

# The New Criterion

Notes & Comments June 2009

## A word of thanks

Aristotle, in an inattentive moment, defined man as “the rational animal.” We’ve often thought that “the ungrateful animal” comes closer to the truth. Why? First, reason seems conspicuously absent from so much of the behavior of *homo sapiens sapiens*. (Why the two “sapiens”? Does the repetition betoken uncertainty about the quantum of wisdom?) The second reason concerns the regular absence of gratitude among men. Blessings seem seldom counted, let alone remembered. We at *The New Criterion* endeavor to be exceptions to this rule, as to others. For the past several years, we have taken the occasion of the season’s concluding issue to acknowledge publicly our gratitude to the individuals and institutions that make our work possible. The extraordinary *dégringolade* we have witnessed in the world’s economies since last September lends a special poignancy to our remarks this year. As we write, the economic climate has that tangy freshness one notices after a severe storm. The skies are clear, the waters calm, but a full damage report has yet to be rendered. Are there other storms brewing? The economic meteorologists are no more reliable in their prognostications than the ones who deal in typhoons and nor’easters. The future, in short, is obscure.

But this note does not petition the future. Rather, it enlists the present to celebrate past benefactions. As we noted last year, we recognized from *The New Criterion*’s beginning in 1982 that we were embarked upon an intellectual adventure that would be as difficult to sustain as it was important to the larger cultural conversation of the West. For one thing, we noted, although *The New Criterion* might be influential—and it has become gratifyingly influential over the years—it could never be popular. Indeed, it could not be popular either in the sense of appealing to a mass audience—for its concern with the monuments of Western civilization would naturally circumscribe its appeal—nor could it be popular in the sense of pandering to the windy, politically correct pieties that define establishment taste today. “The question in 1982,” we wrote,

was whether such an experiment in critical dissent (and dissenting affirmation) could succeed—succeed, we meant, in establishing a space for intelligent dissent on cultural and intellectual matters and for writing that was clear, vivid, and serious without being academic or specialized. The evidence of a quarter century shows that the answer to that question was a rousing Yes. *The New Criterion* began as an experiment in critical audacity—a publication

devoted to engaging, in Matthew Arnold's famous phrase, with "the best that has been thought and said." This also meant engaging with those forces dedicated to traducing genuine cultural and intellectual achievement, whether through obfuscation, politicization, or a commitment to nihilistic absurdity. We are proud that *The New Criterion* has been in the forefront both of championing what is best and most humanely vital in our cultural inheritance and in exposing what is mendacious, corrosive, and spurious. But we are under no illusion that we could have done this alone. From the beginning, we have depended absolutely on a cadre of individuals and institutions that understood the connection between the vitality of criticism and the vitality of culture.

*The New Criterion* has been lucky indeed in its benefactors. For more than twenty years, from our very first issue in September 1982, the late, lamented John M. Olin Foundation was a stalwart supporter of the magazine. The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Sarah Scaife Foundation have also been indispensable allies and supporters for decades. Indeed, the visionary interventions of these three foundations made possible not only *The New Criterion* but also an entire constellation of conservative cultural and intellectual endeavor. We hear a lot about "diversity" in the university and media today; these institutions made genuine diversity a reality by supporting countless initiatives that gave voice to opinions and work that dissented from the left-liberal consensus that continues to define establishment opinion. We are immensely grateful to all three of these institutions, without whose support *The New Criterion* would not exist.

We are also immensely grateful to the ever-widening circle of friends and supporters who have stepped up to help us at this critical juncture. Their show of support, especially at a moment when havoc in the economy has made financial generosity much more difficult, is not only gratifying; it is also increasingly essential to our survival. It would take many pages simply to list everyone who has pitched in to help. We are grateful for every gift, no matter how modest. But we would like to mention in particular the major gifts of Arthur and Johanna Cinader, Michael and Marilyn Fedak, Paul and Heather Mansour, James Piereson, Bagley Wright, and several donors who prefer to remain anonymous. Their exceptionally generous support has been essential in keeping *The New Criterion* alive and well in these (to say the least) challenging times. We are profoundly grateful to them all. And we reserve special thanks for Donald Kahn, a dear friend whose extraordinarily generous support of our efforts for more than a decade has helped transform a brash literary and cultural experiment into a thriving adventure. Our grateful thanks to all of you who have helped make *The New Criterion* what it is today: not only (as *The Wall Street Journal* put it on the occasion of our twentieth anniversary) "a refuge for ... honest criticism" but also "quite simply" (in the words of John O'Sullivan) "the best cultural review in the world."

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