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Books Received

Cover Page Footnote

Reviews of Steinbeck and Covici: The Story of a Friendship by Thomas Fensch; The Technological Conscience: Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise by Manfred Stanley; and Van Wyck Brooks: The Critic and His Critics by William Wasserstrom, ed. Page 85.

Books Received

Syracuse Scholar will review selected books received from faculty members past and present and from alumni of Syracuse University.

Van Wyck Brooks:
The Critic and His Critics
Edited by
William Wasserstrom
Kennikat Press
254 pp.
\$15.00

“It is as much we who are discredited as it is he who is afflicted by disregard,” writes William Wasserstrom in an elegant editorial preface. The author of *The Legacy of Van Wyck Brooks*, *Civil Liberties and the Arts*, *A Dial Miscellany*, *The Time of the Dial*, *Heiress of All the Ages*, and many journal articles, Wasserstrom here proposes to “round out sixty years of debate about the question of Brooks’s service or disservice to American literature and culture.” The grand old man of American letters during a decade (1915–25) when a native movement in American letters “asserted its boldest claims to preeminence among competing international styles, in the culture of modernism,” Brooks died in 1963 a relatively forgotten figure; his pastoral utopianism seemed to have been relegated to America’s cultural past. Now, in the late seventies, Wasserstrom argues, there are sufficient books, studies, and essays, including those collected in this volume, to support any claim that Brooks’s position in twentieth-century American letters is secure and that his ideas are of far more than antiquarian interest.

One of this book’s great merits—not the least, by any means—is to collect essays on Brooks, previously printed, by a remarkable variety of distinguished American and English critics: Mary Colum, Paul Rosenfeld, Edmund Wilson, René Wellek, Stanley Edgar Hyman, F. R. Leavis, Malcolm Cowley, and Wasserstrom himself. Also reprinted and delightful to read are several letters written to Brooks by Sherwood Anderson between 1918 and 1923. Wasserstrom precedes each essay with a succinct, elegant introduction summarizing the vagaries of each critic’s thinking about Brooks over the years, or the nature of his rapport with the subject. Although a selected bibliography supports Wasserstrom’s claim that Brooks remains a force in American letters, a wider choice of books, studies, and essays might perhaps have lent greater credence to Wasserstrom’s conviction that Brooks retains his “powers of survival.” —P.A.

*The Technological
Conscience: Survival and
Dignity in an Age of
Expertise*

By Manfred Stanley

The Free Press

281 pp.

\$15.95

A major argument of this book is that there is a fundamental distinction between a scientifically based technology and its perverted form, technicism. Stanley defines the latter term as "a state of mind that rests on an act of conceptual misuse, reflected in myriad linguistic ways, of scientific and technological modes of reasoning." The author argues that the real issue for a metaphysics concerned with human dignity is not science and technology as such but the dominance of technicist language over all other language codes offering an interpretation of human existence. To counter the technicist imperative, Stanley sees in public education the only force in society able to intervene effectively against the technicization of our social and conceptual modes. The reader wonders how broad or narrow a definition Stanley wants to give of "public education"—whether it incorporates the media as well as the schools; and if so, whether public education via the media would not encourage the technicization of language it is meant to avoid. A central question also left unanswered: what does the author mean by a "metaphysics of human dignity?" And how do you transmit that concept, or pursue "rational happiness" while avoiding "speech appropriate to values" (p. 253)? Despite such apparent inconsistencies, this is a most penetrating essay; it is particularly acute in its careful analysis of the concept of technicism in current American language, behavior, and myth. The diagnosis is brilliant, the suggested cure arguable. —P.A.

Steinbeck and Covici:

The Story of a Friendship

By Thomas Fensch

Paul S. Eriksson, Publisher

248 pp.

\$12.95

Thomas Fensch, now of the faculty of the School of Communications at the University of Texas, received his doctoral degree in communications from Syracuse University. His book tells us about a personal and professional friendship between John Steinbeck and his editor, Pat Covici, over a thirty-year period (1935–64). The "story" is left for the friends, not for Thomas Fensch, to tell: most of the work is a reproduction of excerpts or full-length letters taken from the Steinbeck-Covici correspondence. (Covici saved all of Steinbeck's letters and copies of his own replies.) The letters are of unequal human and literary interest, and, unlike what the dust jacket tells us, they do not "form the basis of the book"; they are the book itself. Dr. Fensch seems to have hesitated between writing the story of a friendship based on the letters and doing a critical edition of the correspondence. I would like to read the book he chose *not* to write. —P.A.