The New Criterion

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I.M. John Gross, 1935–2011

by David Pryce-Jones

Remembering the life of the writer, editor & raconteur.

John Gross, who died last month at seventy-five, was an intellectual, even a highbrow, though neither word seems quite right for someone with so much humor in him, such charm, and whose social gifts were always in evidence. What with being the spare man who caught the eye of every hostess, when did he find the time to do all that reading? He appeared to know everybody and to know about everybody who was no longer alive. A name would lead to another name, a story to another story, each one a gem of gossip, irony, and quirkiness. His memory was flawless, his quotations word-perfect. For years he used to give a party in the Basil Street Hotel in Knightsbridge. He liked to call himself the Elsa Maxwell de nos jours. His guest list was so comprehensive that people mingled who normally would not have tolerated being together in the same room.

The parties, the people, and the apparent hoo-ha provided the raw material for an imagination that never rested. It is possible, though I think it unlikely, that in his inmost self John was timid, on the qui vive for fear that something nasty might be in the offing. More probably, he just agreed with Kingsley Amis's gospel for today that change means worse: what might be intended as progress too often ends in degradation. John watched and weighed anyone who looked like provoking nastiness, above all change for the sake of change.

Temperament, then, drove him to enlist in the culture wars of the moment. The cause of these wars no doubt lies in unfathomable depths of history, empire, the death of kings, and who knows what besides. The effect is felt continuously in matters great and small. People have to adjust to the political goals on offer, to reinterpretations of the past, to the way reputations are manipulated to rise and fall, to the use and abuse of language. As a theater critic, John particularly held out against reading into plays and operas all sorts of moral or political messages at odds with the original work. I remember John asking at one point if I didn't think that pop music was the great divide. Those born after the era of this immense novelty in taste were condemned never to understand those born before it.

John's regular contributions to *The New Criterion* under the rubric "London Journal" were despatches from the front in the culture wars, and they are every bit as penetrating as George Orwell's similar London letters to *Partisan Review*, written during the real war with the Germans. When Tony Blair had just become prime minister, John pointed out that he spoke of "rebranding" Britain as though dealing with a supermarket; the wider lesson was that this encouraged a people to declare war on its own culture. The bbc was also coarsening the culture, John believed, in one instance concocting the nonsense that Wordsworth knew Coleridge to be a better poet than he and had therefore pressed him to continue with drugs in order to destroy him. After 9/11, John was particularly incensed by a bbc television program on which Muslim extremists and their apologists accused the United States of bringing this outrage on itself, and his comment revealed his state of mind: "You start thinking you can't be surprised anymore—not when it comes to left-wing opinion-makers at least—but you end up being surprised nonetheless." Over the last twenty-five years, John often observed that nobody from the bbc had been in touch with him. Culture wars are fought in the trenches, in close combat.

John signed several of his books for me. I have a habit of stuffing correspondence from authors into their books, and a shower of postcards fell out when I went to remind myself of the books in which he had actually written his name. Most of the notes simply evoke good times: "I do hope that I didn't outstay my welcome the other night; if I did I can only plead it was the pleasure of seeing you that kept me." Writing from a Park Avenue apartment, he hopes we can meet in New York. For five long years, he had the Sisyphean task of reviewing two books every week for *The New York Times*. He seemed to manage this easily, and the goings-on of his colleagues on the paper added to his repertoire of irresistible stories. By this time, he was also a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and *Commentary*—in other words, he occupied a position in no-man's land.

One postcard asks rather typically if I had read a review by a critic we both held in low esteem of a new book by a famous novelist we held in even lower esteem: "In a grim way it might amuse you." And here's another dated March 1981 with a portrait of Mao Tse-tung gazing with poster-like uplift into the distance. A strap across the bottom of the card reads, "Father's Mind Was Set On A People's Republic." On the reverse are five printed lines all in capitals: "The Youth of Today—Narcissistic—Depraved—Dangerous. All over the World Right-thinking Folk Are Crying Out This Thing Has Gone Too Far—Our Young People Are Sick. A New Magazine Chronicles the Terrors of Teen Tyranny. Time Is Running Out—Final Days—Edited by John Stalin." Underneath this inspired but presumably fictitious name John has simply jotted "T.L.S." and he thanks me for a review I had just written for him of Saul Friedländer's *When Memory Comes*. Now an eminent historian, Friedländer had described unforgettably what he had gone through as a child in the war, and drawn the conclusion, equally unforgettable, that Jews "obey the call of some mysterious destiny."

