The New Criterion

Notes & Comments February 2018

Ave atque vale

The New Criterion remembers a number of close friends.

When the contents for this issue of The New Criterion began to assemble themselves—in fact, there is human intervention, but chance, or luck, or providence sometimes seems to play a large role—we thought that we might have to draw a black border around the issue. News that first one friend, then another, then another had passed from the scene disturbed the tranquil meditation of composition. After a certain age, Henry James once remarked, someone dies every day.

But that sober reflection tells only half the story. Below, readers will find a memorial by our Poetry Editor, David Yezzi, about the poet Dick Allen—a winner of the New Criterion Poetry Prize and poet laureate of the state of Connecticut—who died late last year at seventy-eight. “Allen’s style,” Mr. Yezzi notes, “was always fresh and generous; he was equally assured in both contemporary free verse and traditional meters.” Mr. Yezzi continues: “There’s a great deal at

Dick Allen. Photo: Hartford Courant
stake in his poems, not only questions of ethics and belief but also of life and death,” subjects Dick Allen treated “lightly, humanely, with wit and compassion.” See David’s essay later in the magazine to sample that wit and humanity.

Readers will also find in this issue a memorial by Marco Grassi, the distinguished art restorer and frequent contributor to The New Criterion, about E. V. Thaw, the great art collector, benefactor of the Morgan Library, and co-author of the catalogue raisonné of Jackson Pollock’s work. Among many other achievements, Thaw was author of eight contributions to The New Criterion, including a review in our inaugural issue in September 1982. Mr. Thaw, who died last month at ninety, was a conspicuous representative of that indispensable if unfashionable

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After a certain age, Henry James once remarked, someone dies every day.
creature, the connoisseur guided by a lively and informed taste. “Ultimately,” Mr. Grassi writes, his decisions remained true to his remarkably perceptive instinct or “eye”: that god-given gift of intuition that needs to be nurtured, cultivated, and continually tested vis-à-vis the art object itself. That Thaw could use this precious tool in judging material as diverse as Renaissance drawings, Impressionist paintings, and Native American artifacts—just to mention a few of his collecting interests—epitomizes the very ideal of connoisseurship.

But it turned out that Dick Allen and Gene Thaw were but the avant-garde, the advance party, in the cavalcade of departures that greeted us over the course of the last several weeks. Hence our thoughts of a black border.

While totting up the losses, however, we realized that, in addition to the ineluctable sadness sparked by the thought of friends departed, there was also the celebration of lives well and fully lived. This, we believe, was Spinoza’s point (or part of it) when, in his Ethics, he notes that homo liber de nulla re minus, quam de morte cogitat, et eius sapientia non mortis, sed vitae meditatio est: “a free man thinks about nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.” Montaigne dilated on the same theme in his essay “That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die.” “I want a man to act,” Montaigne wrote with his usual brio, “. . . and I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death and still more my unfinished garden.”

It is in that spirit that we pay homage in these Notes to several other recently departed friends and contributors.
Bruce Cole, who died last month at seventy-nine, was a historian of Renaissance art and American civics, and the longest-serving director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a post he held from 2001 to 2009. In 2008, President Bush awarded him the Presidential Citizens Medal “for his work to strengthen our national memory and ensure that our country’s heritage is passed on to future generations.” Bruce Cole was a frequent contributor to The New Criterion and participated in our symposium on the future of the art museum in the fall of 2016. He was also a scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., and a potent commentator on a clutch of public controversies, weighing in most recently on the heated debate over the proposed Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial in Washington. As Yuval Levin, Mr. Cole’s colleague at the eppc, noted, “by stopping the construction of the hideous monstrosity of a memorial to Ike designed by architect Frank Gehry (and funded lavishly by taxpayer dollars) and replacing it with a duly modest and restrained public monument to the great man,” Bruce Cole
performed a signal public service, not only on behalf of the memory of Ike but also on behalf of the integrity of the art of architectural commemoration.

Bruce Cole was also the author of fourteen books on various aspects of Renaissance art, American civic literacy, and related topics. He died with a fifteenth book so nearly complete that Encounter Books will be able to publish it on schedule this summer. Entitled *Art from the Swamp: How Washington Bureaucrats Spend Millions on Awful Art*, it will be a fitting capstone to Bruce Cole’s career, combining his deep appreciation of the publicness of successful public art with a gimlet eye alive to the many opportunities for waste—moral and aesthetic as well as financial—which the panting engine of American bureaucracy spins off as a sort of tithe to critics and fellow travelers alike.

New York District Judge Thomas P. Griesa, who died in December at eighty-seven, was a long-standing friend and supporter of The New Criterion. He attended many New Criterion events over the years, and his signature wit and insight made his interventions worth waiting for. The Argentinians were less amused by Judge Griesa, for in his professional capacity he was to enforce the quaint notion that even sovereign nations must pay their debts if they wish to have access to international capital markets. This the Argentinians found outrageous, but to no avail. As Rich Lowry notes in an affectionate memorial piece in National Review, the Judge “enjoyed a newspaper picture of a derisive float mocking him at an Argentine street parade. It was an occasion for great amusement.” For us at The New Criterion, we will miss his moral support even more than his generous material benefactions. It was a boon to know that we had such an eminent jurist on our side.
Mildred Schmertz, who died last month at ninety-two, spent her entire adult career at Architectural Record, rising from writer to editor-in-chief, a position she held from 1985–90. Perhaps even more than other magazines devoted to the arts, architectural magazines face a constant temptation to become adjuncts of their advertising interests and tend to be beholden especially to the architects whose work they comment upon (and must curry favor with). Mildred Schmertz did a brilliant job of balancing the interests of profitability and editorial independence. Architectural Record during her tenure maintained a rare level of seriousness and critical bite. Following her retirement, Mildred Schmertz wrote for many other publications, including The New Criterion, to which she contributed many pieces, most recently a review, in 2012, of Site and Sound, Victoria Newhouse’s book about the acoustics and architecture of new opera houses and concert halls.