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The Lost Voice of Criticism

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Chancellor Emeritus William Pearson Tolley presents
the Dedication Address

THE COURIER

A COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
on the
DEDICATION OF THE ERNEST S. BIRD LIBRARY

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The Lost Voice of Criticism

by Hilton Kramer

It is a particular pleasure as well as a special honor to be invited to speak here today on this happy occasion. Some twenty-five years ago, I had the good fortune, while an undergraduate on this campus, to study with Professor Leonard Brown, and it was this experience, as much as any other, that determined the subsequent course of my own professional life. Leonard Brown's course in literary criticism was, for many of us in those days, the high point of our literary education. Although I was fortunate, after leaving Syracuse, in studying with a number of distinguished teachers who were far better known to the world at large as critics and writers, what I learned from them served only to supplement and re-enforce what I had already absorbed in Brown's extraordinary classes. I shall always feel a profound debt of gratitude to this great teacher.

For Leonard Brown, criticism constituted a high intellectual calling, a vocation of solemn responsibility — responsibility not only for the elucidation of literary texts but (as I now see it in retrospect) for the defense of those literary texts against the corruptions of mass culture, of political sectarianism, and, above all perhaps, of indolent and complacent intelligence. As a teacher, Brown was blessed with the ability to impress upon his students a vivid sense of their obligation to encompass, as profoundly as their abilities permitted, the deepest truths of the literary imagination, and not merely as an academic exercise or a cultural acquisition but as a means of coming to terms with life itself. To understand the complexity of the literary imagination, especially in its difficult modernist forms, was, indeed, to understand the complexity of life, for what else was the high art of literature — in this view — but the deepest and wisest account of life that our culture had vouchsafed for those with the courage and the intelligence to face it?

There was much complaint, then and later, about the false orthodoxies and unnecessary cults induced by what was then still called the New Criticism. With certain portions of this complaint, one could agree and yet still feel that the standards upheld in the New Criticism represented something extremely precious. Under Brown's tutelage, certainly, there was no mistaking the nature of the critical task, which was to induce the greatest possible consciousness of the way the literary mind made its discriminations and effected its miraculous revelations. Far from being considered a threat to the creative and irreducible miracle that lies at the heart of every literary achievement, criticism was understood to be an indispensable aid to its proper appreciation. To be conscious — conscious of form, conscious of the experience that makes a form, conscious of the moral discriminations that

determine a form and of the history from which a particular form draws its sustenance and its inspiration – to be conscious was deemed not only an advantage but a necessity for any serious commerce with the literary mind.

In Leonard Brown's classroom, criticism was the least sectarian, the most comprehensive and humanistic, of enterprises. Edmund Wilson had his place alongside Aristotle, Blackmur and Tate and Empson alongside Coleridge and Arnold and Eliot. After such an initiation into criticism as a habit and a discipline, one might deepen one's knowledge but there could be no real surprises.

The surprises, when they came, were of another sort: in the discovery that the very consciousness that criticism was designed to induce could become the object of a certain hatred even among the people whose ostensible profession it was to enlighten us about the vicissitudes of our own culture.

For nothing is more conspicuous in the history of our literature – and in the history of our intellectual culture – over the past twenty-five years than the decline of literary criticism. I mean a decline not only in prestige but in performance, a decline in confidence, in moral and intellectual energy, in the faith that is implied in the very notion of the critical vocation. Of commentaries about books and their authors, not to mention commentaries about that vast array of cultural artifacts that now makes some insistent moral or esthetic claim on our attention as a substitute for books, – of such commentaries, we have certainly suffered no shortage. But these commentaries, like so many of the objects that inspire them, are not, by and large, designed to make us more conscious of the complexities of either art or life. They function more as anodynes than as instruments of illumination; they are designed to tranquillize rather than to induce consciousness. Whether their objectives are ideological or only commercial or, what is more commonly the case, a combination of the ideological and the commercial masquerading as a new moral imperative, these commentaries constitute a kind of anti-criticism. Their purpose is not to direct attention to some hitherto undiscovered or unexplored terrain so much as to flatter our befuddled disposition to believe that the terrain we already occupy is more than sufficient for the prosperity of our minds and our emotions.

