

# The New Criterion

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## The Critic's Notebook

by The Editors

This week: The history of ambiguity, Fairfield Porter, Beethoven's cello sonatas & more from the world of culture.



*Fairfield Porter, Untitled (View of Pelham hills from artist's studio in Fayerweather Hall, Amherst College), 1969, Oil on gessoed panel, Betty Cunningham Gallery.*

**Nonfiction:**



ANTHONY OSSA-RICHARDSON

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A HISTORY  
OF  
AMBIGUITY

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*A History of Ambiguity*, by Anthony Ossa-Richardson (Princeton University Press): Irony, simile, metaphor, allegory: ambiguity gives language much of its drama and expressive power. William Empson wrote the book on ambiguity in 1930 (and, ironically, the critic Cleanth Brooks found his definitions to be a bit opaque in a *New Criterion* essay from 1984). But Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which posits that "alternative views might be taken without misreading," made possible the New Criticism, with its close study of the interplay among the words themselves, their many layers of meaning, and their form. Now, Anthony Ossa-Richardson builds on Empson's groundbreaking ideas, adding to Empson's analysis of poetry a study of the use of ambiguity—Brooks suggests the more precise term "multiple implication"—throughout the history of Western thought, in Greek tragedy, the writings of Horace, biblical interpretation, and contemporary criticism. —HN

Art:



*Fairfield Porter, Untitled (Amherst College building in snow), 1969–70, Oil on panel, Betty Cuninghame Gallery.*

“Fairfield Porter: Amherst and Other Places,” at Betty Cuninghame Gallery (through May 24): As an observational painter who believed that modern art should have descended from Vuillard rather than Picasso, Fairfield Porter’s project was to find the inherent vitality within everyday settings. His paintings evoke a sort of studied carelessness—a *sprezzatura* aesthetic, if you will—that eschews classical “finish” or bombastic facility in favor of a more open-ended and even vulnerable sensibility. Now, Betty Cuninghame’s small exhibition of oil studies and drawings—eight of which, never before exhibited, were completed while Porter was a visiting artist at Amherst College in 1969–70—is a lesson in Porter at his most unguarded. Among these untitled campus and classroom

vignettes are studies for major works such as *Amherst Parking Lot No. 1*. Also included is a larger, earlier, and far more developed painting, *Jerry* (1955), a lovely portrait in which the artist's obviously bored fourteen-year-old son sits at the breakfast table in necktie, slacks, and slippers. —  
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**Music:**



*Hiroko Sasaki and Scott Ballantyne. Photo: Merkin Hall.*

“Ballantyne & Sasaki All Beethoven: 3 Sonatas,” at Merkin Hall (May 14): It took Beethoven only two decades to transform the cello sonata. On Tuesday at Kaufman Music Center’s Merkin Hall, the cellist Scott Ballantyne and the pianist Hiroko Sasaki will play three of his major cello sonatas spanning this productive period: Sonata Op. 5 No. 2 in G minor (1796), Sonata Op. 69 in A Major (1807–08), and Sonata Op. 102 No. 2 in D Major (1815). George Marriner Maull, known for his pbs shows and radio music specials, will give a pre-concert lecture at 6:30 p.m. —HN

Other:



*Washington Square, New York, ca. 1900–20. Photo: Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

“New York’s Beloved and Iconic Washington Square Park,” at the National Arts Club (May 14): We’ve come a long way from the nineteenth century, when *tout* New York was centered on Washington Square Park. Given the park’s current status as an nyu hangout and redoubt for various charlatans (fake Buddhist monks, healing crystal dealers, itinerant chess players), it’s hard to believe that Henry James could write a novel called simply *Washington Square* knowing that the entire audience would understand the social significance of a house on the park. And yet the place endures, a genuine survivor from New York’s heyday. George Vellonakis, the director of the Washington Square Park Conservancy, will speak Tuesday at the National Arts Club on the history of wsp. —BR



*An evening view of Hudson Yards from the Hudson River. Photo: Related Oxford.*

**From the archive:** “Ayn Rand: engineer of souls,” by Anthony Daniels (February 2010). A critical account of the “Chernyshevsky of individualism.”

**From the current issue:** “The spirits of the city,” by James Panero. On the new Hudson Yards development in New York.

**From Dispatch:** “Roadblocks to impeachment,” by James Piereson. On impeachment precedent & possible outcomes for the present situation.

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