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CRITICS IN THE SKY

Harvey Curtis Webster

BETWEEN THE REVIEWERS who specialize in uncovering the greatness of each week's leading novel and the critic-reviewers who specialize in emphasizing the defects of the year's better books, the modern reader has a pretty tough time. If the reader trusts Mr. Sterling North, and to judge by the best-seller lists he often does, Mr. Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* is a book for the ages, a good deal better than anything those old fuddy-duddies Dante and Tolstoi ever managed to write. But if he trusts the more severe Mr. Fadiman, Mr. Saroyan is "the kiddies' Tolstoi" and this book for the ages becomes a novel that it "takes about an hour and a half to read" but which "must have taken considerably longer to write." Contemporary criticism is full of such confusion. Small wonder that the reader often follows "What America is Reading" or looks for his favorite color among the bindings.

I doubt that the writer is much happier than the reader. If he writes a best seller, the chances are ten to one the serious boys will ignore or damn him. Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* rated only a condescending paragraph in the *New Republic*; J. P. Marquand's *So Little Time* merited only a half-column damnation in the same journal. The "established" not-very-popular writer fares little better. Arthur Koestler's *Arrival and Departure* was enthusiastically reviewed only by Granville Hicks—who knows nothing about literature, according to the *Kenyon* and the *Partisan Review*. John Dos Passos' *Number One*, Albert Halper's *Only an Inch from Glory*, and Benjamin Appel's *The Dark Stain* were mostly inundated by praise for earlier books.

The poet and the new novelist must be most unhappy of all. Unless you happen to be R. P. Tristram Coffin, and fortunately most contemporary poets aren't, you can be pretty sure that your most sympathetic criticism will be buried in the back pages of *Books* or the

Times Literary Supplement. You will probably be reviewed more prominently in the serious journals, along with five other poets, by another poet who is technically and temperamentally prejudiced against the sort of thing you write. If you're Conrad Aiken, you'll have your poems sent to Randall Jarrell for demolition and misunderstanding. The chief consolation is that you'll probably be given a chance to do a little verse-rendering yourself.

The impartial severity of serious reviewers is perhaps most strikingly displayed in what is written about first novels. A. Fleming MacLiesh's *Cone of Silence* served as a convenient whetstone for critical wit. Mark Schorer, who has written some fiction I feel very charitable about, called it "a great bore of a novel intent on reviewing what its author has read (a good deal and he should read it all again), and on revealing his sensitivity to political events ten years after they happen." Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* was dismissed by Diana Trilling as good prose "at the service of a sensational but essentially unfruitful novelistic subject," while Mr. Schorer, whose next novel will undoubtedly be given by somebody to either Mr. Jackson or Mr. MacLiesh, remarks that this novel "on the documentary level could no doubt earn an M.A. in psychology from an amiable university."

Evidently contemporary writing, when subjected to rigorous critical standards, is pretty bad. It is true that a comprehensive survey of contemporary literature, Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*, contained almost warm praise for Ellen Glasgow and Theodore Dreiser and dropped gentle phrases of commendation for a good many writers. But Mr. Kazin obviously had his eye peeled for what the people who really know what literature is would say about him. Page after page is devoted to proving that he can enumerate limitations with the best of the *Southern Review* school of critics (whose limitations he enumerates likewise) and that his critical judgments will survive the court of eternity. As for the other critics who talk about modern literature in general—well, it's pretty obvious that contemporary letters are in a parlous state. Too much disillusionment. Too few first-line writers like Whittier. Too few poets who know what a poem is, still fewer novelists who'd recognize a novel if they wrote one. Too few "specifically literary gifts." The novel is about done for. Poetry is definitely finished. The war and these confused and troubling times. . . .

Undoubtedly the recent confused and troubled times (not that they have ended) had a great deal to do with the temper in recent criti-

cism. The war made obvious and painful a confusion that was becoming increasingly manifest throughout the thirties. Tempers were short in Congress, in the White House, in the newspapers, in the liberal journals. The too-shrill tone of Mr. MacLeish and Mr. Van Wyck Brooks when they talked of the irresponsibles in modern literature, Mr. Dwight Macdonald's angry demolition of the demolishers as literary Stalinists, the indignation of Miss Joy Davidman at the poets who wouldn't (or couldn't) use poetry as a weapon against the Axis, the more genteel and supercilious asperity of Mr. Tate and the *Southern Review* critics when they talked of the poets who did use poems as weapons—these were translations into the aesthetic sphere of what is a commonplace in the everyday world of the shop, the school, and the home.

