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Stanley Edgar Hyman: an appreciation

Robert Phillips

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Stanley Edgar Hyman: An Appreciation

by Robert Phillips

He died in the middle of summer of a heart attack, in North Bennington, as had his wife, the novelist Shirley Jackson, five years before. At the time of his death in July of this year, Stanley Edgar Hyman was just 51 years old.

A revered literary critic and professor of literature at Bennington College, Stanley Hyman was a member of Syracuse University’s Class of 1940. During his undergraduate days he was influenced by the late professor of English, Leonard Brown, whom Hyman once called, making allusion to Ascham’s comment on Sir John Cheke, “teacher of all the little poore learning I haue.”

Mr. Hyman was born in Brooklyn and enrolled at Syracuse in 1936. He served as a junior editor of the Daily Orange and founded, with Miss Jackson, also a member of the Class of 1940, a literary magazine called the Spectre. It was a good magazine and the pair managed to generate some excitement on campus, even daring to publish line drawings of nudes. As Hyman wrote in retrospect:

“Most of the magazine’s troubles and criticism were cooked up by us to bring the magazine to the attention of the student body. The letters to the Orange prophesying doom or charging obscenity were mostly written by us or our friends; eventually we provoked a few legitimate ones. We pushed the faculty advisor, who was a friend and very reluctant, into censoring the two nudes, then we stapled copies with and without and made what fuss we could about it.”

Hyman summarized his writing and editing experiences at Syracuse in this way:

“We were serious, certainly, about literature, and about such matters as discrimination and free speech. It is equally true that the college was glad to be rid of us and the magazine when we were graduated. But they never really interfered with us, and the

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1 Letter to R. Phillips, April 4, 1961
English department under that fine old gentleman, Horace Eaton, gave us every assistance we asked.”2

Upon graduation from Syracuse Hyman became a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and began to contribute articles and reviews to other periodicals. He felt a critic should criticize and eschewed graduate schools altogether. He was one of the rare literary critics of our time who did not have a graduate degree. He and his wife lived first in New York, then in Westport, Connecticut, and then in Vermont when he became a member of the literature faculty of Bennington College in 1945. In 1961 he became literary critic for *The New Leader*, a post he relinquished in June 1965. It had been an extraordinarily demanding job, reviewing books for a bi-weekly. In an “Afterword” Hyman wrote, “I took the task seriously, and worked very hard at it. At the end of that time I gave it up, exhausted in both senses: tired and emptied. The column occasioned a surprising amount of interest and praise—less a tribute to my merits, I suspect, than to the rarity of sustained serious reviewing in our day.” Though his regular reviews ceased, he continued to write extended essays for literary quarterlies and to produce book-length studies.

Stanley Hyman’s first book was published but eight years after he left college. It was widely and wildly acclaimed. Titled *The Armed Vision* and subtitled “a study in the methods of modern literary criticism,” its purpose was defined by Hyman:

“First, to study the nature of modern critical methods as exemplified by selected contemporary critics; second, to note the ancestry of their techniques and procedures, both as disciplines in themselves and as gradual developments in the history of criticism; third, to suggest some possibilities for an integrated and practical methodology that would combine and consolidate the best procedures of modern criticisms.”

The book was an important document, recording a remarkable quarter of a century of criticism. In it Hyman discussed in depth Edmund Wilson, Christopher Caudwell, Yvor Winters, T.S. Eliot, Van Wyck Brooks, Constance Rourke, Maud Bodkin, Caroline Spurgeon, R. P. Blackmur, William Empson, I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke (who came to serve as Hyman’s mentor). The volume was used widely by universities in criticism courses, the original hardback edition was reprinted once, and a revised and abridged paper edition appeared in 1955, many printings having been sold since.

With the publication in 1955 of *The Critical Performance: American and British Literary Criticism of Our Century*, Hyman illuminated and documented some of his critical contentions within the context of a volume of examples. It was an anthology (or symposium) of critical essays which

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illustrated the various methods he had discussed in *The Armed Vision*. He made the relationship of the two books clear in a prefatory note:

“What I have to say about the contemporary flowering of literary criticism the earlier book says at some length; what can be shown of its brilliance and variety of emphasis and mood in one small volume is put out for display here.”

The anthology evidenced Hyman’s uncommon criteria of selection, made available a number of important essays which had been hard to come by, and also communicated a sense of the “rich harvests of method and idea, even in intellectual fashion, on which modern criticism has drawn . . .” Among the critics he anthologized were L. C. Knights, Scott Buchanan and William Troy, a critic whose scattered essays Mr. Hyman greatly admired and which he was later to collect in a posthumous volume of Troy’s work.

Hyman’s third book, *Poetry and Criticism: Four Revolutions in Literary Taste*, was published by Atheneum in 1961. The study posited his thesis that critics who legislate for poetry in general do so with some particular poem in mind which they seek, consciously or not, to impose as a standard. To demonstrate his contention, Hyman examined the ideas of eight great critics—Aristotle, Longinus, Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot—in relation to the poems that he felt best exemplified their principles. The poems ranged from works by the critics themselves to poetry by others “which they seemed not to notice, or take seriously, but which nevertheless shaped their thought.”

It was an outrageous study, and among the works Hyman explicated brilliantly within its pages were *Oedipus the King*, *The Rape of the Lock* and Eliot’s difficult “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” of which Hyman concluded:

“Eliot was not doing an ominous saloon scene, but offering us the deepest forebodings of the human spirit: that man is only a nasty animal; that the dead may not rise; that God’s death may be, as Yeats said, ‘but a play’; that art is merely the child’s fouling of his crib.”