John was only thirty-four when he published *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* in 1969, but the book has the scholarship and the poise of someone at the close of a long and thoughtful

career. It also opened a front in the culture wars. John wrote that some English men of letters had been gifted while others were boring, but all had contributed to a literature that was a national glory. Academics with university salaries, however, had then driven them out. Critics had become either too specialized to be of interest or they were just doormen at the discotheque. Although he was cataloguing men of letters as a more or less extinct species, John chose to become that very thing himself, like a latter-day Eminent Victorian, but one who reserved the right to flick ink from the back of the classroom. At various moments in this role as man of letters, he was literary editor of *The New Statesman* and Melvin Lasky's *Encounter*, a commissioning editor with the publishers Weidenfeld and Nicolson, and, from 1974 to 1981, the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*.

The official history of the *TLS* compliments John for maintaining an extremely high standard of reviewing "helped by the fact that he had no difficulty in discussing almost any subject with his contributors on an equal intellectual footing." Roger Scruton, for one, tells me that he was virtually unknown until John commissioned long articles from him. Another contributor whom he introduced was Alastair Forbes, a member of a well-connected Bostonian family. For him, writing was an affirmation of social status. In 1976, I published a biography of Unity Mitford, a young English aristocrat who managed to strike up an improbable friendship with Hitler, becoming a fanatical Nazi and anti-Semite in the process. Forbes asked to review it and then took the opportunity to attack my father, who had been the editor of the *TLS* from 1948–59, for his supposed personal faults. John rejected this review, whereupon Forbes retitled it "The Piece the Jews Rejected," and personally circulated a hundred or so photocopies around London, including one to me.

For a writer, as John put it, "the fact of having been born a Jew can mean everything or nothing," or, he adds in a rather characteristic qualification, "(more usually) something in between." *Shylock*, published in 1992, was John's first attempt to discover what being Jewish might mean for him. Shakespeare's Jew has long been a stereotype, a villain who has become part of world mythology. The demand for a pound of flesh has provided an enduring foundation for anti-Semitism. Actors have tried to play Shylock as a comic character, or as noble, heroic, and ultimately tragic. What's always left, though, in John's conclusion, is "a permanent chill in the air."

John's memoir of his childhood and upbringing, *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (2001), addresses his identity as an English Jew more directly. He dedicated the book to his children, Tom and Susanna, of whom he was immensely proud. His recommendation was that everyone with these two threads in their identity should feel relaxed about it. John did not enter the sea of the Talmud, as he put it in the words of a religious dictum, but his father, a doctor, and his bookish mother gave him a sense of Judaism, of Hebrew and Yiddish. His experience was very different from Saul Friedländer's, but he too could come to think that Jews obey the call of some mysterious destiny.

John's upbringing was, nevertheless, overwhelmingly ordinary and English, for which he was grateful. During the World War, the family moved from the East End of London to Egham—"A

Small Town in Surrey" is the title he gives to the relevant chapter. What formed him were boys' comics, the songs of those pre-pop music years, period films, teachers in friendly schools who led him to the poetry of Eliot and Auden and the prose of James Joyce, even cricket, and not an anti-Semite or a proper Communist anywhere on the horizon. The path was short and straight to an Oxford scholarship in a college whose warden, the majestic Maurice Bowra, liked to boom to the attending world, "All my geese are swans."

An innately modest man, John made no claims for himself. A spasm of disavowal would certainly have crossed his face on hearing that he has influenced perceptions, and will continue to do so. His anthologies, the *Oxford Books of English Prose*, *of Comic Verse*, *of Essays*, *of Literary Anecdotes*, and the *Oxford Book of Parodies* that came out just before his last illness, when he was still able to take pleasure in the reviews, are statements celebrating the English literary tradition, its huge range, and its civility. I seem to hear the firing of heavy artillery in the ongoing culture wars.

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