But it was only the quantity and the shrillness that were new. While the general public followed the advertisements to the movies, ignored poetry, and swelled the sales of *Gone with the Wind*, the critics of the thirties fought fiercely for a small and select audience. The public does not remember but the critics do: Mike Gold versus Thornton Wilder, Archibald MacLeish versus Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks versus Horace Gregory, *New Masses* versus *New Republic* versus *Southern Review* versus *Partisan Review*, Stalinists versus Trotskyists versus Liberals versus Agrarians. Some good came out of some of these fights. They were also the perfect background for the confusion and ill temper of more recent times.

Strange though it may seem, there is a kind of united front among these bickerers. It is true that the critics continue to annihilate each other, but they have a common ground in their contempt for the public and in their condescension to the creative writer. Strange as it may seem, though the critics continue to annihilate each other, one group of critics has emerged the indisputable, if unconscious, winner. There is hardly a serious critic writing today who does not acknowledge, by either attitude or language, the victory of that small group of "close" critics who used to write for the *Southern Review* and who now most generally appear in the *Kenyon Review*, in the *Partisan Review* and, occasionally and more genially, in *Accent*.

Although it is too bad that this victory has carried with it an increase of contempt for the public and an increase of condescension to the writer, it is not altogether to be deplored. Mr. Kenneth Burke, who does not seem entirely at home in this camp, is unquestionably a great mind, although I am sometimes suspicious of what he uncovers.

One cannot read Mr. Ransom's *The World's Body* or *The New Criticism* without bringing one's own ideas about literature into sharper focus. Much the same compliment can be paid the work of Mr. Cleanth Brooks, Mr. Tate, Mr. Winters (a philosophical opponent but a methodological ally), and Mr. Blackmur.

Mr. R. P. Blackmur may be taken as an example of the virtues and defects of the whole school. He pursues his craft with monastic devotion and writes with infinite subtlety about it and about the craft of creative artists. Whether the final result is agreement or disagreement, a reading of Mr. Blackmur on Emily Dickinson, on E. E. Cummings, on "Language as Gesture," is an illuminating experience. What John Crowe Ransom says about him may very well be true, that he exceeds even T. S. Eliot in the closeness with which he discusses a text. It is also true that he wrote in some "Notes on the Novel": "One group [of modern novels] is composed of books by those writers whose creative faculty is the postwar, barbarous, or non-rational imagination bent upon securing the impact of event and action as felt aesthetically for themselves, and whose technique is largely limited to rendering every effect and every value in its immediate aspect." This is, I believe, a fair example of his prose (though sometimes he writes with simplicity and brilliance), and, once you study out this passage and read the complicated comments that support it, it makes at least provocative sense. But why this thicket of terms and syntax to beat through before getting the meaning? Is it because Mr. Blackmur is trying to keep his ideas safe from the reach of the average writer and the average reader?

I am afraid that Mr. Blackmur is contemptuous of the average reader and writer. Sometimes it seems that he feels himself responsible only to the God of Critics and His high priests on the *Kenyon Review*. Too often, he writes as though he were in continual fear of offending his God by a gentle appraisal. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not, after all, a novel. "*Native Son* is one of those books in which everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing. One needs only compare it with *Crime and Punishment*, which insofar as it is a *novel* it resembles, to see how frivolous, how external the motor violence is by which alone the drama is pointed." Mr. Sandburg is no poet and "would find it difficult to say at what point in a given poem he became conscious of using deliberate devices for specified effects." It is plain that anyone who can be so categorical believes that he has finally found the one true way to interpret revelation, that he believes he has at last discovered the

perfect pattern of the poem and the novel that exist in the mind of his God.

This attitude is by no means peculiar to Mr. Blackmur. In the *Kenyon Review*, Philip Rahv wrote, with a generosity that is not very typical, of Arthur Koestler's *Arrival and Departure*. Still he felt forced to say that the book was "not particularly impressive as a work of fiction," that one could find there only "an interesting approximation of a novelistic texture and some highly credible novelistic characters." From the beginning these reviewers have been notable for their severity to almost all writers who are not safely dead or safely their allies. Mr. MacLeish is never more deft than when he is appropriating the styles of better poets. Mr. Hemingway's popularity is understandable in terms of his defects. Now that Mr. Auden is writing so that a large audience may understand him, it is clear that only his early poetry was profound. For that matter, most of the writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—except for the discriminating few who so integrated structure and texture that they anticipated the *Southern Review's* understanding of the metaphysical tradition—are hardly worth the paper for a denunciation.

