The Critic’s Notebook

by The Editors

This week: On Roman myth in eighteenth-century Scotland, Milton Avery, Ariadne auf Naxos, Paul Taylor & more.


Nonfiction:
Edinburgh by the nineteenth century was known as the “Athens of the North”—attested to by the (unfinished) National Monument atop Calton Hill that takes after the Parthenon—but the classical model most looked to in Scotland in the eighteenth century was Rome, contends Alan Montgomery in a book for Edinburgh University Press. With a front-cover
illustration of Pompeo Batoni’s 1766 portrait of Colonel William Gordon in tartan dress situated in front of the Roman Colosseum and peering up at a classical statue of Roma, who could doubt it?

—BR

Art:


“Milton Avery,” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford (through June 5): It was in Milton Avery’s “aesthetic rather than in his biography that the key to his achievement will be found,” noted Hilton Kramer, who wrote the first monograph on the artist in 1962. “Why talk when you can paint?” the artist famously asked. For the simple Yankee, the art said it all. Now, through June 5, we have a chance to consider Avery's achievement through a major exhibition of the early American modernist on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, this exhibition of sixty works brings together the first retrospective of the artist since Barbara Haskell’s seminal survey for the Whitney Museum. A review of the exhibition by Franklin Einspruch is forthcoming in the April issue of The New Criterion. —JP

Music:
Ariadne auf Naxos by Richard Strauss at the Metropolitan Opera (March 17): This Thursday is the last chance to catch the Met’s latest production of Richard Strauss’s Ariadne auf Naxos. Using the conceit of an opera-within-an-opera, Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, tell the tale of an opera seria production gone hilariously wrong and poke good-natured fun at the clichés of that world—the petulant diva, the truculent composer, the demanding patron. A revival of a visually spectacular 1993 staging combines with a stellar cast headed by the Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen, who debuts one of her signature roles here on the Met stage in this consummate opera lover’s opera. —IS

Dance:
Paul Taylor Dance Company at New York City Center (March 24–31): The City Center Dance Festival dance kicks off next week with the Paul Taylor Dance Company accompanied by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, a chamber ensemble. Paul Taylor (1930–2018) was a competitive swimmer who took up contemporary dance as an adult, founding his own company in 1954 while performing with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. He is best known for juxtaposing modern movement—the pedestrian steps in *Esplanade* (1971), for example, were inspired by a girl he had seen running to catch a bus—with Baroque music, and he frequently scored his works using passages from Bach and Handel. Alongside classic works by Paul Taylor (including *Esplanade*), the company will debut *Pentimento* by Lauren Lovette, a new piece set to music by the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (1916–83).—JC

**Other:**
To the modern ear, a conflict between “patriots” and “loyalists” may seem a flat contradiction. Both terms describe attachment to one’s own state, an obvious necessity for any functioning political unit. But it turns out that, for much of the eighteenth century, the word “patriot” was generally deployed in an ironic sense, as a “byword of
derision,” in the telling of T. B. Macaulay, for seditious rabble-rousers. It took the unabashed adoption of “patriot” by American revolutionaries to put the term on firmer semantic ground. In this context, the patriots–loyalists distinction points up a delicate but urgent moral question at the heart of the American project: how to marshal old attachments in support of a new state. This Wednesday, join the historian H. W. Brands at the New-York Historical Society for a discussion of his latest book, Our First Civil War, which explores these divided loyalties in the infancy of the United States. Out-of-towners can attend via Zoom. —RE

From the podcast:

“Kelly Jane Torrance on the front lines of journalism.” An address to the Young Friends of The New Criterion.

From the archives:


Dispatch:

“Something to say” by Scott Bartley. On Subjects in Poetry by Daniel Brown.

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