

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments June 2011

A word of thanks

We are grateful for your continuing support.

For the past several years, we have taken a few paragraphs in this end-of-season issue to step back and reflect on the vocation of *The New Criterion* and to thank the people and institutions that make our work possible. We have been particularly ruminative this year as we look forward to an impressive birthday. September 2011 will mark the beginning of *The New Criterion*'s thirtieth-anniversary season. You will be hearing about the various literary and cultural events we have planned to commemorate this milestone in the coming months.

For the moment, we wish simply to acknowledge the odd suite of emotions that this accumulation of years occasions. Astonishment is one. *The New Criterion* began as an experiment. Was it possible, we wondered, to sustain a magazine that was serious but not academic, conservative yet attuned to what was vital—really vital, not just trendy—in contemporary culture, lively without being demotic? Was it possible to be forthright, even polemical, when the occasion demanded, but at the same time thoughtful and authoritative? The odds were against it. Yet, *mirabile dictu*, here we are. Granted, our detractors—and let us take a moment to thank those who despise what we do for helping, if but inadvertently, to broadcast our message—would deny the commendatory adjectives in that recital. No matter. *The New Criterion* has evolved from a novelty into an institution, which is to say what was once a brash experiment is now a widely recognized force that, love it or hate it, not only responds to but helps shape cultural debate.

From the beginning, *The New Criterion* has had a dual purpose. On the one hand, we have been sharply critical of what is meretricious and compromising in our cultural and intellectual life. On the other hand, we have endeavored to celebrate what is tonic and nourishing. Above all, we have tried to live up to the fundamental task of criticism: to discriminate firmly between the two, between what is ersatz and the genuine article, and to resist the seemingly ubiquitous pressure to blur or elide this elemental distinction.

Those paddling down a river are typically unaware of the strength and speed of the currents that bear them along. It is often difficult to gauge the rapidity or depth of change when living through it. But casting our eyes back to the early 1980s, it is easy to see that dramatic upheavals

have been percolating in the world, not least in the world of culture. In one sense, of course, it was ever thus. Human life is by nature lived on a precipice forever edged by mortality. This is a point that C. S. Lewis made in a sermon he preached at Oxford in 1939. "Human culture," he wrote, "has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun":

We are mistaken [Lewis continued] when we compare war with "normal life." Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil, like the nineteenth century, turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never comes. Periclean Athens leaves us not only the Parthenon but, significantly, the Funeral Oration. The insects have chosen a different line: they have sought first the material welfare and security of the hive, and presumably they have their reward.

Men are different. They propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds, discuss the latest new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb their hair at Thermopylae. This is not panache: it is our nature.

The New Criterion has been an instrument for acknowledging this truth and for bearing witness to the implications it weaves for, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, the "conduct of life." The fact that we have managed to pursue this task for nearly thirty years is, as we said above, an occasion for astonishment. It is also an occasion for gratitude. *The New Criterion* was always an unlikely enterprise. How could it be otherwise? Longtime readers will recall our fondness for William Dean Howells's observation that the problem for a critic was not making enemies, but keeping them. We have been assiduous in our efforts to do both: the calling of criticism demands it.

But of course we could never have embarked upon, let alone pursued, this journey without the stalwart support of our friends. An enterprise like *The New Criterion* is by nature collaborative. We depend absolutely on a family of supporters who understood the importance of conservative cultural criticism: criticism, that is to say, which seeks to conserve and nurture what is best, recognizing that tradition is not the enemy of but rather the condition for the new. For more than twenty years, from our very first issue in September 1982, the late, lamented John M. Olin Foundation was a central supporter of *The*

New Criterion. The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Sarah Scaife Foundation have also been indispensable allies and supporters for decades. It is worth mentioning again that 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 three foundations 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 each 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 intervened to help us. Their help has also been absolutely essential to our survival. It would require many pages 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 this year from Arthur and Johanna Cinader, Michael and Marilyn Fedak, Arianna Packard Martell, 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 parlous times. We are profoundly grateful to them all. We reserve special thanks for Donald Kahn, a dear friend whose extraordinarily generous support of our efforts for more than a decade helped transform a literary and cultural experiment into a thriving adventure. Our grateful thanks to all who have helped make *The New Criterion* what it is today.

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