It is not true, of course, that the serious critics who write for less elite periodicals than those that are dominated by the critical writers for the *Southern Review*, agree point for point with Mr. Ransom and his allies. Most of them write a simpler and more popular style than Mr. Blackmur; most of them use a simpler critical terminology. Still, they all seem to continue to look upon the *Southern Review* as their model. Almost all of them know the imperfections of "Lycidas" and of Shakespeare's sonnets, the complex interplay of structure and texture that creates a poem, and would not be caught alive giving Miss Millay's better poems more than a condescending pat.

The modern critic, whether he is writing in *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, or *Poetry*, is likely to agree with the *Southern Review* critics about certain fundamental attitudes that discourage the general reader and the serious writer. They ignore almost all best sellers because they distrust the many, although they sometimes profess to do their democratic thinking for them. They are very severe with almost all first novels and first books of poems, for how could the writers have learned the art of making objective correlatives march so early? After admitting certain excellences in a short first paragraph, they usually proceed to an exhaustive catalog of the defects in books by even established

writers—for they know that the failure that is the expense of greatness is even more the expense of having become established. They are generally careful to show that they know there is a pattern in the skies for what a novel or a poem should haltingly strive for on earth—though they are usually more careless about defining that pattern than the *Southern Review* critics used to be.

Except for the best of them, and even with these not too often or too much, there is little enthusiasm for positive achievement. Promise rarely gets more than a qualifying clause. Only upon the rarest of occasions is the approach to greatness as clearly defined as the failure to be great. Only rarely is the reader helped to discover what good he should look for in a book or the writer given much reason for persevering in the difficult job of trying to say what he feels it important to say. . . . Mr. Swift, you will never be a poet. This will never do.

Looking back over what I have written, I feel that I have been guilty of some of the temper I have condemned. It is very difficult not to be. I have not read any of the critics of the *Southern Review* school as closely as they have obviously read the authors they criticize. Though I read, and with pleasure, the *Kenyon Review* and the *Partisan Review* each quarter, there are always pieces that shoot over my background, my head, or both. I am a little on the defensive because I keep seeing myself in the men they tear to pieces. In an issue of the *Kenyon Review*, for example, I read of Mr. Wells' recent book on poetry: "There is little need, with the readers of the *Kenyon Review* as an audience, to applaud its virtues, or to quarrel with some of its particular judgments." I am afraid a book of mine might not even have virtues Mr. Cleanth Brooks (who wrote the review) would feel it necessary to omit applauding; I'm not even sure that I belong as a reader of the *Kenyon Review*. To a somewhat lesser degree, I am frightened by all the serious critics.

Nevertheless, I believe what I have said and what I am going to say needs saying. It is true that there are positive qualities in the criticism written by the *Southern Review* school that I have not mentioned. It is also true that Malcolm Cowley and Diana Trilling, to mention two from a good many, write remarkably perceptive and charitable criticism in the *New Republic* and the *Nation* two out of every three weeks. Even an unusually supercilious book section in any of the magazines I have mentioned is worth infinitely more than the glowing supplements to the advertisements that pass for criticism in some other places.

It is also true that there are about one hundred and twenty-nine million, nine hundred thousand Americans who read neither the *New Republic* nor the *Nation*, about one hundred and twenty-nine million, nine hundred and ninety thousand who read neither the *Kenyon Review* nor the *Partisan Review*.

Sometimes it seems that modern criticism is purely verbal in its devotion to the ideal of democracy. To the critics, the people are pretty much the "great beast" they were to the intellectual elite of Hamilton's time. They are the ones who read the bad best sellers, follow the advertisements, don't know what they're fighting for, prefer Sandburg to Wallace Stevens, Betty Smith to Arthur Koestler. It is true that sometimes the people are the "great beast." Sometimes they seem to do more stumbling than learning in their—do we hope?—progress toward the ideal of democracy. There are the people and here are the critics. And the critics will not bend and the people cannot see.

