The New Criterion

Thoughts on 30

With this issue, *The New Criterion* completes its thirtieth season of publication. It has been a bittersweet year for us. On the positive side, we have enjoyed a remarkable anniversary. We believe that *The New Criterion* consistently delivers some of the best critical writing in English (or any other language, come to that). This year we were particularly fortunate. From John Talbot's essay on the Loeb Classical Library in our special anniversary issue in September to Michael Dirda's reflections on Philip Larkin in April, from Alexander McCall Smith's brief for fiction that accentuates the positive and Barton Swaim's observations on being a Southerner to Peter Collier's recollections about the polemicist Christopher Hitchens, David Dubal's thoughts on the joys of playing the piano, and Denis Donoghue's observations about teaching modern poetry, Volume 30 of *The New Criterion* has offered a veritable cornucopia of criticism that lives up to Horace's injunction to delight as well as instruct. In addition to our usual coverage of culture and the arts, this season has also seen the publication of important essays by Gertrude Himmelfarb on Lionel Trilling, William Gairdner on the worrying rise of despotic elements in Western democracies, Andrew McCarthy on the rule of law, and James Piereson on the future of universities in a period of economic crisis, among many others. At the end of April, we inaugurated *The New Criterion* Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society at a gala dinner to commemorate the award and the magazine's anniversary. Our first honoree was Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, and we are proud to publish a version of his presentation later on in this issue. Add to this our special symposium on the question "Is America in Decline?" in January and our year-long series "Future Tense: The Lessons of Culture in an Age of Upheaval," and we believe that *The New Criterion* has celebrated with one of its strongest years ever during its thirtieth birthday.

Against these triumphs we must set the sad news of the death of Hilton Kramer, founding editor of *The New Criterion*, on March 27, two days after his eighty-fourth birthday. Although illness had robbed us of Hilton's counsel these past several years, we at the helm of *The New Criterion* remain dedicated to the course for the magazine he set three decades ago. Our May issue, which features a clutch of memorial pieces about Hilton's achievement and legacy, includes a selection of passages from Hilton's critical writings from the 1950s through the early 2000s. In a Note to our first issue in September 1982, Hilton (who left his position as chief art critic of *The New*

York Times to start *The New Criterion*) ruminated about why one might wish to enter the cacophonous arena of "little magazines" and start a new critical journal. Let us quote this passage once again. "There are," Hilton wrote,

> no doubt many reasons for wanting to start a new review, but the primary one was long ago stated by Sir Walter Scott while he was involved in preparations for launching *The Quarterly Review* . Writing to Gifford in October 1808, on the eve of the *Quarterly*'s initial appearance, Scott declared that "The real reason for instituting the new publication is the disgusting and deleterious doctrines with which the most popular of our Reviews disgraces its pages." The journal Scott had in mind was, of course, the *Edinburgh Review*. But he—fortunate man!—lived in a tidier and more fastidious intellectual universe than ours. Today we know to our sorrow that there are many worse disasters to be visited upon the life of culture than the *Edinburgh Review*. We are surrounded by the evidence wherever we turn. The feeling of dissatisfaction with existing journals, and with the ideas and practices that govern them, is therefore likely to be especially acute just now for anyone capable of recalling a time when criticism was more strictly concerned to distinguish achievement from failure, to identity and uphold a standard of quality, and to speak plainly and vigorously about the problems that beset the life of the arts and the life of the mind in our society. . . .

A very large part of the reason for this sad state of affairs is, frankly, political. We are still living in the aftermath of the insidious assault on the mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. The cultural consequences of this leftward turn in our political life have been far graver than is commonly supposed. In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic. Yet the subject is one that has scarcely been studied. It would probably take the combined talents of a Gibbon and a Tocqueville to tell the whole shabby story on the requisite scale, but one does not have to be a genius to recognize some of the more egregious results of this flight from intelligence and intellectual scruple. The cultural landscape is littered with its casualties and debris. . . .

