The New Criterion

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Never apologize, never explain: "The New York Review" at 30

This month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of *The New York Review of Books*, and to mark the occasion the journal has published an appropriately titled *First Anthology* drawn from its pages (345 pages, $27.50). From its very first issue, the *Review* has been the voice of the Left-liberal establishment in this country. Hence it was to be expected that its anthology would be crammed with certain famous names, and the editors have not disappointed us in this regard. Hannah Arendt, W. H. Auden, Isaiah Berlin, Joseph Brodsky, Bruce Chatwin, Joan Didion, Richard Ellmann, Robert Hughes, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, V. S. Pritchett, Susan Sontag, Igor Stravinsky, Gore Vidal—these are the names, and the kind of names, that we have come to expect in *The New York Review*, and in this respect, at least, this *First Anthology* accurately represents the fetching combination of high seriousness, intellectual celebrity, middlebrow journalism, and "progressive" social commentary that has been the cynosure of the paper's success from the outset.

Several other things about this commemorative anthology are worth noting, however, for they, too, accurately represent both the spirit of *The New York Review* and the role it has played in American cultural life since the 1960s. The first is the almost total absence of writers who owe their reputation to the existence of *The New York Review*. Surely it tells us something significant about this distinguished journal that of the twenty-three writers the editors have selected to represent its first three decades, only one—the late Jonathan Lieberson—may be said to have made his reputation in the pages of this review. All the others came to *The New York Review* as established names—names that in some cases had been established decades before the *Review* was created.

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The First Anthology thus confirms the widely shared impression of a journal whose editors have harbored a distinct disinclination, if not an outright aversion, to the cultivation of new and untried talent. This is, of course, one of the things it means to be the voice of the establishment, yet even by establishment standards *The New York Review* has remained remarkably indifferent to the recruitment of younger contributors. Compare the first thirty years of *Partisan Review*, for example, with those of *The New York Review*, and you see the difference between a journal eager to search out new voices and one that was created to be the voice of established opinion. You see, too, the extent to which *The New York Review* has been dependent on the first thirty years of *Partisan Review* for its own pool of talent.

The second thing to be noted about *The First Anthology* is its omission, for the most part, of the kind of political writing that set the polemical tone and the ideological temperature of *The New York Review* from the assassination of President Kennedy right through to the election of President Clinton thirty years later. There is no trace here of the hard-Left fire-and-brimstone sermonizing of, among others, Noam Chomsky, I. F. Stone, and Andrew Kopkind, whose contributions did so much to define the radical stance of the *Review* and make it indeed the principal organ of radical-chic politics. (Needless to say, there is no reminder here of the infamous diagram published by the *Review* to instruct its readers in the making of Molotov cocktails.) There is no trace, either, of the reportage from Vietnam by Bernard Fall, Jean Lacouture, Mary McCarthy, and others that did so much to shape intellectual attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Of those writers, only Jean Lacouture had the grace to renounce his morally compromised coverage of the war in the face of the Communist victory—an act of political repentance that none of his American counterparts has ever seen fit to emulate. It has been left to two writers who were entirely marginal to the *Review*'s treatment of the Vietnam War—Dwight Macdonald and the Vietnamese poet Thich Nhat Hanh—to represent, or misrepresent, this crucial chapter of the journal's history. In a culture like ours, which every day grows more and more amnesiac about its own recent past, this revision of the historical record is tantamount to a falsification.

The third thing to be remarked of in *The First Anthology* is the disappearance of all but one of the illustrious British dons who have dominated the pages of *The New York Review* during the entire course of its history, lending it both intellectual distinction and a certain air of snobbery. There is no trace here of Baron Dacre of Glanton (Hugh Trevor-Roper), Lord Annan (Noel Annan), Sir Freddy Ayer, Sir Ernst Gombrich, Sir Lawrence Gowing, Sir Stuart Hampshire, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, Baron Solly Zuckerman, and a good many other British academic eminences who have shaped the discussion of history, art history, and so much else in the *Review*. This very large component of the journal's own history is represented in *The First Anthology* by a single contribution—Sir Isaiah Berlin's much-reprinted essay on Alexander Herzen. This, too, must be accounted as a revision of the historical record.

Finally, in contrast to those already noted, still another conspicuous omission from *The First Anthology* does indeed faithfully represent the record of the *Review*, and that is in its coverage

of the arts. Simply stated, *The New York Review* has tended to observe a discreet and almost unbroken silence about what was happening in and to the arts in the tumultuous decades since its founding. About the past, it has often published some brilliant essays, and that side of the record is given token representation in this anthology by John Richardson's expert essay on Picasso, Pierre Boulez's discussion of Mahler, Robert Craft's "interview" with Stravinsky on Beethoven, and, on a somewhat lower level, Gabriele Annan's piece on Marlene Dietrich. But the sole contribution here that addresses the arts as they have developed since the founding of the *Review* thirty years ago is Robert Hughes's "The Rise of Andy Warhol"—a salutary put-down of a large cultural phenomenon, to be sure, but hardly a substitute for a critical assessment of the period under review.

For thirty years *The New York Review of Books* has been something of a bellwether of the intellectual Left in this country, yet something about its politics—and it has always been a fiercely political paper—seems to have been deliberately scuttled or denied on this anniversary occasion. *The First Anthology* is a handsome reminder of the high order of criticism and reflection that has often made the *Review* mandatory reading even for those who dissent from its political disposition. Yet about that disposition, which has been its guiding light, it neither apologizes nor explains. Perhaps this, too, is what it now means to be the voice of established opinion.

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