in cultural administration, modernist poet-critics secured a livelihood and were able to keep watch over literary standards for the culture at large. In his chapter on Eliot, he observes that a poetic movement requires “the institutional means to ensure the permanent maintenance of its achievements” (28). For Kindley, modernist poet-critics tried to make peace with bureaucracies, and today we need to consider “whether to challenge or sustain that peace” (15). His deeper concern is the changing nature of the humanities, and what the experience of modernist poet-critics can teach us.

Kindley’s history of poet-critics brings to mind Rita Felski’s recent work, such as *The Limits of Critique* (2015), on renewing the possibilities of literary studies and the value of the humanities in general. She takes aim against the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Paul Ricœur), and her purpose is “to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument” (3). Using the figure of the critic-as-detective searching for the guilty party within a text, for instance, Felski notes that suspicious reading, which often questions the value of narrative, itself tracks closely to the “pleasure-driven” narrative of mystery stories in which secrets will be revealed (116). Instead, she calls for critics “to experiment with modes of argument less tightly bound to exposure, demystification, and the lure of the negative” (120). Her work resonates with Marilynne Robinson’s 2017 essay “What Are We Doing Here?” arguing that the academy needs a “conceptual language” to explain our fundamental responses to beauty found in literature and in learning in general. Robinson cites her students at the University of Iowa who said her workshop was the first time they had heard the word “beautiful” used to describe a work of literature. In many ways, these calls are a turn toward the *critic-as-poet*, and given the rise of newly minted MFA and PhD graduates in creative writing who also work in literary studies, it’s easy to imagine that we will see more literary critics with the attendant values of writers. The scholar and poet Stephanie Burt at Harvard University is a primary example of how the two pursuits can inform each other.

Ashbery, who later worked for many years as an art critic, wrote “The Instruction Manual” in 1955, when he was employed as a writer and editor of college textbooks, and had just returned from Mexico:

I never actually wrote an instructional manual, but I wrote the poem in an office of McGraw-Hill in New York. There wasn't any window in the room so that was an invention. To me, it is more “confessional” that it appears to be on the surface. The poem really ends with me returning to the boring task I have to do, where the poem began.

It leads back into me, and is probably about the dissatisfactions with the work I was doing at the time. And my lack of success in seeing the city I wanted to most to see, when I was in Mexico.

The name held so much promise: Guadalajara (Bellamy, 18).

Like Ashbery's account, Kindley's insightful book suggests that what's interesting is not the poetry written despite its author working in a bureaucratic institution, but the poetry that's written *because* its author works in a bureaucratic institution.

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