The time has surely come for criticism to turn its back on this intellectual vaudeville act, which wears a fancy radical face when performing for the public while at the same time—backstage, as it were—availing itself of all the advantages and preferments that our society offers in such abundance. It is time to apply a new criterion to the discussion of our cultural life—a criterion of truth. This is by no means a simple or an easy task. The defense of high art in a democratic society has never been a simple or an easy task. It is in the very nature of democracy, with its multiplicity of interests and tastes, for the task to be difficult. Yet it is imperative that we recognize, as the first condition for any serious criticism of the arts in the contemporary world, that it is now only in a democratic society like ours that the values of high art can be expected to survive and prosper. The dishonesties and hypocrisies and disfiguring ideologies that nowadays afflict the criticism of the arts are deeply rooted in both our commercial and our academic culture. They govern much that is written about the arts in the media, and much that is taught about them in the classroom. For all practical purposes, indeed, they constitute a very large part of the mainstream of our cultural life today. It is therefore all the more urgent that a dissenting critical voice be heard, and it is for the

purpose of providing such a voice that *The New Criterion* has been created.

As *The New Criterion* matured, it became clear that there were essentially two parts to presenting this dissenting critical voice. One part centered around the negative task of exposing those dishonesties, hypocrisies, and disfiguring ideologies. To the extent that cultural and academic life had become captive of political imperatives, it was part of the task of honest criticism to exhibit and anatomize those shackles. If the art world had abandoned genuine engagement with aesthetic realities for the sake of puerile "transgressions"; if the academic world had substituted hermetic word play or anemic, politically correct radicalism for a vital embrace of the humanistic tradition; if, in short, ideology trumped candor, it was our task to describe and criticize the fact, using whatever tools from the armory of rhetorical repartee were appropriate to the case at hand—argument, when reason had a chance of gaining a fair hearing, but also parody, sarcasm, and ridicule, when those potent weapons were better suited to exposing the prevailing cultural or intellectual depredation.

The New Criterion early on made its reputation as a polemical journal, calling attention to the many naked would-be emperors who populate the cultural landscape in such profusion. But from the beginning, the magazine was also deeply devoted to battling what we have called cultural amnesia: attempting to rescue figures and reputations that had, like so much of our civilizational inheritance, been prematurely consigned to oblivion. Hilton liked to tell the story about college students he taught who first heard about the revolutions of 1848 in his class on nineteenth-century painting or who regarded Jackson Pollock as an old master and Picasso a name from the dim mists of a nearly prehistoric past. A kindred nescience infects our culture's awareness of literature, history, philosophy, and, indeed, the mechanics and institutions of democratic government. We see it as one of *The New Criterion*'s central tasks to battle that encroaching ignorance by shedding a recuperative light on the monuments of our cultural heritage that, in constituting our past, also furnish the living substance of our present. As T. S. Eliot observed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know." If, that is, we take the requisite trouble to acquire the knowledge. *The New Criterion* exists in large part to aid in that acquisition.

As we look back over our first three decades of publication, we find ourselves beset by contending emotions. On the one hand, we are proud of all that *The New Criterion* has accomplished: the important controversies we have weighed in on, the charlatans we have exposed, the writers, young and old, we have nurtured. On the other hand, it is sobering to reflect on the fact that many of the issues we conjured with in the 1980s—from political correctness on campus to banality and psychopathology in the art world—are still with us, in some cases in exacerbated form. That does not, we think, mean that *The New Criterion* has failed in its critical task, only that the problems with which we conjure are part of the permanent challenge of our culture. Above all, looking back on our first thirty years, we feel a sense of gratitude for those institutions and individuals who have made our work possible. In the early 1980s, *The New Criterion* struck many as an audacious, not to say foolhardy, undertaking. And yet here we are. We could never

have survived without the confident support of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Sarah Scaife Foundation, all of whose decades-long investment in *The New Criterion* has been the *conditio sine qua non* of our success. To them we must add the names of many other institutions and individuals, among whom we would like to name in particular Donald Kahn, who intervened at a critical moment in our fortunes, as well as Arthur and Johanna Cinader, Michael and Marilyn Fedak, James Piereson, the Thomas W. Smith Foundation, and Edward Studzinski. To these names, we add the Friends and Young Friends of *The New Criterion*, and our many supporters through the years. We thank them all for making our first thirty years possible. Here's to the next thirty!

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