The decline of criticism – and I speak specifically of literary criticism – in the intellectual life of the last quarter-century signifies an historic shrinkage not only in the role that conscious intelligence is expected to play in the creation of cultural values – the values by which creative intelligence lives – but in the position that literature itself is expected to occupy in the consciousness of our educated classes. And this historic shrinkage, lamentable enough in itself, is all the more lamentable in being promoted not as a catastrophic loss but as a desirable liberation. Having suffered an impairment in our faculties, we have been asked to believe that we have in fact acquired a new source of vitality.

There is no doubt, at least in my own mind, that literature is now *expected* to occupy a somewhat defensive and devalued position in the lives of the educated, and I wonder if we have yet begun to gauge the implications of this turn in our cultural affairs. Wherever our intellectual contemporaries meet to exchange views in public, whether at the dinner table or the cocktail party, at committee meetings or in the sessions of the Modern Language Association, it is not literature but something else – the movies or the visual arts or popular music or the ballet, but pre-eminently the movies – that sparks the most animated exchanges and the most articulate defense. The decline of literary criticism has, in fact, been accompanied by a parallel boom in writing about the movies – writing that may at times constitute a legitimate mode of criticism in itself but, significantly, does not need to do so in order to excite the animated response I speak of. The success of a publication such as *New York* magazine, which is nothing if not a reliable guide to cultural fashion, is an interesting case in point, for conspicuously missing from its roster of regular critics and columnists who bring us a steady flow of information and misinformation about everything from this week's movie to next year's expected sexual deviation – conspicuously missing is a regular book critic. The editors of this magazine have, in their wisdom, determined that their readers, who are likely to be college-educated, enjoy high incomes, and occupy positions of some responsibility in the professions, these readers do not rate the discussion of books very high on their agenda of cultural necessities. Even *The New Yorker*, which otherwise does maintain a high standard of literary discourse in its pages, no longer deems it as necessary to employ a regular book critic as, say, a film critic or a music critic.

Such developments, accompanied by what is for me the most fateful of all – the decline in the quality and number of our little magazines and literary reviews, where for so many decades the best literary intelligence was to be found – such developments tell us a great deal about where literature stands at the moment in the cultural hierarchy. And lest we succumb to the belief that literature has simply drifted, undirected, into this devalued position by the inevitable pull of philistine taste and indifference that have been – and remain – a fairly steady factor in our cultural affairs since the dawn of the industrial era, it is well to remind ourselves of the role that criticism itself – the anti-criticism of the intellectuals – has played in this debacle. In the history of which I speak, philistine taste, unaided by an energetic effort to discredit critical intelligence, would not have been sufficient to the task of reducing and damaging the position of literature. A vigorous anti-criticism was required to bulldoze the foundations.