Of course, some of the sense of the critics *does* dribble down. From the *Kenyon Review* it goes to the *Nation*, from the *Nation* to a college professor, from the college professor to an unusually intelligent student, from the intelligent student to a less intelligent student. Even in this dribble there is hope, but is it enough and are we quite sure, anyway, that the ideas that go down are the ideas that should? I believe that there is a place for the *Southern Review* school and their ontological speculations (though I wish they would see them somewhat more as hypotheses, somewhat less as revelation), that it is good to have many of their ideas seeping down. I also believe that there are certain principles that must be applied in the bulk of serious criticism if the gap between critic and writer, between critic and public, between reader and writer is ever to be closed.

There is no such thing as *the* poem or *the* novel. If a good deal of what Sandburg has written, of what Tennyson has written, and, yes, of what Wordsworth has written, is not poetry, what is it? If *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Native Son* do not fall within the modern interpretation of what a novel is, that interpretation should be changed (and was *The Waste Land* a poem in the twenties or *Ulysses* a novel?). These novels and a good many of the poems by these poets do enhance the reader's "self-consciousness as a human being." And that seems to me, as it does to Mr. Daiches, "to be the end of art." If the critics would expend half the energy they use in analyzing the defects of

Native Son in pointing out the enhancement of self-consciousness Wallace Stevens' poetry might bring to a moderately intelligent reader, would it pull down standards or pull them up?

It is a mistake to be constantly preoccupied with analyzing the great or even to be constantly measuring each book read by standards of greatness. There is, as John Dos Passos once remarked, a literature that exercises its effect horizontally over a period of a few years and a literature that exercises its effect vertically over a period of centuries. While you are one of the living, reading what the living write, it is difficult to say which is which. The current presumption, which I share, is that *The Grapes of Wrath* is horizontal literature; *Ulysses*, a book that will exercise its effect vertically. It is a necessary function of the critic to have the best and the most fluid principles he can master and to guess whether a novel or a poem is likely to be limited in its usefulness to the needs of man now. Once he has made up and stated his mind, however, it seems a little ungracious to spend the remainder of a critique pointing out the qualities *The Divine Comedy* has that this piece hasn't. If the critic is right in deciding that the piece's usefulness is limited to our time, there could be some value in pointing out that usefulness while it is still useful.

The tone in which the value of such a poem or novel is pointed out should not be condescending. The only justification for literature is its present or future helpfulness to mankind. I do not understand precisely how books help mankind. Perhaps it is helpful if people can be brought to the level of appreciation Mr. Ransom has reached in his study of Wallace Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds": "its technical competence is so high that to study it, if you do that sort of thing, is to be happy." Certainly the early Marxists' ideas about the interrelations of literature and life were over-naïve. Probably it is reaction from this over-naïveté, which he once believed in, that causes Mr. Auden to say that "poetry makes nothing happen," that "it is a way of happening, a voice," that

Art in intention is nemesis

But, realized, the resemblance ceases.

If Mr. Auden or I or any other writer or reader really believed this, there would be no more books and no more reading. In some perhaps never-to-be-comprehended way, art helps life. And who is to judge now and who will be able to judge centuries from now whether it was

Ulysses or *The Grapes of Wrath* that was most helpful? Many modern critics write as though they are superhumanly certain about this uncertainty. The recent *New Directions Annuals* are too experimental to be any good; *A Bell for Adano* is too timely to have much value.

What if the critics practiced a belief that there is a potentially great audience for both serious criticism and serious literature. Say they pointed out that yes, there is some good writing in the first two hundred pages of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, it's not bad that the public made it a best seller—but see how fake it becomes as it draws toward a close? Suppose they tried to interpret T. S. Eliot for as large an audience as possible instead of always trying to say something that will be at once recognized as discriminating and new by T. S. Eliot and a closed family of critics? Suppose they decided to raise the general level of literature for the benefit of all who write seriously and for the benefit of all who might read seriously, instead of continuing the present struggle to beat the other writer to death with a review that will send readers scurrying after Lloyd Douglas' latest. (Did any serious critic ever try to take the trouble to point out to the public why *The Robe* should not be a best seller?) Say, even, they left the cover of critical terminology and tried to say the same things so simply that many would understand them? It might be worth trying. It might be they would find that there is a real basis for belief in the people.

As critics are very fond of telling one another when they are not too busy decapitating reputations, there is no hope for literature under fascism, great hope for literature in a democracy. That hope cannot be realized without an audience that is constantly increasing in size and intelligence. There can be no hope for such an audience without intelligent criticism to teach and increase that audience. If the critic maintains his standards and still takes seriously his responsibility to the people, the hope for a great literature in America may be realized. If he doesn't, we might as well prepare ourselves for the burning of the books.