Original as the book was, it did not represent Hyman’s major writing during the five years that separated it from *The Critical Performance*. (The book was, in fact, four public lectures that he had delivered at Wayne State University in 1960.) Rather, his concentration had gone into a voluminous critical study, *The Tangled Bank*, which was published in 1962. Here he attempted to prove that the power and the influence of four twentieth-century non-literary thinkers, Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud, were due in substantial part to their ability as imaginative writers. He examined the books of the four as art which had aesthetic as well as ethical dimensions—works “of the moral imagination imposing order and form on disorderly and anarchic experience.”
The Tangled Bank was partially biographical as well as critical, and assessed the effects of the four on the twentieth century, their positions and influences today, as well as their individual works. It was, however, in no way a history of ideas. Hyman resolutely treated the quartet's prose writings as "imaginative organizations," as though they were poems or plays. Reflecting years of reading and research, he discussed every book of all four writers and found the works to possess metaphorical visions of order and form.

This was probably Hyman's favorite of his own books. Certainly Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud were seminal influences upon his own thinking and writing. He drew his critical method from the ritual theories of Jane Harrison and Gilbert Murray as well, and from the symbolic action theories of Kenneth Burke and the handling of analogical form as practiced by William Empson.

The year 1962 also saw the publication of Hyman's short study, Nathanael West, in the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers series. Dedicated "To the Memory of Leonard Brown," it was a remarkably original reading of West, especially when Hyman explicated West's Miss Lonelyhearts within the context of an oedipal vision and the protagonist's powerful latent homosexuality. The pamphlet stands today as the best criticism extant on West, despite several subsequent book-length studies.

With the exception of this pamphlet and the 1956 critical anthology, Stanley Hyman's books up to this time had displayed his talent for writing in extended forms. The Promised End: Essays and Reviews 1942-1962 was an exhibition of twenty years' work in shorter forms. Moving from literary and cultural criticism, from folklore and language to psychology and religion, The Promised End was a cheerful manifestation of the author's enthusiasms and appreciations. His topics included the Child Ballads, Thoreau and the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.

While a pot-pourri, the volume was a book rather than a scrapbook; it was unified by a scrupulously consistent and convincing point of view of man and his works. Mr. Hyman combined a deep understanding of the cultural and ritual elements of art with sensitivity to the dramatic, lyrical and stylistic components, thereby avoiding the critical provincialism of both those who restrict themselves to text alone and those for whom history and psyche are all.

Two books by Stanley Edgar Hyman appeared in 1966. The first was a second pamphlet in the Minnesota series. Writing on Flannery O'Connor, he discussed the language, elements of tragi-comedy, radical Christian dualism, symbolism, preoccupations and pervasive sexuality within the body of that late Catholic writer's fiction. He also advanced the unpopular opinion that Miss O'Connor's second novel, The Violent Bear It Away, was her masterpiece. Nearly every critic had championed her short stories at the expense of her novels. Mr. Hyman's essay was important in another sense: it...
insisted upon the establishment of a proper balance between Miss O'Connor's much-discussed theology and her ultimate themes. He declared that any theological discussions can only be preliminary to and not a substitute for aesthetic analysis and evaluation of her fiction.

The other 1966 book was *Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time*. It was not and did not pretend to be a unified study; the tone was more casual, the method less scholarly; the pieces were brief. Nevertheless, as a generous sampling of Hyman's reviews which had appeared in *The New Leader* between 1961 and 1965, the book was impressive. Hyman made the selection from a body of reviews twice the size of the book. He declared the collection was submitted "as the record of an experiment in regularly confronting the literature of our time with a hard eye, so to speak, insisting on standards of excellence at a time of general cultural debasement, trying to tell the truth at a time when truth has become unfashionable in literary journalism." Indeed, he demonstrated that many of the emperors of contemporary literature were clothesless.

Unlike earlier books, the views on display in *Standards* were of a more destructive than constructive nature. His pieces on James Purdy, John Cheever and Norman Mailer, for instance, were devastating in every meaning of the word. Mailer's retort to Hyman's review is worth quoting: "Stanley Edgar Hyman is a real literary critic and he wrote the worst review of *An American Dream* that I've read so far by a critic who is a professional of the first rank... yet I read his prose with the greatest delight, because he writes well about literature."

*He writes well about literature.* With a change of tense, Mailer's words might serve as an epitaph for Stanley Edgar Hyman. Yet he did more than that. In addition to *The Critical Performance*, he edited other books: *Darwin for Today*; Kenneth Burke's *Perspectives by Incongruity* and *Terms for Order*; Shirley Jackson's posthumous *Come Along With Me* and *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*; and *Selected Essays of William Troy*, a project long on his mind and one which won the National Book Award. Finally, a new book of original criticism, *Iago*, is scheduled for publication by Atheneum this fall.

And besides the writing and editing, there was the teaching. For years after he joined the Bennington faculty his course, "Myth-Ritual-Literature," was said to be the most popular undergraduate offering of the college.

Hyman did all this without much recognition. He received no honorary doctorate from Syracuse or any other university, though an invitation to return to Syracuse to give a single lecture did come in 1965, twenty-five years after his graduation. He received no Arents Award, no Centennial Medal. There were, however, two awards of record of which he was very proud: an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship in 1959 and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in criticism in 1967.

The title of his last book, *Standards*, summarizes the principle to which
his life and career were dedicated. Perhaps Stanley Hyman's own final sentences on Nathanael West, a writer with whom he surely identified in some ways, are appropriate here:

"He was a true pioneer... making it possible for the younger (critics) who came after him... to do with relative ease what he did in defiance of the temper of his time, for so little reward, in isolation and in pain."