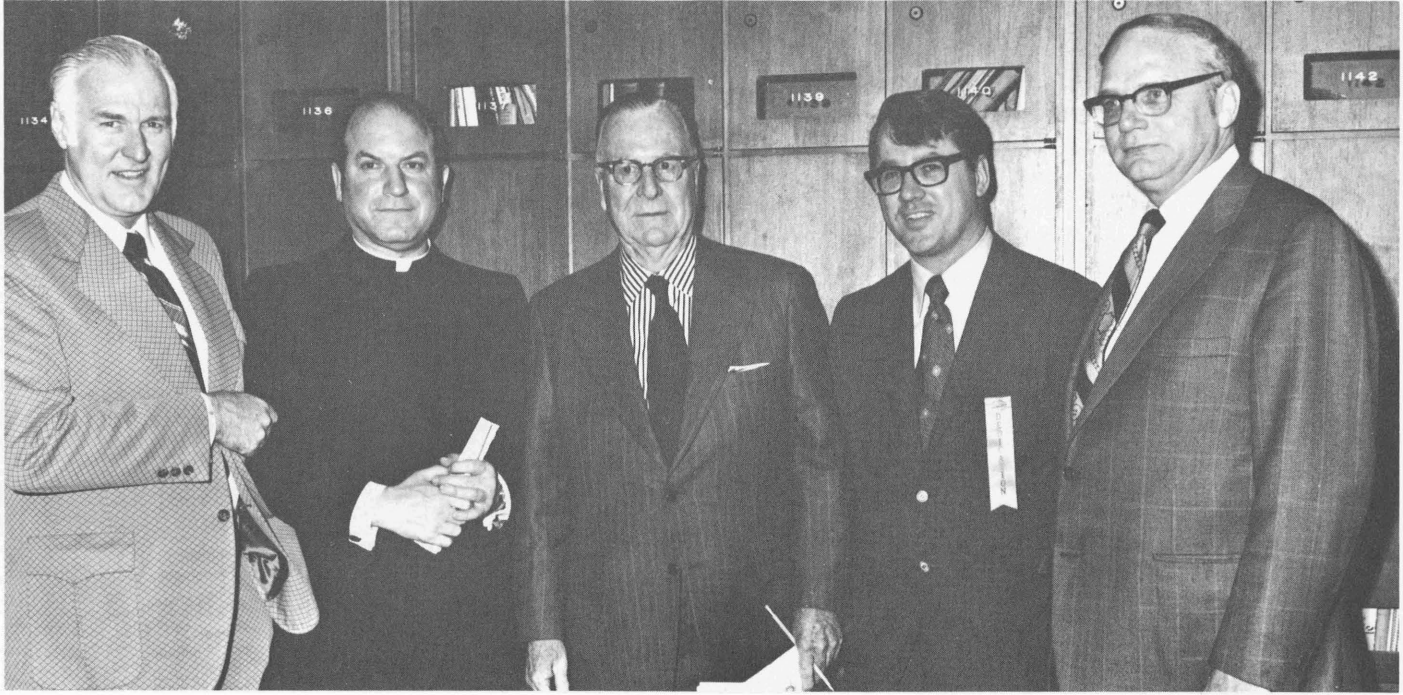
For this task there was no lack of eager volunteers, even – perhaps one should say, especially – in the ranks of those who, professionally speaking, still “professed” to uphold the very thing they were determined to destroy. The McLuhan madenss, now a dim and slightly comic memory even, I suppose, for those who so recently gave voice to its arcane vocabulary of

literary self-contempt, was but one of a series of campaigns designed to “liberate” us from the constrictions of literary intelligence. Another was the effort, led by no less a personage than the Leavisite editor of *Partisan Review*, to persuade us that, in the songs of the Beatles, we had been given an achievement comparable to *The Waste Land* – and a hell of a lot more affirmative than that literary antique. Literature, too, was to be considered a kind of sound-stage on which the writer “performs.” The literary text, once so sacred to criticism, dissolved – in this view – before the antics of the “performing self” – and by this criterion, not surprisingly, the only figure capable of competing with the Beatles turned out to be Norman Mailer. Was it a coincidence, then, that the Beatles campaign marked the final, ignominious end of this once valuable literary review as a medium of serious critical debate? And what did it really signify that a mind like McLuhan’s, which had once belonged to the ranks of the New Criticism, and a mind like Professor Poirier’s, which had once been content to ratify the narrowest of Leavisite orthodoxies, that minds such as these became so vocal in the campaign against mind?

I think we find the answer most clearly and openly articulated in still another of the campaigns that have brought us to our current turn. Perhaps the most comprehensive and influential example of this anti-criticism is to be found in the writings of Susan Sontag. Miss Sontag is a formidable intellectual figure, formidable precisely because she brings so much intellectual authority to bear on the campaign to discredit the critical function. Her influence in this regard has been sufficient, at least, to command the sponsorship of one of the best critics of the older generation – Lionel Trilling – who felt moved to include her most notorious attack on criticism, the essay called “Against Interpretation,” in an anthology entitled *Literary Criticism: An Introductory Reader* intended for use in university courses. The irony – one might even say, the capitulation – which this inclusion represents, Professor Trilling himself showed no sign of acknowledging, but it is one that the historian of the fortunes of criticism over the past quarter-century will be intensely conscious of, especially as he turns the pages of this anthology to find that it is Miss Sontag who has been assigned the position of bringing to conclusion a survey that opens with texts from Plato and Aristotle. For it is indeed the critical endeavor initiated in the writings of Plato and Aristotle that she is most concerned to discredit and displace – displace, we may say, with something other than criticism.

“The earliest *experience* (the word is italicized) of art,” Miss Sontag’s essay begins, “must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual.” And she continues: “The earliest *theory* of art, that of the Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, imitation of reality.”

“It is at this point that the peculiar question of the *value* (again, the word is underscored) of art arose. For the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself.”



Principal participants in the dedication ceremonies: Dr. John H. McCombe, Dean of Hendricks Chapel, who gave the Invocation, Monsignor Charles L. Borgognoni, Chaplain of the Newman Association, who pronounced the Benediction, Chancellor Emeritus William Pearson Tolley, Director of Libraries Warren N. Boes, and Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers.



Hosts and guests gather for the Donors' Dinner in Hotel Syracuse on the eve of Dedication Day.



Richard W. Couper, President of the New York Public Library, speaking at the Dedication Luncheon in Hotel Syracuse.



Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers addresses approximately five hundred guests at the dedication ceremonies.

What is being lamented in this essay is, indeed, “the peculiar question of the *value* of art”; what is lamented, in other words, is consciousness itself – consciousness as it reflects upon experience and devises theories and values – consciousness that compares one experience with another in order to determine preferences and permanences. Not simply the mimetic theory of art, but the habit of mind that looks to theory, is placed under attack.

True, Miss Sontag resigns herself to the permanent loss of a primeval innocence, though she is admirably honest in refusing to conceal the depth of her yearning for it. “None of us,” she writes, “can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it *did*. From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art. We can only quarrel with one or another means of defense. Indeed, we have an obligation to overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice.”

What Miss Sontag is, in effect, advocating in this essay is a mode of criticism that will function for us as the moral and esthetic equivalent of that “end of consciousness” we can no longer hope to retrieve, what she calls – in the conclusion to “Against Interpretation” – “an erotics of art.” What is regarded as “obtuse” and “onerous” and “insensitive” is the thing that encourages consciousness, and what most encourages consciousness – or at least offers the most conspicuous resistance to that state of primitive transcendence so much to be desired – is the notion that there is “such a thing as the content of a work of art.” Miss Sontag writes: “What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails” – and for Miss Sontag, it is hard to imagine an emphasis that would not be an overemphasis – “is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*. And conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art.”

The “erotics of art” Miss Sontag specifically calls for – and that so many others have urged and continue to urge upon us – is a call (or rather, a recall) to primitivism, to that familiar and sentimental hatred of civilization that is one of the leitmotifs of modern literature itself. The retreat from the burdens of the literary mind is a retreat from the burdens of civilization, a rejection of the tasks that civilized culture has placed before us and upon us. In confronting those tasks, literary criticism has indeed performed a heroic service, more heroic than we fully realized at the time it was at its zenith – the service of making us conscious of how our best literary minds conceived the very culture we inhabit, the very lives we live.

The function of this anti-criticism is an escape function, an invitation to fantasy and daydream – which is to say, a philistine function – for it is the rejection of criticism that serves philistine objectives, that serves to discredit consciousness and intelligence and complexity in the name of a lost and

irrecoverable innocence.

As significant as Lionel Trilling's placement of Susan Sontag's essay in his textbook survey for students, in my opinion, is his omission of the greatest modern connoisseur of consciousness our country has produced — Henry James, who was at once a great critic as well as a great novelist. This is an omission that would have been unthinkable twenty-five years ago — and a significant measure of the decline I have attempted to describe. James was certainly not oblivious to the “magical” aspects of art, to the authority it derives from a primitive impulse. But the entire burden of his work and the whole abundant energy of his marvelous mind was lavished upon demonstrating, over and over again, the perils of these misplaced quests for innocence and the necessity — in our culture, not only an esthetic and even a biological necessity but a moral necessity as well — of immersing ourselves in the treacherous complexities of real experience. That was why, to its everlasting credit, the great critical movement now so sadly in decline placed so high a value on his achievement as a writer — and on the achievements of his literary peers.

The voice of that critical movement is now practically stilled, and in its stead we have this odious counterfeit that employs the vocabulary of mind in order to urge its surrender. In the fifties, we often heard the complaint that literary criticism was taken too seriously, that its practitioners acted as if civilization depended upon the parochial, piecemeal, fragmentary, highly specialized tasks it was performing for specialized audiences in narrow confines. Yet looking back on that complaint today, on this occasion, when we are gathered to honor an institution that is the very symbol of the literary mind, it seems to me that something crucial to our civilization *did* depend on this narrow task — and *does* depend now on a revival of the vocation we have allowed to wither. The voice of criticism is the voice of civilization in its effort to illuminate its own fate. Like so many other tasks that once seemed marginal and supererogatory, and thus dispensable, it now appears to be absolutely central to our needs, and imperative to our moral and intellectual survival.

For Miss Sontag, “the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.” Or again: “In *most* (in this case, it is I who italicize the word) modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone.” And she singles out literary criticism, in particular, as the most guilty party. “This philistinism is more rife in literature than in any other art. For decades now, literary critics have understood it to be their task to translate the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else.”

Now what is most significant about the line of this attack is not the argument about “content” or “interpretation” and their alleged alliance with philistine taste, but the distance that separates the argument from the reality of the critical movement it is ostensibly addressed to. There is no question

but that in the lower intellectual altitudes of academic life, philistine “interpretation” of the sort she describes once abounded – and, for all I know, still abounds. But Miss Sontag is speaking of something more significant than an academic cottage-industry; she is speaking, as she says, of “most modern instances,” and she thus dismisses the entire intellectual burden of the New Criticism, and indeed of all modern criticism worthy of the name, which was to illuminate the ways in which the poem or play or novel *worked* – worked *as* a poem, *as* a play, *as* a novel. This emphasis on the esthetic strategy of the concrete text was indeed the crux of the battle that criticism waged against the literary historians once entrenched in the universities; it was at the center of all the debates over critical method. It was, as they say, what the New Criticism was all about. And this, Miss Sontag ignores – and ignores for good reason – for her argument requires an imaginary antagonist since she cannot bring herself to identify her real one, which is literature itself, especially modern literature, with its legendary difficulties and complexities that require, for adult comprehension and response, precisely the “disease” of consciousness she wishes to be cured of.

She turns instead, and inevitably, to the movies, which are said to be “the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms right now.” And why the movies? For the same reason that McLuhan turned to the television screen and Professor Poirier to the Beatles. Because it is in these, rather than in the more arduous act of the literary mind, that we find an experience that most closely approximates the experience most passionately longed for – the “incantatory” and the “magical,” which is to say, the mindless, the consciousnessless, of “the earliest experience of art.” It is in these, rather than in the art of literature, that we can hope to take possession once again – even if only for the moment and only as an illusion – of that primeval innocence that predates the dawn of “consciousness.”